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Another Perspective

SUSAN TROLLER, a Capital Times reporter, recently resigned and submitted her last article for the paper. Much of it was particular to the Madison area, but the following excerpts should be noteworthy for everyone.

"I'll definitely miss being amid the rich stew of intellectually engaging ideas surrounding public education and its place and purpose in a democracy. Reporting on that conversation has been fascinating, exhausting, exhilarating -- and never dull.

For what it's worth, here are some of my observations as I put aside my reporter's notebooks, file papers and clear out thousands of emails that helped inform my work over the last several years.

Not all "reformers" actually want reform.

There's a well-funded national campaign made up of conservative think tanks, public relations firms and big-money donors whose mission is to discredit public schools. Some of them just hate the teacher unions and disdain teachers and all public workers.

Others are ideologically opposed to the notion of public education and would like to privatize everything; their releases provide a steady litany about the advantages of "choice" schools, from private voucher schools to for-profit charters that operate with public dollars.

I definitely get propaganda from the various teacher unions, as well. With the releases from WEAC or the American Federation of Teachers, the spin on the message is straightforward and there's no guessing where the money to support the organization comes from.

That's not true with groups with names like the American Federation for Children (pro-school choice) or Education Action Group (strongly anti-union) where it takes more than a casual effort to learn who's providing the money behind the messages (generally it's a handful of extremely wealthy individuals with an ideological bend against public education).

Overall, these outlets provide a steady drumbeat designed to discredit public education and turn readers against "government schools," sometimes at the rate of two or three press releases a day.

Some of the information is valid. Most of it is distorted or biased. But I see it reported as "fact" by a lot of news media. It has certainly predisposed many people without any real experience with public schools to believe all or most of them are "struggling" or "failing."

In the last five years, I've been impressed by most teachers I've come across as I write about their schools, their projects, their students, their struggles. They not only want their students to succeed, they work at it with a kind of missionary zeal that involves long hours and creative thinking.

Personally, I'd love to see some of the state's political leaders who have helped shred teachers' lives and reputations over the last year spend a week leading a classroom. They would surely get an education. If hidden video cameras recorded their efforts, the footage would yield a billion hilarious hits on YouTube, guaranteed.

I've also learned that leadership -- the principal -- defines a school in almost every case.

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Another Perspective, continued...

Forget about testing teachers, or even students. If you want to improve a school, hire a top-notch principal who can inspire teachers and engage parents.

The best teachers will struggle with a bad principal. But even the most indifferent parent community will engage with a smart, charismatic school leader who loves the children and respects his or her staff.

It does, honestly, take a village to educate a child.

Finally, whether I agree with the members of a school board or not, I have to take my hat off to them for taking on a tough, thankless job with no real upside. Yes, they have their special interests and favorites that range from one end of the political spectrum to the other, but they represent the real grass roots of American democracy at work. We all owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude."

Penalty Stiffens for Viewing Porn on School Computers New Law Goes into Effect Friday, December 9, 2011

2011 Wisconsin Act 84 modifies current law that governs the revocation of licenses issued by the DPI.

Current Law: Under current law, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) may, after written notice of the charges and an opportunity for defense, revoke any license granted by DPI for incompetency or immoral conduct on the part of the licensee. Current law defines "immoral conduct" as conduct or behavior that is contrary to commonly accepted moral or ethical standards and that endangers the health, safety, welfare, or education of any pupil. An administrator is required to report to DPI the name of any person employed by the educational agency and licensed by DPI if: (1) the person is charged or convicted of specified crimes; (2) the person is dismissed, or his or her contract is not renewed by the employer based in whole or in part on evidence that the person engaged in immoral conduct; or (3) the person resigns and the administrator has a reasonable suspicion that the resignation relates to the person having engaged in immoral conduct.

Upon receiving a report from an administrator relating to a license, DPI must investigate to determine whether to initiate revocation proceedings. During the investigation, DPI must keep confidential all information pertaining to the investigation except the fact that an investigation is being conducted and the date of the revocation hearing. Current law requires DPI to destroy all information pertaining to an investigation or a revocation proceeding three years from the date on which the investigation is terminated or a final decision denying revocation of the license issued, whichever is later.

2011 Wisconsin Act 84

Under the Act, "immoral conduct" [*automatically*] includes the intentional use of an educational agency's equipment to download, view, solicit, seek, display, or distribute pornographic material. The Act requires an administrator, when reporting to DPI about a licensee's conduct, to include a complete copy of the licensee's personnel file and all records related to any investigation of the license conducted by or on behalf of the educational agency.

Moreover, under current law s. 19.356(2)(a), Stats of the open records law, with certain exceptions, if an authority decides to permit access to specific types of records, the authority must, before permitting access and within three days after making the decision to permit access, notify any subject of the record that the authority is permitting access to the record. Wisconsin Act 84 now exempts the transfer of these records by the administrator of an educational agency to DPI from that provision. (*In other words, the employee does not need to be notified first about the Administration sharing his/her personnel file with the DPI.*)

Under Act 84, in addition to the investigation and confidentiality requirements described above, DPI is required to post the name of the licensee who is under investigation on the DPI website.

Act 84 repeals the current statute which requires DPI to destroy all information pertaining to an investigation or a revocation proceeding after three years, as described above. Instead, under the Act, DPI is required to maintain a record of all investigations it conducts that indicates the name of the licensee, the date the investigation began, the reason for the investigation, and the result of the investigation. Whenever an investigation results in the revocation of a license, DPI must post the name of the person whose license was revoked on the DPI website. **Act 84 takes effect on December 9, 2011.**

Wisconsin Legislative Council Act Memo. Prepared by Rachel Letzing, Senior Staff Attorney, Nov. 29, 2011. [*edited and with emphasis added*]