



THE LAKELAND TIMES

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MINOCQUA, WISCONSIN • TUESDAY, MARCH 15, 2022

\$1.00

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Superintendent selection sparks controversy

With the selection of LUHS alum Ernst as new LdF superintendent, community members spoke up with concerns regarding representation and cultural sensitivity

By Kelly Holm
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

During a closed session at the end of March 9's meeting, the Lac du Flambeau school board for-

mally selected Dr. Joshua Ernst as its next superintendent, following Dr. Larry Ouimette's impending retirement.

Ernst, who graduated from Lakeland Union High School in

1999, is currently the administrator of the Clear Lake school district, a position he has held since 2016. He received his superintendent's license

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State Senate passes massive expansion of school choice But bill faces certain veto by Evers

By Richard Moore
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

On a 20-11 vote last week, the Wisconsin Senate passed a major expansion of the state's school choice program, an expansion that would enable most families in the state to participate in the program, regardless of the child's grade level or the family's income.

The bill would remove state enrollment caps, family income limits, and grade entry points, and it would create individual scholarships for children in public schools to take courses from an approved provider. Funds could also be used to pay for educational materials and resources offered by a wide variety of education providers.

One DPI estimate pegs the cost of expanding the program at \$577 million in increased property taxes in districts outside Milwaukee where voucher students live. The cost in Milwaukee is about \$2 million.

Of course, the bill, which also passed the Assembly, is headed to a certain veto by Gov. Tony Evers. Nonetheless, passage is more than symbolic. While it will get the governor's position on the record during an election year, it also signals what the GOP intends to do if a Republican wins the governor's race in November.

The bill was just one of five education bills passed by the Senate last week, a package that includes establishing a parental bill of rights and breaking up Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) into smaller community districts, with oversight provided by a commission whose members would include the governor and the state superintendent of education.

State Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills), a main author of the package, said the governor faced a simple choice: Does he stand with students and parents or with unions and bureaucrats? Darling said the bills would shake up the education status quo and that Evers still had a chance to prove he is "the education governor."

"If the governor goes through with his planned vetoes of these reforms, it's clear he's okay with failure," Darling said. "Test scores continue to plummet on his watch and the governor offers no real solutions and rejects a chance to be a part of fixing Milwaukee Public Schools."

Darling said there is a crisis in the state's schools, especially in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS).

"It is heart-wrenching to watch the governor and Democrats blocking reforms while there are MPS schools



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FINDING OZ

Phoebe Wirtz as "Dottie" looks on as Adie Rowe as "Kitty" dances past her during a scene from the Minocqua Dance performance of "Finding Oz," on Thursday, March 10, at the Lakeland Union High School Theater in Minocqua. Proceeds from the ballet will benefit the Lakeland STAR School/Academy.

Lake Tomahawk town board approves \$1,000 toward broadband application

DeMet: 'I just feel they bypass Lake Tomahawk in situations like that'

By Brian Jopek
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

The Lake Tomahawk town board at its March 9 meeting approved \$1,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds toward a broadband grant application.

The deadline for the application, which is for \$2.5 million from the Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC), is March 17.

Essentially, as it has been explained by Oneida County Economic Development Corporation (OCEDC) executive director Jeff Verdoorn, if the \$2.5 million is obtained from the PSC, then with \$1.5 million in ARPA funding des-

ignated by the Oneida County board for the \$16 million county-wide project, the county would bond the remaining \$12 million.

In addition, the OCEDC has asked for resolutions of support for the project from each county municipality.

The application is to be submitted on the county's behalf by Hilbert Communications, which will be the firm responsible for installing the fiber-optic lines that will be available to Oneida County residences and businesses if the grant is approved by the PSC.

