

QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance (SWSA) is a public school advocacy organization of school district leaders who represent over 225,000 Wisconsin students in 30 school districts in the Milwaukee region. We are a nonpartisan voice for student success, school growth and long-term economic vitality through research, advocacy, public policy and effective communications.

The landscape of publically funded K-12 education policy is changing rapidly. Some of the changes are healthy and promote a stronger and more effective learning experience, adding to the rich tradition of Wisconsin as a national education leader. Still, we find some changes are politically driven, ideologically-based with a focus away from developing more effective schools and school districts. This White Paper provides an outline of priorities for policy makers emphasizing the essential aspects of defining a quality education and the elements of quality we aspire to provide all children whose K-12 education or educational services are publically funded.

Members of the Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance (SWSA) believe that a quality education is something we owe to all of our children. This means engaging students and their individual needs and interests, giving them a voice in the educational process, and providing instruction anytime, anywhere that emphasizes anytime/anywhere skills.

We recognize that the term 'quality education' can mean different things to different people, based on their values, needs, and aspirations, but as educational leaders, we feel compelled to describe our vision for a standard of quality that will best serve our students and our society.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted that each generation is a new people, and must acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to maintain and improve a constitutional democracy. Education for citizenship in a democracy is the central theme of our public schools.

Public schools are defined as any school or school service that receives public funding, reflecting the changing nature of K-12 education.

We envision quality education as a collaborative product of research and practice based on distinct elements connected to the enduring purposes of public education. These purposes are:

- To develop children academically, intellectually, socially, and physically
- To nurture children in developing into ethical citizens and leaders who can contribute to and thrive in a global society

- To promote cultural literacy
- To foster creative, collaborative, adaptable, curious, and self-motivated critical thinkers
- To foster the development of skills enabling economic self-sufficiency
- To instill the democratic values, principles, and beliefs on which our society rests

Our description of a quality education is guided by three principles that are essential to any school or program:

Principle I: Education for all

Since the inception of Wisconsin as a state, public education has been of primary importance to residents. The central principle of public education, guaranteed by the Wisconsin state constitution, is that an education shall be provided for free to all Wisconsin students, no matter their economic background, abilities, disabilities, or other characteristics. Public schools have been and will continue to be the best quality option and most accountable choice for families of special needs students

Principle II: Education for democracy

An arguably more important reason for public education is that our democracy requires it. Just as in the earliest days of our republic, the citizens of today need at least a basic education so that they may choose their leaders intelligently and otherwise contribute meaningfully to our democratic society. A sound education provides students with the skills to think critically, as well as the ability and desire to be of service to others. Though this idea is by no means a new one, the SWSA believes that education for civic responsibility is more important now than ever before, and benefits individuals, our community, and our entire state.

Principle III: Education for our economy

Our changing economy requires our graduates to be well trained in the knowledge and skills necessary for the jobs of today and tomorrow. At the elementary and secondary levels, this means ensuring that students are career-ready and have the abilities to learn and to re-learn as the jobs in our increasingly globalized economy change.

At the individual level, success in education means personal achievement in an increasingly competitive job market. At the state level, a highly educated populace with a high level of skill and the flexibility to meet the challenges of a new economy makes Wisconsin a beacon for businesses seeking the nation's best and brightest minds.

To achieve a quality education, all public schools or school services must:

- Embrace new and bold innovations that build on current best practices and research, yet challenges current mainstream instruction. These may include changes in classroom configuration, improved student assessment and use of appropriate technology.
- Recognize that one of the most important variables in the success of our children's education is the knowledge and experience of their teachers, and that raising the bar for student achievement means also doing so for teachers.
- Embrace highly rigorous, personalized instruction and the use of appropriate technology that provides additional assistance to students in areas in which they need help or find opportunity, while ~~also~~ building on their interests and gifts.
- Provide pathways from K-12 to higher education or to additional training programs that foster employment success.
- Act responsively and responsibly to the needs of students of different cultural backgrounds and recognize that students begin education at different levels of readiness.

We close with a statement recognizing that a quality education is a personal experience of growth and connectedness. Students feel a sense of support, belonging, and competence. Students develop a personal connection and growing sense of responsibility to a larger community and a sense of purpose and potential about their own lives.