



**DEAR READERS: AS WE GO TO PRESS WITH THIS ISSUE OF THE MAGAZINE,**

news of the unthinkable tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., is still unfolding. Sadly, our state's schools have also confronted violence and dealt with heartbreak. In recent years, a student took his own life at Marinette High School after holding his classmates and teacher hostage, and Principal John Klang was killed protecting his students at Weston High School.

This month, I had originally written a column addressing the growing gap between the funding for our public schools and the increasing expectations being placed on them. However, in light of the recent devastation in Newtown, the scope of the conversation about support, mutual aid, and partnership goes well beyond school report cards and accountability measures.

Looking ahead, we must ensure that concrete steps are taken to continuously address the issues of school violence, the safety of students and school staff, and the full cycle of

violence prevention and crisis preparedness and response. For now, however, it is sufficient to stand united in support for all communities that have been affected by an act of explanation-defying violence, and especially in our support for the community of Sandy Hook Elementary School.

My original column is printed below, but it is offered only with the understanding that the issues discussed therein are quite distant from the substantially more important concerns and remembrances that presently weigh heavily on our minds.

## Supporting Our Schools

The public schools in our communities face a myriad of changes.

They're adapting at the local level to meet their students' needs and the evolving global community while meeting increased state and national demands for performance data on students and teachers. As we have conversations throughout Wisconsin about these reforms and new accountability measures, we also need to talk about funding for our public schools.

Local property taxpayers and the state have a partnership in funding public education, which is appropriate as both have a stake in a high-quality public education system. However, in recent years, just as the state has been stepping up its demands on schools, it has been reducing its contribution, leaving a greater share of the burden of maintaining this investment on the backs of property taxpayers. Not too long ago, the state contributed 67 percent of school costs. It now contributes 62 percent. Property taxes are making up the difference — to the tune of about \$470 million per year more.

The state recently enacted labor reforms that gave school boards a greater say in the compensation and working conditions provided to their employees. Such flexibility in compensation allowed school boards to

balance their budgets in a difficult economic time. It is our hope that this flexibility combined with a commitment to adequately fund our public schools will allow school boards to provide the compensation and working conditions that attract and retain high-quality employees.

In that vein, as our economy improves, it's time to rethink how to restore the state-local partnership in what has been and continues to be the most important institution in the development of Wisconsin.

The state will soon be writing its 2013-15 state budget, and it looks like the state's revenues are growing. Now that our schools know more specifically about the state reforms they will be implementing and what Wisconsin's improving financial picture looks like, it's time for the state to be a better partner to schools by providing additional resources and an upward adjustment in revenue limits.

Increasing the state's contribution isn't merely about relieving local property taxpayers, it is about creating more equity and fairness in the system, and making sure the burden of paying for public education is borne across all sectors that benefit from that system. State dollars help ensure that children in our property-poorest communities

have the same access to a quality education as children from wealthier communities.

The public also needs to have a conversation about the revenue limits imposed on schools by the state. Increasing state aid alone will not give schools more resources — it will only change the mix of state and local dollars that fund our schools. Greater flexibility is needed if schools are going to make technology upgrades, provide professional development to their staffs, and provide the programming needed to prepare students for the jobs of tomorrow.

Public school boards recognize that these have been difficult times for taxpayers. School boards have been good stewards of taxpayers' money. In the last three years, school boards throughout all four corners of the state levied less than what they could have by between 60 and 70 million dollars each year. School boards will continue to be responsible.

Both the state and our local communities are critical shareholders in public education. As such, we need to protect our mutual investment and make sure that our public schools are healthy and vibrant, geared for the future and preparing students for tomorrow's jobs. ■