

## State of Education

September 20, 2018 – State Capitol

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Welcome, and thank you all for being here today.

This is my 10th time addressing you as your elected State Superintendent. It's my great honor to serve our kids and families, our educators, our public schools and libraries. After a decade at this, you'd think today would feel like old hat, but it never does. Being here and speaking to you in this beautiful Capitol building - I remain forever grateful for the trust you've placed in me.

In these 10 years, I marvel at how much has changed about the world we live in;

- My iPhone has gone from big to small to big again.
- Aaron Rodgers moved from Brett Favre's back-up to a contender for Greatest of All Time
- And let's see... what else has changed? Oh yeah. I got new glasses!

### Education as the Equalizer

Through it all...

Education remains - as it has always been - the great equalizer. The pathway to prosperity. The key to a skilled workforce and a robust economy.

I'm born and raised here, and for as long as I can remember, our world-class public schools and universities were the envy of the country. We're home to the nation's first kindergarten. Home to one of the country's first land-grant colleges and public university systems.

And despite efforts to strip it away, we are still home to the Wisconsin Idea, where the forces of education, innovation, and government have collaborated for over a century to bring revolutionary changes for public good.

That is a lot to be proud of.

Our deep history and commitment to public education is a source of *immense* pride to me, as I'm sure it is to all of you. It's personal. It's part of our DNA.

### Priorities Out Of Whack

But this legacy - these values - are being chipped away, piece by piece.

I don't need to recount the past decade of disinvestment and what's at stake. As school district leaders, you've faced impossible tradeoffs:

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- What maintenance do we put off, hoping it holds another year?
  - Which programs, courses, or staff do we eliminate to make ends meet?
  - How many kids can we squeeze into a classroom before we compromise their ability to learn?
  - Which schools do we close?

Governing is about priorities. You live it every day. And right now, Wisconsin's priorities are *out of whack*.

### They Should Be Our Priority

Today in Wisconsin we're spending less on our public schools than we did eight years ago - putting us below the national average, and these choices have consequences.

We serve over 50,000 English learners - and that number is growing. *They should be our priority*. But state aid to help them learn and succeed has been flat for over a decade while costs continue to balloon.

We serve over 120,000 special needs students. *They should be our priority*. But the state's primary special education aid has been frozen for a decade, and now covers only a quarter of required costs. Local schools are left to somehow make up the difference.

Four in every 10 kids are economically disadvantaged. *They should be our priority*. But our state increasingly ignores their needs and punishes their parents for being poor - making it harder for kids and families to access childcare, healthcare, and food assistance.

Our educators are on the front lines of these challenges, but they chose this profession - like we once did - because they love kids; they want to inspire a love of learning; they want to change lives. So when they speak up about bad education policy, deteriorating schools, or the massive teacher exodus we're facing, they're doing right by our kids. And we should listen. They're reminding us that education - like democracy - doesn't come for free. It must be nurtured, sustained, and invested in over time.

Time magazine recently profiled what it's like to be a teacher in America with a powerful cover story - and it's not an easy read, folks. Our nation's teachers, the highly educated, trained professionals who we trust with our kids... they are working extra jobs and making immense personal tradeoffs to stay in a career they love.

In Wisconsin, one in three households is either below the poverty line or in serious danger of falling below it. Those are our friends, our neighbors, and increasingly, those are our educators.

Public education will only remain the great equalizer - the pathway to prosperity and a better life - as long as we remain committed to public education.

### A Better Way

A decade of *disinvestment* hasn't magically solved problems, increased student performance, or improved our competitive edge. Divisive solutions from Washington and Madison haven't made things better. These policies are failing us.

But the people of Wisconsin know there's a better way.

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We see it in the conversation about school funding. Over the past few years, groups of moms and dads across Wisconsin began meeting and giving up their free time to learn about school funding. They took that knowledge to their communities and local school boards and formed groups, like the Wisconsin Parent Education Network.

And because of their advocacy, we have seen over 1.1 million residents from Shullsburg to Manitowoc rally behind public education and vote to raise their own taxes to support their schools. Over half the school districts in the state have passed referenda since 2011, and the success rate of questions jumped to roughly 70 percent. State leaders in Madison aren't getting it done, so people of Wisconsin are doing it themselves.

We see it reflected in changing public opinion. Marquette University polling shows that nearly two-thirds of Wisconsin residents prefer increased school spending over cutting their property taxes. That's a huge shift from just four years ago when the opposite was true. And another wakeup call for anyone who thinks voters value tax cuts above all else. I believe the people of Wisconsin want honest leadership, genuine cooperation, and real solutions.

Let me tell you about a real solution I saw in Ashland a few weeks ago. Ashland voters passed a successful referendum in 2016 that funded building improvements, including new wellness spaces in each of their schools. But physical improvements were just one piece of the puzzle. I met with community therapists and school staff who are collaborating to meet children's mental health needs during the school day, breaking down barriers and reducing stigma. And I heard from courageous kids and brave parents who spoke to how this work is having a powerful impact on them. *How it is literally saving lives.*

I've been to a lot of places and met with a lot of people since the last time I stood at this podium. But I can tell you that sitting with these families in Ashland - hearing their stories and witnessing the power of what they've created together - that was perhaps the most important thing I've done this year. Real, collaborative solutions to build a better future for our kids.

*Now, that is the Wisconsin I know and love.*

## Budget

Folks, the pendulum is swinging. Back to a place where we value an investment in our kids' futures, and we demand our leaders do the same. Where we value working together to build our schools and communities up instead of adopting policies and politics that tear each other down.

Now is the time to adopt a transformational education budget that responds to this call. A budget that provides educators what they deserve: the resources they need to meet the needs of our kids. A budget that increases opportunities, closes gaps, and allows for competitive compensation.

The budget I proposed finally fixes our broken school finance system. Our Fair Funding plan helps small and large districts alike give every kid a fair shot at a great education. It includes revenue limit fairness so lower spending districts can catch up, and restores the state's two-thirds funding commitment to our schools. Without any gimmicks, while holding the line on taxes. It's long past time for a real solution on school funding, and now's the time to get it done.

The budget I proposed this week also gives an extra lift to kids who need it. We will make an unprecedented \$600 million investment in special education, or about \$4,000 extra per child with disabilities. Those extra funds will mean more support for kids who need it most, and more flexibility in your local budgets for community-powered solutions.

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Our budget provides nearly \$64 million more in student mental health funding so more districts can follow Ashland's lead. It funds full-day 4K and provides Wisconsin's first state funding for afterschool programs. It strengthens opportunities for English learners, expands funding for rural schools, invests in our public libraries, and creates new supports for children in our largest urban districts.

## Conclusion

Here's the deal. It's not enough to just say that we respect teachers and value education. We must lead because we know there's a better way. We know it because that's the Wisconsin that we hear when we reach outside of this political echo chamber.

We must continue raising our voices until they can no longer be ignored. *Together*, we can restore respect for Wisconsin schools and educators. *Together*, we can reinvest in our schools so that every kid can thrive. *Together*, we can bring civility and collaboration back to public education and to public life.

We know there's a better way. We know it's time for a change.

And change, folks, is in the air.

Thank you, God bless you, and On Wisconsin.

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*Tony Evers is Wisconsin's elected state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2018-86.pdf>.*