The \$1,000 pledge approval by the

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Print Run 4,800
Vol. 131 - Issue 07
1 Section, 16 Pages





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MEN'S ENSEMBLE

LUHS choir director Tami Sellner directs the LUHS Men's Ensemble, from the left, Frank Doud-Youngbird, Harrison Wheeler, Steven Coffen, Isaac Olson, Jonah Gilbert, Breacken Karegeannes, Owen Clark, Victor Sandberg, Lukys Taylor and Gage Coffen, as they sing the New Zealand folk song "The Wellerman" on Tuesday, March 8, at the Lakeland Union High School Theater.

Senate

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that are failing our kids," she said. "Unfortunately, they are giving up on another generation of children in Milwaukee."

Although Democrats said Republicans were merely pandering to the far right, especially with the school choice bill.

"Giving in to the demands of a vocal fringe who claim to represent parents with legislative proposals hatched in right-wing think tanks, Senate Republicans abdicated any claim as good stewards of our public schools," Sen. Chris Larson (D-Milwaukee) said. "With the estimated \$577 million increase in property taxes their voucher expansion bill would create, they've proven also to be poor stewards of public resources. Finally, these anti-education bills represent yet another attack by Wisconsin Republicans on the maxim of local control."

Why taxes would go up

In criticizing the expansion of choice, Democrats fixated on the likely higher property tax bills in districts where voucher students re-

side, but those higher taxes would not come from the expansion of voucher schools per se, supporters of the choice expansion argued.

At a February 16 public hearing on the choice bill, Julaine Appling of Wisconsin Family Action said the voucher programs bring cost savings to education, and significant cost-savings at that.

"These programs save taxpayers money and in general provide a better return on their tax investment," Appling testified. "I've seen reports varying from \$13,000 per student statewide average to over \$16,000 per student statewide average. The maximum voucher is \$8,982 for non-special needs students, with students with special needs getting vouchers of just over \$13,000. Let's just assume \$14,500 is the average per-pupil cost for public schools in Wisconsin. That means if every student in the voucher program got the highest voucher payment, which never would happen, taxpayers would save about \$5,500 per voucher student. The actual saving is obviously higher."

The reason property taxes will rise, these supporters

point out, is that public schools can and will raise taxes to replace the dollars they lost when the now-choice student chose to leave the school. In other words, choice supporters say, the school will no longer be educating the child, but it can legally raise taxes to collect the money it would have spent to educate the child.

That is the case, according to a fiscal impact statement prepared by the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

"Under the current law mechanism, there will be no fiscal impact to the state associated with an expansion for these choice programs, regardless of the magnitude of the expansion," the impact report states. "However, there would be an increase to costs borne by property taxpayers in school districts in which the voucher pupils reside, because under current law, a school district is eligible to claim an adjustment on its revenue limit to offset the voucher related reduction to state general aid. Thus, an expansion of the [Racine and statewide voucher programs] will directly impact property taxpayers for school districts in which

[Racine and statewide voucher programs] voucher pupils reside."

So while it is true, as Democrats claim, that outside of Milwaukee the voucher programs reduce state funding to school districts when students leave to attend private voucher schools, it is also true that those districts can raise taxes to recoup those lost dollars.

In addition, while choice supporters say the current system rewards schools that lose students by holding them harmless for voucher departures, it also penalizes the majority of families who can't access a choice program because they must pay twice if they leave a bad school — once for the private school and twice by continuing to pay taxes to the public school.

Parent Wendy Dorn of Elmbrook expressed frustration at the February public hearing.

"After working inside the school district, attending many school board meetings, and getting to know several school board members, I have come to the conclusion that our school board is allowing leftist ideology to corrupt the curriculum of every subject, and infuse the

culture of our schools," Dorn testified. "We pulled our son out of Elmbrook schools, but we still pay \$3,500 in school tax dollars to the district each year. We would prefer to put that money toward our son's annual private school tuition, but our income is too high to participate in the parental choice program."

The Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations opposed the legislation, saying Wisconsin's public schools are the only place where students with disabilities receive the right to a free, appropriate public education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

"The IDEA does not apply at private schools, whether with or without a voucher," the group stated. "Therefore, expansion of the voucher program comes at the expense of the schools that are not only educating the vast majority of Wisconsin's students with disabilities, but are the only schools required to do so."

