NEA honors Senator Tim Cullen with human and civil rights award

Senator Cullen is among a dozen recipients of the NEA Human and Civil Rights Award

HOUSTON—For his commitment to increasing diversity in the classroom, his dedication to quality public education, and his lifetime of public service as a policymaker, Wisconsin Senator Tim Cullen has received the NEA President’s Award.

“Senator Cullen’s career has been one of activism and unwavering devotion to improving public schools in the state of Wisconsin,” said NEA President Lily Eskelsen García. “We are proud to honor a person who has made so many contributions to improve schools for both teachers and students. Senator Cullen’s leadership will have long-term positive implications for the schools and lives his policymaking touched.”

Although he originally wanted to be a high school social studies teacher, Cullen was drawn to politics. In 1974, he was elected to the Wisconsin Senate, where he served as majority leader in 1981, 1983, and 1985. Because education always was important to him, Cullen served on the education committee for the length of his tenure.

Cullen held his state senate seat until 1987, when he began working for the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services and then transitioned to the private sector. However, he never lost his connection to advocating for public schools and later served on the Janesville School Board.

In 2007, Cullen moved to address his concerns about the lack of educators of color in the Janesville School District, where, even as 14 percent of the students were students of color, less than 1 percent of teachers identified as people of color.

To address this issue of racial diversity, Cullen helped develop the “Janesville Minority Teacher Scholarship.” This program provides a multi-year renewable college scholarship of up to $5,000 per year to a student of color from the Janesville district. The student earning the scholarship must pursue a degree in education, obtain a Wisconsin State Teacher Certification, and apply for a position in the school district of Janesville once they complete their degree.

This program continues to provide resources to future educators who, in turn, make Janesville schools more diverse and representative. In every stage of his career, Cullen has advocated for high-quality public schools, and even today his commendable work continues to make a difference.

Senator Tim Cullen was one out of 12 outstanding social justice heroes honored at NEA’s 2019 NEA Human and Civil Rights Awards, which took place on July 3, in Houston, Texas. Click on link to view video tribute of Senator Cullen.

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