

GUEST COLUMN / WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL

# Mitch Henck: Get to the heart of school reform

Jan 18, 2015

Wisconsin lawmakers have made school accountability the No. 1 issue to start this session.

That's wonderful, but nobody is talking about real reform.

One proposal would turn failing public schools into independent charter schools. The same proposal would cut funding for private school vouchers for four years if that private school fails.

Lawmakers are fighting over who would grade the schools and under what guidelines.

Having covered local school board meetings for years as a reporter, I am here to tell you school board members don't have a clue what goes on in the schools. They lean on standardized test results or answers from administrators who frame their answers according to their funding priorities.

We often hear "We need local control!" Most parents have never attended a school board meeting. They show up on buses if the board wants to close a school due to consolidation, or if the board wants to cut a specific program that affects their child.

Parents who care about the schools with select teachers and principals should form site-based committees to actually watch what goes on in a school over time. They should advise the school board on curriculum and discipline and other issues school board members never see. The site-based committee members would be appointed by the principal after interviews with applicants.

The principal is like the head coach. If he or she doesn't get that school turned around, that principal is shown the door.

As former Superintendent Art Rainwater would say to Madison School Board members in his Arkansas drawl, "You're not here for the thousands of hours behind closed doors." He was right.

Top-down solutions don't work. Private school vouchers only work if they are coupled with open enrollment. A friend in Madison wants to send his children to Verona schools, but all the slots are taken.

With private school vouchers, only 1,000 slots were available statewide outside of Milwaukee and Racine. That's not much of a choice. If there isn't universal choice, then choice doesn't truly exist.

Despite the rhetoric, most parents would still choose public schools where the schools are good, even if slots in private schools were available. But private schools might be a better fit for parents and children who want a different experience. If students are unable or unwilling to perform, they need to be sent to alternative schools that get funding based on outcomes. They would be funded by the state, and the alternative schools that succeed would get the contracts.

The ones that fail would close. Schools with successful models could always find existing space with room for the necessary digital technology.

On the achievement gap, the ill-fated Madison Prep charter school would have been a worthy experiment. It would have had more teachers of color who would have formed closer relationships with families in and out of school. That was killed by the teachers union and a cowardly School Board.

It's time for lawmakers to unleash the passion and commitment of educators who have the flexibility and guts to do what's necessary to win.