

Testimony of Henri Kinson
The Biden-Harris Border Crisis: Wisconsin Perspectives
House Judiciary Committee
October 24, 2024

Good morning. My name is Henri Kinson. I grew up in Whitewater, went to the Whitewater school district and then to undergrad at UW-Whitewater. I served on the Whitewater School Board for seven years and I am also the parent of four boys who have attended Whitewater public schools, with one still a sophomore there.

I was asked to come here to testify as to the educational situation in my hometown of Whitewater due to the large recent influx of non-English speakers. Put simply, educational outcomes by every metric are falling like a rock in Whitewater.

When I attended Whitewater schools years ago, as a small university town, our outcomes were great; certainly in the top third of the state and always the best in the area. Today, we rank in the bottom fifth of all districts across the state, and are still falling.

The reasons for our falling test scores are no secret; all you have to do is go to Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction (DPI) website to see that the three drivers of academic achievement across the state are 1. Special needs kids, 2. Economically disadvantaged (ED) kids, and 3. English learners (ESL). That's it. The more a school district has of any of these kids, the lower the academic results will be, and vice versa. Any district's test scores are basically a math problem.

So what inputs have been changing? Whitewater's proportion of special needs kids, while high at about 20% (state average 14%), has not been growing. Similarly, our proportion of economically disadvantaged kids is also high, but hovers around 50% (state average 45%).

Which leaves English learners. As recently as 2020-2021, the district had 236 English Learners. Last year it was 352, an increase of 50% in just 3 years, and growing. Migrant children are almost always both economically disadvantaged and ESL, and sometimes special needs as well. I just spoke with a friend who is a paraprofessional in the district whose job it is to care for special needs kids and she told me of a family that just moved here that has two out of their three kids being high special needs, like changing diapers. This requires the district to transfer those kids to a special facility in Elkhorn, which costs the state even more money.

At Lincoln elementary, more than a quarter of the kids are ESL. Such a large and growing proportion of kids who aren't native speakers invariably drives academic achievement down for everyone, and we are no exception. Last year, with 25% ESL kids, Lincoln sent 80% of its 5th graders into middle school below grade level in English. This data is public; it is from Wisconsin's own Department of Public Instruction.

To combat this, the Whitewater school district spends hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to get the migrant kids up to speed, but these expenditures necessarily come at the expense of other things such as lowering teacher to (non-ESL) student ratios, so overall test scores drop.

Another dynamic that many people don't think about is open enrollment. Here in Wisconsin, we have public school choice, so if you don't want your kid to go to your home district, you can enroll them in another one. As Whitewater's academics have declined, the number of parents placing their kids out of the district has increased, which further depresses test scores and decreases revenue, as the most involved parents are the ones most likely to move their kids somewhere else. Hundreds of Whitewater parents do this every day, with more than 200 kids going to schools outside the Whitewater district, more than 10% of the kids in our district. This includes our school board president, who sends her kids to neighboring Elkhorn to attend school, where they have less than 5% English Learners. And much higher test scores.

There is a boy who lives in the district who got a perfect score on his ACT test this Spring. But he doesn't go to Whitewater schools.

This movement of students outside the Whitewater district costs us almost \$2m in revenue annually and illustrates the negative feedback loop that can occur as a district faces a large influx of English Learners like the one we are experiencing in real time. To see what we are heading for, we don't need to look any further than our neighboring district of Delavan which began facing an influx of English learners about 30 years ago. It now has the highest proportion of resident kids in the state enrolling out, almost 40%. It has perennial problems passing referenda and low test scores (they are actually worse than Whitewater's). Whitewater is not far behind.

I am often asked what can be done to remedy the situation. At this point, I ask anyone who will listen, stop the bleeding. Please stop the huge influx of migrants coming to Whitewater. This is a problem not of our making and out of our control. It is frustrating hearing politicians imply that residents who care about their kids' instructional quality are somehow racists or xenophobes as the politicians' children attend classes at public and private schools with few to no English learners. Some of our classrooms are half English learners.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.