WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF
Public Instruction

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2026 State of Education Address

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As prepared for delivery by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for being here. It is an honor to stand in front of you today for my sixth State of Education Address.

Any opportunity we have to celebrate public education and our exceptional schools, educators, and students, is worth embracing. But, for me, this year's celebration carries extra meaning. We have spent the year honoring America's 250th anniversary. We have commemorated our nation's founding, the quest for self-government, the leaders and defining moments that have built our nation, and the freedoms afforded to us—which are all worthy of our reflection. But we cannot celebrate America's 250th anniversary without also celebrating the role that public education has in our democracy.

It is easy, today, to take public schools for granted. They have, after all, always been here for us—embedded in our communities. An ordinary part of our everyday life. We forget just how revolutionary—and largely unique to the United States—the idea of public education was centuries ago.

This makes me reflect on whether the survival of democracy is any accident. Because if we didn't have public schools, we really wouldn't be celebrating 250 years of democracy.

To witness the way in which public education helped build our nation town by town, we must look no further than our own backyard.

In 1787—the same year the U.S. Constitution was written—Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance to govern the Northwest Territory, which included what would become Wisconsin. Among its many provisions, the ordinance did something revolutionary: it proclaimed that in this new nation, education would not be a privilege reserved for the wealthy, but a right belonging to the people.

The founding document declared: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

With that single sentence, along with the bold requirement that each township reserves one square mile of land specifically for public schools, the young republic put forth a radical idea: democracy does not work without an educated public.

And so, in tiny frontier towns in the Midwest, schoolhouses were often the first public buildings raised—before courthouses, before post offices, even before paved roads.

And they were placed in the 16th section of the township—right in the center. In these schoolhouses, children learned to read and write, but they were also where neighbors gathered for meetings, debates, worship, elections, celebrations, and community.

And inside those schoolhouses, a covenant took shape: educate our children and they will give back. They will serve, they will vote, they will help sustain the republic.

Public education in Wisconsin was not an accident; it was by design. It has been part of our region's civic identity since its earliest days. And that covenant that took shape in schoolhouses centuries ago didn't disappear. It evolved. It is enshrined in our state's constitution, which makes providing a system of education "as nearly uniform as practicable" a public responsibility. It resurfaced in the mission of our land-grant university, making higher education a public good. It persists in the Wisconsin Idea—the promise that the work of our public universities will improve the lives of all citizens. From the nation's first Kindergarten, which opened in Wisconsin in 1856—to our early tradition of Normal Schools—to today's robust public university, technical college, and library systems, Wisconsin has always been a pioneer in public education.

And that's all because our founders understood, nearly 250 years ago, that public education is the infrastructure for democracy. Wisconsin was built on a deep tradition of patriotism, civic duty, and public purpose.

This legacy has been passed down to us and it is our responsibility to uphold it today.

While public education in the earliest days of our republic was about building the foundation of our nation, today it is about strengthening the people and communities that sustain it.

Democracy is not something simply handed down from one generation to the next that endures on its own. It's something you have to invest in; it's something you must practice.

And that is still, to this day, one of the most important promises of our public schools. They give our children their first opportunity to practice participating in a democracy. Every day, in school buildings across Wisconsin—from our largest cities to our smallest rural communities—and as I stand before you this very moment, students are finding their voice for the first time. They are raising their hand to express an opinion. They are beginning to understand that their perspectives matter. And just as importantly, they are learning that their perspective is not the only one that matters. They are part of a community of people, all with their own stories and experiences.

They learn to listen, they learn to think critically, they learn to disagree respectfully, and they learn to work together.

This is civic formation, happening right before our eyes in our schools.

When students develop their voice, that same voice shows up years later, making up the civic backbone of our communities—in city council chambers, school board meetings, community organizations, and the everyday conversations citizens have to solve problems.

But that's only part of the story.

Yes, our public schools are preparing the next generation of citizens, but they are also preparing the next generation of teachers, scientists, architects, entrepreneurs, nurses, artists, musicians and public servants. They will invent things and solve problems that we don't even know exist yet. They will strengthen our institutions. And they will, one day, care for us.

