

## **WASB • WASDA • WASBO State Education Convention Address**

January 18, 2012 — Frontier Airlines Center, Milwaukee

*By State Superintendent Tony Evers*

Thank you Jamie Benson, WASDA president, for that introduction and for your leadership in River Valley and as WASDA president. And, thank you to the Hayward High School Concert Band, directed by James Tabbert. Let's give our student musicians and their teachers another round of applause.

I would like to thank and recognize the efforts of your associations and their executive directors:

- John Ashley, and all of WASB,
- Miles Turner, WASDA, and
- Woody Wiedenhoft, WASBO.

They do a great job representing and bringing you together. Let's give them a hand.

As your state superintendent, I am humbled by the work that goes on in public schools across Wisconsin to educate and serve our children and our citizens. I am tremendously proud of the accomplishments of our public schools: once again leading the nation in graduation rates and the Midwest in Advanced Placement participation.

Yes, that is good news, but the work is not done. We must continue working to ensure *all* children graduate ready for college and careers. We are nowhere near that goal when one in 10 Wisconsin students drops out of high school. For Native American and Hispanic students, that number is one in four. For our African American students, one in three. Graduation gaps persist for students with disabilities, English-language learners, and students in poverty. High school dropouts earn less, rely more on social services, and are four times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates. For their futures and ours, we must continue our fight to make Every Child a Graduate prepared for the future.

I am engaging your organizations, and you, on a number of efforts to improve student learning and our schools. Let's talk about our reform efforts.

- We adopted the Common Core State Standards, rigorous, internationally benchmarked English language arts and mathematics standards that are now shared across 46 states and territories. And, we are working to bring these new standards into the classroom.
- We are putting a new emphasis on early reading. To have Wisconsin once again be a national leader in elementary reading performance, we are working to strengthen our early learning standards, implementing statewide early literacy screening, and improving educator preparation and ongoing professional development.
- We also are engaging in Next Generation of Learning projects that use technology to customize the student experience. Technology-driven instruction personalizes student learning beyond the classroom walls, creating the possibility of individual learning plans for each student in the not too distant future.
- We also must continue to bridge the divide between high school, college, and career by expanding opportunities for every student to earn college credit or secure industry certifications while in high school.
- We are developing next generation assessments tied to our new standards. Soon, these online adaptive exams will provide students, parents, and teachers the timely feedback they need to improve learning.

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- The state is also helping districts across Wisconsin to implement Response to Intervention programs that will customize interventions and support for struggling and gifted students.
  - Together with a team of education leaders, including WASB and WASDA, we developed a fair and robust educator evaluation system and will soon be engaged in piloting it in districts.
  - On school and district accountability, we have long known that the system imposed by No Child Left Behind is broken. Without changes, every school in the country could soon be labeled as “failing.” We are right now finishing work on a long-term answer that will include growth and attainment and focus on graduating all students ready for college or careers. It will identify and support struggling schools as well as reward and replicate the practices of our highest performers.
  - And, we advanced the first comprehensive school finance reform plan in decades. The Fair Funding for Our Future plan laid the groundwork to prioritize existing resources and created a pathway for significant and necessary re-investment in our public schools.

Your organizations and leaders here today recognize the importance of this agenda and are working with me to ensure that every child is a graduate prepared for college or career. And I thank you for it.

Think about our current reform efforts: higher standards, new assessments, a reinvigorated effort around reading, new educator evaluation systems, a new school and district accountability system, and more. The pace of reform is unrelenting. But our students, our communities, and our state deserve no less.

In this era of higher expectations, we are the agents of change. And while we embrace the changes we have advanced so far, we know that our work is not yet done — not by a long shot. To truly prepare students for success, we will have to continue to align our PK-12 system around the knowledge, skills, and habits we know it takes to succeed in college or a career.

Increasing our expectations of what students need to know and be able to do, to match the reality of the 21st century, will not be easy. Students who were proficient on the WKCE may no longer be proficient on the new assessment system as new, more important skills are measured. Schools that were making AYP under NCLB may no longer meet the expectations of our next generation accountability system.

While this transition may be difficult, it is grounded in the reality of what it will take for our kids to succeed in the future and will better highlight where we need to invest to improve outcomes for our boys and girls. As education leaders, we will all need to clearly communicate with our students and parents, our local communities, partners, and elected officials about why college- and career-ready expectations are needed, why they more accurately reflect measures of success, and why they are the right thing to do for our kids. While in the transition, results from achievement measures will look different than what we are used to, ultimately our education system will not remain the same — it will be better.

Finally, I cannot stand here today without talking about what has occurred in Wisconsin over the past year.

Without a doubt, the past months of political turmoil have taken a toll on our state, including our public schools and educators.

Rancor over state funding cuts, the elimination of collective bargaining, unprecedented educator retirements, recall elections, and fears around the state and national economy have pitted community and family members against one another. This toxic political environment has generated anger toward those who have dedicated their lives to public service including too many of you, our locally elected school leaders and educators. This is not the Wisconsin I know, the Wisconsin I love.

Now is the time to move beyond the harsh rhetoric and begin the slow process of rebuilding the trust that was so swiftly shattered. *And it will take more than words; it will take action.* It is not enough to say that we respect educators and value education; our leaders must demonstrate it. We must reinvest in our schools, fix our broken

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system of school funding, and ensure our educators have a seat at the table. That is how we can move forward together.

In these difficult times, working together has never been harder, or more important.

Some have questioned why I would work together with the governor or legislative leaders on any initiative, when we have so strongly disagreed.

I stood steadfast with parents, educators, and school board members in opposition to the devastating state budget cuts; the expansion of vouchers, while cutting public schools; and elimination of collective bargaining. And I stand with them still today. Wisconsin schools faced this year some of the largest cuts to public education in the nation. We are seeing growing class sizes, fewer course offerings, and reductions in support staff. And many of you report that next year's cuts will be the same or worse. This is only the beginning, unless we change course.

I believe as strongly today, as I did then, that these were the wrong choices for our kids, our communities, and Wisconsin.

However, we cannot afford to let conflicts among adults rob our children of the educational opportunities they need to succeed. I am committed to finding common ground and working together to improve education for Wisconsin's children wherever possible. With stakeholders across Wisconsin and the political spectrum, we are leading the way in advancing educator effectiveness, school accountability, and reading instruction. Our kids deserve no less from us.

So, with eyes wide open, I will continue to drive an agenda forward and fiercely advocate for our kids. We will work together where we can and stand opposed where we cannot, because that is what leaders do. But I will always put the best interests of our kids first.

As I said before, I love Wisconsin. I was born, raised, and educated in the public schools of Plymouth and the University of Wisconsin. I am married to a Wisconsin educator. My three kids went to public schools as do three of my school-aged grandkids. I will always stand up for Wisconsin children, parents, educators, public libraries, and public education.

Thank you for being here today. Let's continue our collaborative efforts to improve our educational system for our children.

God bless all of our children, their parents, school leaders, educators, and elected officials.

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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/eis/vm-media.html>. This speech is available on the DPI website at [http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2012\\_19.pdf](http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2012_19.pdf).*