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ICYMI: Looking to the future at Lincoln Hills

MADISON—Department of Corrections (DOC) Secretary Jon Litscher penned an editorial which appeared in the [Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel](#) regarding DOC's actions to ensure that Copper Lake School/Lincoln Hills School is a safe and secure environment for youth. The column is included below:

“During my time as corrections secretary, my focus has been on expanding education, vocational training, treatment and programming for inmates and offenders. While our core mission is public safety, I believe that we must provide opportunities for inmates and offenders to learn vital skills that prepare them for success in the community and encourage them to leverage these opportunities to live productive lives upon their release from Department of Corrections custody and supervision.

Nowhere has this emphasis had a more significant effect than at Copper Lake School and Lincoln Hills School. Since I began in February 2016, we have made considerable investments to fundamentally shift our culture to incentivize and reward positive progress by youths, rather than solely focus on correcting misbehavior. Our interest is in helping these youths learn from their prior misdeeds, find their potential and move on to bright futures.

We have sought additional resources and utilized existing resources within our current budget to expand treatment and programming opportunities, including changes that will greatly increase the amount of time that youths spend out of their room engaged in productive activities to develop pro-social behavior. We have made policy changes to lessen the use of OC, restrictive housing and restraints, and continue to examine how we can further minimize their use.

Additionally, we have made wide-reaching personnel changes, bringing in experienced and highly qualified staff from across the Department of Corrections to lead cultural and institutional change at the schools that aligns with evidence-based practices. We have also emphasized and required significant training for all staff at the youth facilities, including a seven-week academy for new security staff. As a result, our staff have a clear understanding of their role and responsibility in each youth's achievement.

The sum total of these changes is a vastly improved environment. When I visit Copper Lake and Lincoln Hills, I hear directly from staff and youths the positive effect these changes have had. We have opened

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our doors to parents, county agencies, judges, legislators, professional associations, members of the media and others to see these changes firsthand and have received positive feedback from many visitors. I am incredibly proud of the ownership our employees have taken in serving as positive role models for youths in our custody.

I firmly believe that the environment at the facilities is safe and secure for both staff and youths. While issues have occurred, we have taken action to hold employees accountable.

Dwelling on the past, except as it informs future improvement and enhancement, discounts the progress that has occurred over the prior year and presents an image that does not reflect the reality that we see every day. As I noted above, we are continually focused on creating opportunities for youths to be successful and transition to independent lives in the community.”

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