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Statement by MPS School Board President on Wisconsin Senate Bill 411 • August 11, 2021

The Milwaukee School Board President calls on Wisconsin state legislators to oppose Senate Bill 411. The announcement for the joint Senate and Assembly Education Committee hearing on Wednesday, August 11, 2021, describes the proposed legislation as “relating to: anti-racism and anti-sexism pupil instruction and anti-racism and anti-sexism training for employees of school districts and independent charter schools.” In fact, SB 411 seeks to prohibit teaching and staff training on these important matters.

This bill is unnecessary, obstructs teachers’ ability to teach, and harms Wisconsin’s 818,000+ students.

SB 411 is unnecessary. This legislation is a “solution” in search of a problem. There is no evidence that educators are teaching “race and sex stereotyping” or that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive....” On the contrary, this bill, and similar legislation in more than two dozen states, is an attempt to weaponize any discussion of racism or sexism in order to silence teachers and to conjure up fear among voters.

SB 411 is an attack on teachers’ ability to teach. Teachers deserve the right to teach the truthful history of our nation’s past and to discuss current events in ways that help students understand the root causes of some of our nation’s most daunting problems. All teachers, regardless of their subject area should have the right to discuss controversial topics, whether historical or current, in developmentally appropriate ways.

The penalties for such teaching are outrageous. For example, a district could potentially lose 10% of general state aid if a teacher teaches about the institutional anti-black violence of the slave system or the dispossession of Native Americans from their lands or the U.S.-Mexican war, through which the U.S. annexed half of Mexico. These are facts of US history. If an MPS teacher taught such truths it would mean the reduction of \$61.3 million in state aid, causing irreparable damage to our students. Other districts could suffer as well: Racine would lose roughly \$16.2 million, Green Bay \$17.6 million, Appleton \$9.6 million, Eau Claire \$6.6 million, and Kenosha \$15 million. Moreover, just the threat of such budget cuts will surely muzzle thousands of teachers throughout the state.

SB 411 would harm Wisconsin’s more than 818,000 students. Wisconsin’s students deserve to have teachers who teach history accurately and teachers unafraid to discuss controversial topics with their students in developmentally appropriate ways. We should not underestimate our students. They follow current events. They participate in political debates and are leading organizations and movements that address many of our nation’s most entrenched problems. To close off schools as a location where students can discuss, debate, and investigate such issues would be a travesty to our students and would discourage their interest in participating in civil society.

I call on legislators to oppose SB 411. We will continue to defend the right of teachers to teach, and the right of students to learn, the true history of our nation.

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