

Joint Committee on Finance
March 30, 2017

**Testimony of State Superintendent Tony Evers
on the 2017-19 Biennial Budget Bill**

I want to thank the chairs and the committee for the opportunity to be here today to testify on the 2017-19 biennial budget bill. Joining me today is Jeff Pertl, my Senior Policy Advisor and Erin Fath, my Budget and Policy Director.

We all have a personal stake in education. My grandchildren attend public schools, and the kids of today will be the legislative leaders of tomorrow. The next generation of students are more diverse, face greater economic uncertainty, and will inherit an increasingly complicated world.

We cannot rest on laurels, and we must confront our challenges directly. Wisconsin excels in graduation rates, AP participation and ACT scores, but we have one of the largest achievement gaps in the country. We are making progress in closing these gaps with greater community engagement, innovative instruction, personalized learning, and community schools. As policymakers, I think we have to view laws, rules, and budgets through an equity lens if we want to meaningfully move the needle.

Wisconsin funds students in public, charter, and private schools. We support students with special needs, student who are gifted or talented, and English Learners. We educate students in small rural schools and large urban cities. When I talk about student success, I want all of these kids, regardless of where they go to school, to graduate college and career ready.

To that end, I want to commend Governor Walker for making a significant commitment to K-12 education in his budget proposal. Many of the items the Governor outlined are a direct result of local advocates and school leaders calling for a change of course. I am pleased to note he included many of the items I recommended in my budget as well.

Today, I want to specifically highlight the importance of the following provisions in the Governor's budget, which will help kids succeed in school:

- Funding to expand direct **mental health services** available to kids in schools, and to support additional training opportunities that will expand capacity in schools to provide critical screening and intervention services;

- Additional support for **rural schools** - many of which face declining enrollment - through the state's sparsity aid and transportation aid programs to help maintain programming in the face of increasing costs;
- Increased funding for the immensely successful incentive grants and the creations of a new readiness grant that together help students with **special needs** transition into the workforce or higher education.
- Providing support to assist Milwaukee Public Schools with their **summer school** programming, benefiting thousands of kids across the city.
- And while I wish he would have adopted my Fair Funding initiative, which would provide a more equitable, fair, and transparent school finance system, I am very pleased the Governor is putting us on the right trajectory with his proposal to increase **per pupil categorical aid** over the next two years.

While the Governor's budget includes many positive items, there are a few things that warrant further discussion that I hope you will examine carefully in the upcoming months.

Licensure: The quality of a child's teacher is one of the most important factors affecting a student's success in the classroom. That is why I'm working with our stakeholders and will be coming back to you with proposed changes to our licensing system that streamline and strengthen licensing.

Concurrently, the Governor is proposing to reinstate life licenses for teachers. This has generated a good conversation statewide, and I encourage you to take the time needed to iron out the details on his proposal. For instance,

- Should a new teacher be granted a life license out of the gate without any evaluation of their practice?
- What about teachers who take a long break from teaching?

These are all things addressed in the prior life license system that are missing here.

Special Education: State special education categorical aid for school districts and independent charter schools has been frozen for nearly 10 years. I hope you will consider increasing the state's commitment to students with disabilities by moving us above our current 26% reimbursement rate.

High Cost Special Education: Two years ago, this Committee added \$5 million to the state's special education appropriation for students whose costs exceed \$30,000 annually. If you added around \$2 million each year, which I recommended in my budget last fall, we will be able to fully-fund this program for school districts and independent charter schools.

English Learners: The state bilingual-bicultural aid has also been frozen for a decade, leading to a dwindling reimbursement rate (currently at a paltry 8% rate). I hope you consider increasing the state's commitment to our growing English language learner population.

Low Revenue Ceiling: Revenue limits froze district spending per student when they were created, penalizing frugal communities. Today, Port Washington's (\$10,100) base revenue limit is roughly \$900 higher than West Bend's (\$9,200). Both are great districts, but funding parity would give West Bend \$6.2 million more to recruit the best teachers and provide cutting-edge facilities.

One way districts can address this is through the low-revenue ceiling, which allows our lowest spending districts to move closer to the state average without triggering referenda. However, currently it is frozen at \$9,100, which is meaningless as every district is above. I think if the committee increased the low revenue ceiling by my recommendation of \$9,500 in FY18 and \$9,900 in FY19, we might see fewer referenda over the next two years.

Over the last five years, voters across Wisconsin have stepped up to increase local taxes at unprecedented rates to provide needed resources to their schools. While I applaud those efforts, I urge this Committee to ensure the State provides a stable, substantial investment in education. Otherwise, we risk creating two types of public schools in this state – those that can afford to provide a quality education through referendum and those that cannot.

As this budget moves forward, please prioritize the interests of children, and ensure that all students can access the unlimited opportunities provided by a quality education. Every budget presents challenges, but the economy has recovered and people across Wisconsin are hungry for strong investment in schools.

As always, I am ready to work with you and other legislators throughout the process. I offer my staff and their expertise as you move forward, and I sincerely appreciate your willingness to engage on these important issues. At this time I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.