



Wisconsin Family Ties

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School Safety Cannot Be Built on Arrest and Suspension

Madison, WI – Yesterday at the state Capitol, Rep. Jeremy Thiesfeldt (R-Fond Du Lac) introduced AB693, a bill that would have harmful repercussions for students with mental health and emotional/behavioral challenges. Everyone agrees that teachers and students deserve a safe environment for teaching and learning, but the “Teacher Protection Act” offers no new resources or ideas for bringing safety through improved relationships and behavior. Instead, it would increase the use of ineffective punitive measures that are already disproportionately used on students with disabilities: suspension and referral to law enforcement.

Wisconsin has an extraordinarily high rate of school referrals to law enforcement, particularly for students with disabilities. According to a 2015 report from the Center for Public Integrity, Wisconsin ranks third in the nation in referrals from school to law enforcement for students with disabilities. Students with mental health challenges are already overrepresented in the juvenile justice system, yet the bill expands mandatory reporting to law enforcement without taking disability-related behavior into account. Any adult witness could criminalize behaviors arising from anxiety or lack of communication skills, by requiring the principal to report to law enforcement.

“Students with underdeveloped skills in communication and problem-solving are among those who would be put at increased risk,” stated Hugh Davis, Wisconsin Family Ties executive director. “Involving law enforcement to respond to student behavior will never teach students skills that they do not possess.”

Among Wisconsin students with emotional-behavioral disability, there was one suspension in 2015/16 for every 3 students, making the suspension rate 11 times higher for students with emotional-behavioral disability than for their non-disabled peers. Suspensions are remarkably unsuccessful at improving student behavior. Instead, research indicates that exclusionary discipline is associated with high drop-out rates and failure to graduate on time, which in turn has serious impact on success later in life. AB693 would increase exclusionary discipline by allowing teachers to seek suspensions beyond the normal chain of command.

According to Davis, “No part of this bill leads toward a real increase in safety for teachers, serving instead to create further challenges for students already struggling with mental health and related issues. Unfortunately, this bill is devoid of research-based approaches to working with and teaching students who exhibit challenging behavior. The research points to changes in adult understanding, actions, and reactions as key to reducing challenging behavior and increasing safety for all.”

Wisconsin Family Ties calls upon the state legislature to join us in opposing AB693, and instead to prioritize creating well-resourced, supportive conditions for teaching, learning, and true safety.

Wisconsin Family Ties, Wisconsin’s family voice for children’s mental health, is a parent-run nonprofit organization serving families that include children with social, emotional, behavioral or mental health challenges. Founded in 1987, its mission is to enhance lives by promoting children’s mental health.

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Wisconsin’s family voice for children’s mental health

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