

Blue Ribbon Commission Explores School Funding Inequity

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At a recent public hearing in De Pere, the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding heard from school districts in that area, including Green Bay, about the challenges they face, which are exacerbated by funding issues.

DE PERE, WI - Linda Brown recently passed away in Topeka, Kansas. Ms. Brown was the student at the center of the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that struck down school segregation. Ms. Brown's father, Oliver Brown, tried to enroll his nine-year old daughter in the all-white Sumner School.

The day after Ms. Brown's passing, I joined other members of the Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding to explore inequities in Wisconsin's public schools at a public hearing in De Pere.

The stories we heard wove a tale of struggle, innovation, inequity and challenge.

Major changes are happening in our state's public schools. Compared to twenty years ago, we have more minority students, students who are English Language Learners, and students whose families are experiencing poverty.



In Brown County, four of 10 students live in poverty. The district has three times as many homeless students as it did in 2003. Children come to school hungry. They carry the burden of family conflict to their seat in the classroom.

Today's students have more mental health needs, including depression, anxiety and suicide. "Nearly 50% of girls and 30% of boys report anxiety," said Christine Gingle, Social Work Coordinator at the Green Bay Area Public School District. "Almost 50% is a staggering number, but not overly surprising given the immense pressures students encounter during their school career... Many have suffered losses...are concerned about safety, or are experiencing grief. Safety concerns have a significant ripple effect on our community."

Commission Member and UW Professor Julie Underwood asked, "What happens when you don't have the resources to serve students?" Ms. Gingle answered, "The work falls back on the classroom teacher."

"Students bring their problems to the classroom," shared Dr. Michelle Langenfeld, Green Bay Area School Superintendent and a fellow member of the Blue Ribbon Commission.

"Teachers say to me, 'I can't do this anymore. When I close my eyes at night, I can't sleep because I see all the children I cannot serve'," Dr. Langenfeld continued. "We are blessed to be in a community that does help us. But every superintendent can share the same stories. We are all working the best we can. We also need to care for our caregivers."



In the Green Bay Area School District, students speak 31 different languages. Minority students

make up the majority of English Language Learners (ELL). The Green Bay Area School District has 600 Somali students who face not only language challenges. Many are orphaned. Some watched as family members were executed. Most have no formal education.

“In 1990, the reimbursement rate for ELL was 63%.” said Julie Seefeldt, Director of the English Learners Program at Green Bay. “The current reimbursement rate...is at approximately 7.9%.”

“This story is not unique to Green Bay,” Dr. Langenfeld told our Commission. “Somali families are grateful for the educational opportunities. They want their children to work hard and become American citizens.” In response to questions about the resulting challenges facing the district and teachers, Dr. Langenfeld replied, “Necessity is the Mother of Invention.”

Justin Millfox, a teacher at West High School in Green Bay and President of the Green Bay Education Association, told us about the necessity for invention. “West High School is the home of the Wildcats,” Mr Millfox said. “We have a Cat Closet for school supplies and clothes for kids who do without.” The struggles of students are very hard on teachers as they try, with few resources, to address the significant needs of children with big gaps in their learning.

Many folks testified about problems in the way the state pays for schools. Our Commission heard: Providing EQUAL dollars does not solve the problem because not all student needs are equal.

“Providing equal dollar amounts of per-student increases in funding does not provide the necessary equality to provide our low income and English Learner students the support necessary for success,” noted Brenda Warren, Green Bay School Board President.

The legacy of Linda Brown and her father’s fight for equality continues to challenge us today. Their bravery and courage opened doors for children across our nation. Today, these doors and the schools beyond them are in need of repair. Dr. Langenfeld acknowledged that challenge as the public hearing adjourned stating, “We have no time to lose. It’s Go time!”

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