

Vinehout Endorses Free 2-Year & Tech College Tuition in Wisconsin

Posted on Feb 10, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



After reading about the proposal offered by Tennessee Governor Haslam, Senator Kathleen Vinehout suggests that Wisconsin use the state's projected surplus to provide free tuition and fees for Wisconsinites attending technical or UW 2-Year Colleges. The cost of providing this free education would still allow for half a billion dollars to remain in the state's coffers, and the investment in education is one that pays dividends to individuals and families as well as the state's economy.

MADISON - "So, what's the best jobs plan?" The Governor asked his State of the State audience. "Easy answer: education. If we want to have jobs ready for Tennesseans, we have to make sure that Tennesseans are ready for jobs."

With this introduction, Governor Bill Haslam announced a plan to bring absolutely free tech and community college education to every high school senior regardless of his or her grades or ability to pay.

"We just needed to change the culture of expectations in our state," Governor Haslam told the New York Times. "College isn't for everybody, but it has to be for a lot more people than it's been in the past if we're going to have a competitive work force...If we can go to people and say, 'This is totally free,' that gets their attention."

It's the season of bold plans for governors. As legislatures gather to hear State of the State speeches, state executives put their best plans forward. As bold plans go, Republican Governor Haslam's is right at the top.

What if we could change the culture in Madison? Think outside the box and come up with a nonpartisan way to address state challenges using the budget surplus created by an improving economy?

Governor Walker proposed using the surplus to give owners of a median value home about \$100 a year drop in property taxes over last year. He added other minor tax changes to his plan, including less than a dollar a week cut for 98% of all income tax filers.

Discussions of the Governor's plan focused on the wisdom of adding to the state's structural deficit and leaving a paltry amount in the state's savings account. Both are important concerns.

What if we could avoid big fiscal pitfalls and also do something bold?

At a cost of about thirty cents a day per person, Wisconsinites could have the Governor's lower tax plan. For less than seventeen cents a day per Wisconsinite the state could put in place a plan of free tuition and fees for every Wisconsin resident attending our 16 Technical Colleges and 13 UW 2-year Colleges.

If implemented in the 2014-15 school year, the plan would cost annually less than \$350 million leaving over half a billion in this budget's surplus going forward.

Putting state money into education is putting money where it works. Surveys of Wisconsin Technical College graduates reveal that nearly three out of four have jobs in their field within 6 months after graduation. Nearly 9 out of 10 graduates live and work in Wisconsin.

Putting money toward technical and 2-year UW colleges also makes sense. These schools are the gateway of opportunity for hundreds of thousands of families in Wisconsin. A college education helps raise the income of families and strengthen the state's economy.

An absolutely free first two years of college helps families of modest means afford a four year college education and helps those one in five Wisconsinites who have some college education but lack a degree think about going back to school.

Education raises wages and the likelihood of employment. According to a recent New York Times report, "More educated workers continue to enjoy much better employment options than those with a high school diploma or less." The problem we face is only a third of our workforce has a college degree or more. "With many less educated workers chasing a limited number of new jobs, employers have little reason to increase wages."

Wisconsin's economy is lagging. Wages have stagnated. Wisconsin will continue to lag the nation in personal income as long as we remain a less educated state than the national average.

Improving the education of Wisconsin's workforce prepares Wisconsin for work and improves the economic health of the state. Families are better off which in turn benefits the state. Those who earn more, spend more, and pay more in taxes.

What would you prefer? A hundred dollars less in property taxes for a \$150,000 median value home or absolutely free tuition for every Wisconsin resident at our local tech and UW 2-year campuses. Think about it. And let me know!

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