An investment in public education is not just an investment in our children, it is an investment in all of our shared future.

This is a pretty simple truth, when you think about it. It's something our nation's founders understood centuries ago.

So why are we turning our back on this vision today?

For far too long, Wisconsin's public schools have been forced to do more with less. And let me be clear: this was not an accident, and it was not inevitable.

The financial pressures schools face today are the direct result of years of deliberate political choices. For nearly two decades, our elected officials—the very people entrusted to uphold our state constitutional promise of a system of education "as nearly uniform as practicable"—have failed to provide predictable, sustainable state funding that keeps pace with the cost of educating our children.

And at the same time, they have expanded policies that redirect public dollars into unaccountable, private systems at historic numbers.

They claimed in 1993 that revenue caps would be temporary.

They claimed in 2009 that disconnecting school aids from inflation would be temporary.

Neither was temporary.

Thirty-three years later, the revenue caps remain. Seventeen years later, school aids remain disconnected from inflation.

Schools simply cannot absorb decades of below-inflation funding without consequences.

When roughly 80% of a school district's budget goes to people, stagnant funding has very real consequences: staffing reductions, larger class sizes, fewer student supports and opportunities, and increasingly difficult working conditions for educators.

The cost of everything else has gone up, too.

When diesel costs more than six dollars a gallon—roughly twice what it cost a decade ago—you don't get to run the same bus routes for the same price. When the roof needs repair, when technology needs to be replaced, when a building needs a new boiler, those costs don't wait for the state to catch up.

So schools and local taxpayers are forced to make impossible choices: cut a program, increase class sizes, put off maintenance for another year, hold down employee compensation, or ask their community to raise taxes through a referendum.

And then, too often, those very conditions are held up as evidence that public schools are failing.

Let me be clear: Our schools are not the problem. Our teachers are not the problem. Our students are not the problem. The problem is that we have asked them to carry the weight of decades of political decisions—and then blamed them when the burden became too heavy.

Years of undermining public confidence in public schools does not help children. Record numbers of referendums put pressure on communities, pit neighbors against neighbors and turn schools into casualties of partisan politics instead of the pride of their communities.

If you're lucky, you may not see this in your own community. For some, these challenges are only passing headlines. Because the reality is, Wisconsin's school funding formula is deeply inequitable, which creates a set of "haves" and "have nots" for districts mere miles apart.

But for some, this reality is impossible to ignore.

Just a few weeks ago, families across Wisconsin celebrated the excitement and energy of the first day of a new school year with all the familiar traditions that come with it. But just up the road from this very building, in Hustisford—where a school had been a staple community life for more than 175 years—this first day of school was anything but familiar. After yet another failed operational referendum this past spring, the district had no choice but to begin the dissolution process.

On the first day of school, as students arrived in classrooms nervous and eager, ready to find their voice, and teachers lined hallways, ready to unlock the potential of the next generation of leaders, classrooms inside Hustisford's two schools sat empty. From the youngest to the oldest, every kid felt the impact.

Kindergarteners, who should have been walking through the doors of the school their family chose when they made this beautiful community home, instead traveled to a neighboring town. Meanwhile, seniors who spent the past 12 years as Hustisford Falcons started their last year of school in an unfamiliar building.

This is what happens when we turn our back on our schools.

And when schools close, the impact doesn't stop with students. It ripples through entire communities.

We cannot underestimate how critical public schools are for thriving communities. They are economic engines. They are often one of the biggest employers. They protect property values. They attract new families and support local businesses. And in many communities—especially in our rural areas—they are the community's very identity. They are what unites us. They bring neighbors together in bleachers and auditoriums. They bring fall festivals, homecoming celebrations, and traditions passed down from generation to generation.

This is part of the quiet power of public institutions like schools and libraries. They are among the few places in American life where everyone is meant to belong.

This is what Wisconsin was built on. And this is what we stand to lose.

But despite all of this, I still stand here today with hope. Because our story is not done. The American Experiment has not concluded. An experiment, by definition, is something that is tested, refined, and improved. And we are only 250 years into our story. Think about it. Our country is only three lifespans old.

We are not so far removed from the idealism of our founders when they made that bold claim that "schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged" as a necessity of good government and the happiness of mankind.