Richard Moore is the author of the forthcoming *Storyfinding: From the Journey to the Story* and can be reached at richardmoorebooks.com.

Ernst

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and doctorate from Marian University, and was also a candidate to succeed Dr. Claire Martin at his alma mater.

During public comment, several Lac du Flambeau community members voiced disapproval for the direction they felt the school was taking in regards to the willingness of staff and administrations to engage with, understand and provide meaningful programming related to Ojibwe culture.

While 81% of the district's students are listed as Native American (another 12 percent are listed as multiracial), less than 20% of its staff are Native American. Those who spoke during the meeting were aware that a Native candidate had been passed over in favor of a non-Native one, and brought up studies on the importance of representation when it comes to school leadership.

"Indigenous education calls for Indigenous leaders," Doreen Wawronowicz, previously an Ojibwe language and culture teacher

for the district, said. "All we're asking is that this next superintendent be engaged with us. Because we've not had the greatest engagement, and our kids are suffering."

Ouimette, during a March 10 phone call with *The Lakeland Times*, confirmed that the school board had considered a Native American finalist for the position, but that the board and the advisory committee — consisting of staff, Lac du Flambeau community members and tribal council appointees — were in agreement about Ernst being the top choice. Advisory committee members were told during the interview process to rank their preferences.

Beyond concerns about the superintendent choice, speakers felt a lack of respect from the district for tribal elders and the tribal community as a whole.

"A lot of the pictures of our elders from years past, that worked in the school, they have been taken down," said Bagwajikwe Madosh, who said her grandmother Alice Carufel's portrait was among those missing. "For this to happen, I think it shows a disrespect

for who we are... those are our ancestors."

Ouimette said he did not know where the portraits were or that they had been removed, but thought they might have been taken down for cleaning or wall repainting. The following day, he told the *Times* he had asked around and thought they might be in the Cultural Connections room.

Music teacher Lisa Hernandez said she wanted to see more programming from Lac du Flambeau elders brought into the school. "When I first came here 29 years ago, we had a couple days set aside every year where the kids would have the elders teaching them," she said. "I thought, these are just such cool programs. When I grew up, we were the only Indian family in Burlington, and I never got any of that until I came here... I think our kids are missing out."

Wawronowicz and Hernandez wanted to see the school board, administration and staff interacting more with the tribal community, with the former suggesting that the superintendent selection process should have been held at the tribal of-

fices, with the entire council present.

"You should be coming to Family Circle and saying hi to everybody that's there. Make yourself known... every single one of you has been invited to come in," Hernandez said. "Instead of stopping and saying good job (to the boys in Lac du Flambeau's singing and drumming group), you walk in the office, and the door's closed. What does that tell young people?"

Other staff members, speakers alleged, were outright rude and disrespectful to students. Last week, Wawronowicz was sitting in the hallway with a group of middle schoolers who were mourning the passing of former staff member Mary Masiakowski.

"There was a teacher there. He stands, and he says to me, 'are these all the naughty kids who can't go in the library?'" Wawronowicz relayed. "Where was the sensitivity training for that person, to say that about those kids (when) we're respecting someone that made a difference in their lives?"

Jean Thoms came to speak at the meeting "because of nine little Indian children

that were left behind yesterday" on a field trip, which Ouimette said was an incentive for good behavior. Thoms said her grandson was the only child in his class who was not permitted to go, and that no one had communicated this to her beforehand.

"I stood in that hallway, right in front of the office there, and watched all the staff going through. Not one 'good morning'," Thoms continued in her recollection of the previous day. "Kids were coming into the school, coming back in from outside, taking their snowpants off and their boots and trying to put them away. Their teacher came out. That woman walked past a kid's jacket lying on the floor and she kicked it under the bench."

Afterwards, school board president Gary Smith told the speakers that while the board could not respond during the public comment portion of the meeting, he wanted to continue the conversation with each one of them.

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