

News Release

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State of Education address foreshadows budget priorities

MADISON — In a passionate State of Education address Thursday, grounded in his lifetime service to public education, State Superintendent Tony Evers foreshadowed priorities of the 2017-19 state budget request he will submit to the governor later this fall.

He touched on the importance of

- providing resources to students that reflect the need to increase equity and close achievement gaps,
- building the educator workforce so every student has a teacher who is well trained and well compensated, and
- paying for schools in a way that avoids mounting inequalities.

“When I visit districts large and small, I see some very exciting things,” Evers said. “There is constant innovation and a drive for excellence. Despite our challenges, we are on the leading edge of meaningful education for all kids. From Fort Atkinson where a pond becomes a classroom, to Three Lakes where the community works alongside our young people in a state-of-the-art Fab Lab. From the student portfolios in West Salem and Cudahy, to the top notch career and technical education (CTE) programs in Menomonie and Nekoosa; I could not be prouder of the learning I see.”

He told district administrators earlier in the day that he supports their efforts to innovate to meet the needs of all students. “Our schools are engines of change and creativity, and I will do everything I can to open the doors of innovation and create space for you all to lead this work around our shared efforts to promote excellence for all. That includes exploring ‘Districts of Innovation’ used in Kentucky to address Wisconsin’s achievement gaps,” he said.

Evers reflected on the increased diversity in Wisconsin public school classrooms, sharing from his own experiences. “Growing up as a small-town kid, the first time I met someone who wasn’t white was at a summer job at the canning factory down the road. I think that my story may be similar to many Wisconsinites my age. And while

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this may seem like a recollection from a bygone era, when I do travel around the state, I'm struck that there are some places where this story could still be true today.”

Evers stressed that equity and efforts to close gaps cannot become a discussion about improving the lives of other people's children. “If we see this as an issue of one school or district, we all falter. This is about ensuring the prosperity of the next generation of students, no matter their race, no matter if they have a disability, no matter who they love. It's about all of our kids,” he said.

Evers noted that mental health resources are stretched thin or are non-existent in many parts of the state. He cited a recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention study that showed up to one in five Wisconsin students has a mental health challenge. Additionally, over half of school-aged children face at least one identified form of adversity. “Whether it's because mom lost her job, parents divorced, or there was an untimely death in the family, it means almost half of our students will need an extra lift to help them achieve their potential,” he said. In his budget, Evers will advance policies to put more services in schools, especially in high need areas, and provide more training of school staff around the areas of mental health first aid, screening, trauma informed care, and brief interventions. Part of the budget request also will include finding ways to co-locate mental health services in schools.

“To promote excellence for every student, we cannot ignore the critical staffing shortages many of our districts face. To put it simply, not enough of our young people are considering careers in education,” Evers said. He recounted his experience as a member of the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents while dining on college campuses. “Not once in eight years have I sat down for lunch next to someone who told me they were pursuing a career in education,” he said. “Data to back up that anecdote shows graduation and enrollment in Wisconsin educator preparation programs is down when compared to 2009 levels. On ACT's survey of test-takers, fewer students are indicating that education is their preferred field of study.”

To address staffing shortages, Evers adopted emergency rules in August designed to reduce hurdles for districts without sacrificing the quality of the teaching profession. He noted that additional changes will require long-term solutions that address the status and pay of educators. In his budget, he will be seeking additional resources for rural schools to compete on a level playing field for teachers. “But one strategy is free and we can do it today,” he said. “We need to end the negative rhetoric surrounding the teaching profession. Teachers teach because they care about kids. We ought to treat them with respect and pay them as professionals.”

The issue of educator pay is intrinsically linked to how we fund our schools. From 2009 to 2014, Wisconsin ranked near the bottom for change in teacher pay according to the U.S. Census Bureau, a 2.4 percent

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decrease in take home pay over six years. “When the founders of our state crafted a system of public education, they put great value on the idea of an equitable system,” Evers said. “I believe the public is with us on the need to address funding reform. In the past five years, passage rates for referenda have drastically increased. Today almost 80 percent of questions asked are approved. Citizens are voting to raise their taxes because the state is not pulling its weight. Polling also continues to show that the public favors adding more funding for our schools. But for every eight districts that can pass a referenda in today’s environment, there are two that can’t. That creates a system of haves and have nots—and it is not acceptable.”

He noted that the most recent Wisconsin Supreme Court review of the state’s school finance system found three student groups as key indicators of distress: English language learners, students with disabilities, and students in poverty. Evers plans to include provisions in his 2017-19 budget for minimum aid and weighting of per pupil aid to reflect student needs. He also will ask for more resources for students learning English, reinvestments in special education to counteract a decade of flat funding, and a reform of summer school funding to support learning opportunities that close achievement gaps and increase dual enrollment opportunities for high school students.

Evers ended his State of Education address with a plea. “I want to close by asking something of each and every one of you. It’s not small, and it won’t be easy. We desperately need broad support to achieve excellence for each and every child. We also need people who are willing to be honest; people willing to talk to each other about inequities; people willing to find strength in the diversity that makes Wisconsin, and America, great. I am convinced that if we can speak up together with candor and without fear, solving our problems around school funding and school staffing will come. It will come for every kid in Wisconsin.”

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NOTES: Details of the Department of Public Instruction’s 2017-19 budget request for school finance will be release in November after general school aid is certified. This news release is available electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2016_88.pdf.