We have failed our children; now is the time to make it right!

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Public education advocates have shied away from taking sides in the political battle for the future of education. “We shouldn’t be mixing our kids’ education with politics ….. it’s unseemly,” the theory goes. “Besides, we don’t want to make the other side angry.” Get over it, folks. That boat has sailed.

It doesn’t matter whether you are Republican or Democrat, conservative or liberal, red or green, public education in your hometown is at a crossroads. Recent Wisconsin history shows what could happen, and the most recent election only solidified the grip on our public schools of their most strident critics and powerful opponents.

You don’t have to join a political party to influence change, either. All you have to do is act on your instincts that Wisconsin’s public schools are the heart of every community in the state. They anchor our local economies and provide a “sense of us” for everyone. Public schools show young adults what’s possible and help them figure out how to make “the possible” happen.

Right or left, public education is the foundation for what is good about the Badger State.

Our future—and the future of every one of our public school children—depends on us effectively defining the debate and discussion in the coming days, weeks, months, and years based on our common values and the moral imperative of educating future generations.

Most public education advocates understand the crisis. For example, we have borne witness to the rapid march of privatization through the expanding taxpayer-subsidized private school scheme.

What is different now is that anti-public education forces are even more entrenched and powerful. They have public schools in their sights and the ability to pass whatever legislation they see fit. While we all stand at the door to stop them, we must ask ourselves if we are prepared—as a loose organization—to counter the well-organized and funded forces arrayed against our children, our public schools, and our communities.

The lack of a cohesive and positive message and vision led to the continuing disaster for Wisconsin’s public schools. The failure was recently well documented by George Lakoff. The post-election vacuum Lakoff describes will be filled by whoever acts first. Our first job, as public education leaders and advocates, is to fill it with positive messaging and framing that will define the upcoming discussion around public education.

This memo will give public education advocates the frame and message necessary to fill that void. In order for us to be successful, we must follow some fundamental guidelines that are critical to elevating public discourse on this critical issue:
• We must all be immediately consistent, repetitive, and collaborative to get this message and our core values into public discourse. This will provide needed context for our stories, anecdotes, and facts.

• We must avoid giving in to fear and vitriol. It is our responsibility to provide a positive, constructive, and progressive vision to our communities as an effective counter to the anti-public education forces. It is important to listen carefully to “the other side” in order to find their vulnerabilities and where they share our progressive values. Remember, Republicans and Democrats share progressive values—especially about their public schools. If we fail to listen, we miss opportunities to connect with them.

• Use the ideas, language, and values below to evoke the unconscious core values most people share. Then follow up with personal, local, and truthful stories and examples consistent with those ideas, language, and values. It is important to realize that people understand government and policy at a basic, very personal level.

Based on those ideas, how do we retake the high ground and save our public schools?

If we are to lead against privatization we need to use the best tools we have. We can and must present a completely different moral vision of education ..... a vision that is MUCH MORE important than saying “education only exists so people can be career ready and get a job.” We have a responsibility to plant a tree in whose shade we will never sit. It is our moral obligation to invest in our future by investing in our children and their public education.

• Public education is a moral issue and we should talk about it in those terms. All politics are moral and as public education advocates we are “moral actors.” Our schools are what is good and right for Wisconsin, so talk about it in those terms. People will respond to our leadership and vote on our shared morals and values. They will not respond to or vote on a laundry list of facts and issues. Take the moral high-ground and elevate discourse above that old politics of fear. Connect with your friends and neighbors of all political persuasions about their local public schools.

• Express WHY public education matters to your community. You need to express positive and proactive visions and ideas that retake the moral high ground and put us on the offensive. It’s time to force those who want to privatize public education and rip out the heart of our communities to defend themselves on OUR terms.

• Keep using the message that public schools are the heart of our communities. This has been effective in elevating public schools to be about what is good in their families and their lives on a daily basis. For many, “their schools” helped to make them a success. Keep reminding folks of the fact that great public schools make for great communities. You can’t have one without the other!

• Talk about public schools as a moral obligation that provides opportunity and freedom for all children. Public education is the only institution where all children learn necessary skills and knowledge. Remind people “their schools” are where youngsters become young adults ..... where they learn what is meaningful and what is possible in their lives, just as their parents and grandparents have. Who among us have not had their lives changed for the better because of their public school experience? Reinforce the philosophy behind public education and that without it there is no democracy and no freedom.
These four “thinking points” give you the tools to consistently and effectively express why public schools are the heart of your communities. They are values that the majority of people will agree with, regardless of their political affiliation.

Now that our quiver has tools, it’s time to use them to undermine the views of those who would privatize and destroy public education ..... while staying positive and expressing our core, community values.

So, how do we undermine the “voucher” frame?

First, it is imperative to stop using the terms “voucher” and “choice.” Both of these terms, in today’s usage, have achieved metaphorical status: People unconsciously think of the words as positive/constructive, conservative, and that reinforces their very values and existence.

Instead:

- **Call them “subsidized” or “taxpayer-subsidized” private schools.** The strategy behind this is based on sound science and research. Most anti-public education people also dislike subsidies of any kind. This then differentiates between the “public” and “private.” In the context of public education (effectively communicated as above), subsidizing a private school is unjust and most importantly, immoral.

- **Constantly point out that research proves that “taxpayer-subsidized private schools are systemically destroying our public schools.”** Based on all legitimate research, subsidized-private schools are able to skim students and skim money from our community schools—stealing these critical assets and contributing to systemic destruction of “my child’s public school.” Milwaukee is a perfect example of this systemic causation.

- **Be smarter than “they” are.** Don’t use their language and their stories. Create stories based on our core values and views of public education ..... stories that also undermine anti-public education views and values. For example, **“Subsidized private schools are a cancer destroying the heart of our communities.”**

This metaphorical statement, when it reaches the public discourse, will be very powerful. It effectively reinforces the “heart of the community” metaphor, which is already accepted, along with providing negative images to associate with the destruction being caused by subsidized- private schools.

If we are going to save public education as we know and value it, we have to think about what we’ve done in the past. Based purely on results, our strategies and tactics haven’t worked. By almost any measure, the schools in our communities—and more important, the children in them—are worse off than they were a decade ago.

A good place to start is to set aside our territorial dust-ups and work together discussing our core values, working out a common message, and going on the offensive for a public education system that is necessary to freedom, opportunity, and community.

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