But this hope has to be met with action.

And that action must begin with fixing the way we fund our schools.

The formula used for funding our schools, for years, has failed our children, schools, and entire communities. The reasons are varied and complex, but you don't need to be familiar with every detail of the funding formula to know that it's simply not working. The evidence is all around us.

Just look at the numbers. We know it is not working because over 90% of school districts have had to go to referendum in the past nine years, forced to ask their communities for additional funding simply to keep their schools running and pay their teachers.

We know it is not working because we have all seen our property tax bills.

And, we know it is not working because children are literally suing the legislature because the state has turned its back on the ideals and values of our founders.

And when a system no longer reflects the needs of the children it was created to serve, we have a responsibility to change it.

The formula places value on the wrong things. It values enrollment, district spending, and property value, rather than student needs. It fails to ask the most essential question: how much does it actually cost to educate the students who live in a district so that they have an equal opportunity to succeed? A student's opportunity for success should not depend on their zip code. If we are going to improve the academic outcomes for ALL students, then the funding formula must prioritize student need. And we know that there is an urgent need to improve outcomes for every student. For years, Black students in our state have experienced some of the largest disparities for outcomes anywhere in the country. Students with disabilities, too, continue to face significant barriers. We cannot accept these longstanding gaps as the status quo. And we simply cannot afford to wait any longer. The opportunity for change is in our hands.

We are all in this together.

But that means we all must advocate for change. Over 100 years ago, another Wisconsin leader—Bob La Follette—put it this way, "America is not made, but is in the making. There is an unending struggle to make and keep government representative. Mere passive citizenship is not enough."

Fighting Bob's call for civic action is just as relevant today.

Because, unfortunately, for far too long, too many lawmakers have not treated our schools—or the people who depend on them—with the urgency they deserve.

These are the same people who have been entrusted with the stewardship of these public institutions—responsible for protecting them, just as past generations did for them. They benefited from public schools that were well funded. Public schools that helped them reach the height of success. Yet whenever they have the opportunity to do the same for the next generation—to extend the ladder for others to climb—they instead pull it up behind them.

Today, we have people running for office who have spent a decade or more in government, in positions to make school funding decisions—or who have left state

government for another level and now want to return—whose records include repeatedly voting against investments in Wisconsin's children.

They have had the opportunity to strengthen our public schools. They have had the opportunity to invest in the next generation.

Instead, they have voted against funding for our public schools, for student mental health, for expanded 4K, for child care and health care. They have made choices that put children and families at greater risk.

Look at their record.

Not the campaign promises. Not the talking points. Not the labels.

Their record.

Because past actions are the best evidence we have of what someone will do when given power again. Wisconsin does not need more people who tell us they support children while their votes tell a different story. We need people in positions of decision-making power who are pro-public school, pro-child, and pro-Wisconsin—full stop.

And this is our moment to make that choice.

This is our year to act. We are at an inflection point and we must decide: Are we going to be part of the generation that allows the status quo to continue? Or are we going to be the generation that chooses to change. The generation that boldly recommits to the ideals our founders understood centuries ago: that every child deserves an opportunity to reach their potential, and it is our shared responsibility to ensure that happens.

When public education is undermined, the institutions that helped keep our democracy strong for 250 years are weakened. And if we continue this, we won't have another 250 years of democracy.

So as educators, parents, community members, elected officials, and citizens, we have to ask ourselves a simple question: Are we pulling the ladder up behind us—or are we holding it steady for the next person?

Because our children are watching. They are watching what we value. They are watching whether we keep our promises. They are watching whether we believe their future is worth investing in. And they are watching whether, when we have the power to make a difference, we choose to use it.

Our founders chose to use it.

Generations of Wisconsinites have chosen to use it.

Now it is our turn.

Our turn to protect the public institutions that have carried this state for generations.

Our turn to invest in the children who will carry it forward.

Because that is how we honor the past.

That is how we protect democracy.

That is the choice before us.

We can pull the ladder up behind us. We can force the next generation to make do with less. We can allow the institutions that bind our communities together to erode, one decision at a time.

Or we can choose differently.

Thank you.