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Kiddos and Mental Health

By
Senator Jeff Smith

We always want what's best for our children. We want our children to be happy, comfortable and safe. If we could provide all the tools for our children to succeed, why wouldn't we?

The urgency for mental health funding is not going away. We need to face it head on. You'd think an issue affecting so many people would lead us to come together to find solutions on this important issue. What is the biggest hurdle we face?

It all comes down to funding. Without proper funding it's very difficult for families, school districts and community agencies to afford the resources and professional staff needed to treat mental illness. As lawmakers, it's our job to address the serious issues affecting our communities. We have many funding responsibilities as legislators. The welfare of our children must be the most important.

In the past couple of weeks I've had the privilege of meeting professionals who deal directly with mental healthcare for our children, or "kiddos," as the professionals call them. I recently visited Northwest Journey, a care center for school-age children in crisis. I learned about the incredible services offered at the organization. The professionals spoke about their passion to help children overcome their doubts and achieve a bright future.

The stories I heard and read were heartbreaking, but encouraging to think of a child's potential, if given the resources to succeed. One of the children wrote, "A year ago around this time I thought I didn't have a future but I can take a step back and see that my future holds an endless amount of possibilities."

It shouldn't be a surprise to most that families in crisis are less likely to have the means to afford private services or even private insurance. Northwest Journey is able to offer these critical services through the Medicaid program, which is managed by the state and provides assistance to families in-need.

If Republicans would've expanded Medicaid, organizations like Northwest Journey would have the potential to do so much more for their clients. This is our money that we've already paid to the federal government. I don't understand why we would fund other states' Medicaid programs, while ignoring the critical needs of our own children right here in Wisconsin.

There's more we must do to support our children, besides expanding Medicaid. Prior to meeting with professionals at Northwest Journey, Senator Patty Schachtner (D-Somerset) and I learned about similar challenges Menomonie School District faces

relating to providing mental health service. You see, our schools are woefully short of counselors and psychiatrists to help children in crisis.

Since 1993, Republicans imposed revenue limits on school districts. This dramatically restricted each district's ability to fund our schools. Incremental increases based on 1993 education funding levels while using a broken funding formula has been disastrous for Wisconsin schools.

School districts have made deep cuts just to afford core curriculum, forcing mental health services onto the chopping block. Republicans cut \$38 million in school mental health aid from Governor Evers' budget, which would've funded more mental health professionals and programs.

School funding and how the formula works (or doesn't work) has been debated for years. And, like so many other important issues, Republicans haven't done anything about it.

Our children are relying on us. All children will be affected in some way, even families who aren't directly affected. No matter the circumstances, we all walk the same path, breathe the same air and rely on the same democracy. We are all one community.

You can do your part by contacting legislators in your area. Ask them if they believe a child's well-being is the most pressing priority. If so, tell them you will be holding them accountable based on their decisions. Those actions need to result in more success stories like those children at Northwest Journey who have found hope in their future.