



April 2, 2025

**Joint Committee on Finance  
Department of Public Instruction Testimony  
2025-2027 Wisconsin Biennial Budget**

The Department of Public Instruction (DPI) thanks Co-Chairs Born and Marklein and the rest of the Joint Committee on Finance for providing the opportunity to testify today on the 2025-2027 Wisconsin Biennial Budget.

I am Dr. Jill Underly, the elected state superintendent of public instruction for Wisconsin. As the state's top education leader, it's my job to guide the Department of Public Instruction and make sure that our public schools and our libraries are meeting the needs of our students, our communities, and our state.

We know that to continue to grow, innovate, and compete as a state, Wisconsin needs to invest in our state's most incredible resources: our learners. With Governor Evers' 2025-27 biennial budget proposal, we have the opportunity to make significant investments in our schools and libraries. The budget's programs, proposals, and investments have been carefully crafted and researched, and are based on not only best practices in education and lean on the strengths and capacities of our communities, our schools, and our educators.

The proposals outlined in Governor Evers' budget represent the most straightforward, tried and true, transparent ways to meet the needs that are already there, as well as plan for the future.

**In order to improve, we must invest.**

Investing in public schools ensures Wisconsin is a place where kids, their families, our educators, and our communities can thrive.

These calls for investment, while **thoughtful** in their design, aims, processes, and accountability measures, are also **bold**. We must realistically and holistically address Wisconsin's historic underfunding of public education for the past two decades. Now is the time to fix what is broken in our funding mechanisms and refuse to kick the can down the road. Because we know what happens if we don't take action—our kids, our learners, and our state will suffer.

We cannot afford to wait.

This is a pivotal moment for public schools, where the actions we take now will determine the future of our children and the strength of our communities.

For far too long Wisconsin schools have faced the challenge of underfunding and insufficient resources. Our public education system has been under immense financial pressure, impacting the learning environment for every student and teacher. This struggle is felt in every corner of

Wisconsin. The chronic underfunding of education in our state has reached a critical point, and it's time for change.

To address ongoing underfunding by the state legislature, Governor Evers' budget includes critical **per-pupil revenue limit increases** of \$334 in FY26 and \$345 in FY27. The budget proposal also sets a new low-revenue ceiling of \$12,400 by FY27, ensuring districts have the resources they need for the future.

In 2009, Wisconsin stopped adjusting revenue limits for inflation, resulting in over a decade of inadequate funding for public education. The Governor affirms that we must **restore annual per-pupil revenue limit adjustments**, ensuring school districts can count on consistent and reliable state funding.

Governor Evers' recent budget proposal incorporates many of my recommendations, allocating more than \$3 billion for public schools and libraries. This investment is aimed at vital areas like mental health, food security, and expanded academic opportunities, all of which are essential for ensuring students thrive both inside and outside of the classroom.

Governor Evers' budget also proposes a significant increase in the **special education reimbursement rate** – from about 30% to 60%. Right now, districts have been forced between a rock and a hard place. These are legally-mandated services, and we are only reimbursing them about 1/3 of the cost. This means that districts have had to cut student programming, which hurts all our kids. This special education rate adjustment will help school districts meet student need, while helping them deliver the strong education that all students deserve.

**Early childhood education** is a critical factor in improving long term student success. Governor Evers' budget recognizes this by counting full-day, full-week 4K programs as 1.0 FTE (full time equivalent) rather than 0.5 FTE, providing the appropriate funding to support and expand early learning programs across communities.

**Universal school meals** are one of the most effective ways we can make sure that no Wisconsin child is hungry and all children are ready to learn. In our 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Study survey, over 1/4 of Wisconsin High School students reported experiencing hunger at least once in the previous month due to food insecurity. We know the effect hunger can have on learning– we feel it ourselves. That's why districts often will provide free breakfast on testing days. They know, and we know– student achievement surges when bellies are full.

With investment in **farm to school** programs, we can support Wisconsin's local farms by connecting them with schools to provide fresh, nutritious meals, while offering students valuable opportunities to learn about agriculture, food systems, and healthy eating habits.

Finally, we should fully-fund the **School Breakfast Program** at the statutory rate of \$0.15 per meal served. The budget will expand participation to residential childcare centers, independent charter schools, and the state's residential schools, ensuring more students benefit, no matter where they are.

In Wisconsin we are experiencing ongoing and worsening **educator attrition rates** in the state, as evidenced by our most recent educator workforce analysis report. Nearly half of all new Wisconsin teachers will leave Wisconsin or the profession by their seventh year. We cannot

afford to lose so many talented educators.

To turn the tide and strengthen Wisconsin's educator workforce, the Governor's budget proposals focus on supporting teachers at every stage of their career – from expanding [the Peer Review and Mentoring Grant Program](#) to offering stipends for future educators and their mentors. The budget also reimburses districts for costs associated with “grow your own” educator programs that help staff obtain further licensure and encourages students to consider teaching as a career, as well as supporting [the Teacher Apprenticeship Program](#) through the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

Finally, we know that we must find ways to better support **youth mental and physical health**. Recent data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows that 59% of Wisconsin high school students have faced mental health challenges within the past year. That's almost six in every ten students. Far too many. We have the knowledge and resources to make a meaningful impact and provide the support these students need.

We must expand the **School-Based Mental Health Services Program** to make sure that every student has access to the in-school mental health supports they need. This \$167.6 million will make sure districts can hire the school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses they need. We know the positive effects of good mental health on academic achievement, so funding will also support mental health training programs, broadening the types of training available, and extending these resources to staff working in out-of-school programs.

We also applaud the budget's prioritization of student **physical health and well being**. Students deserve access to period products, and the budget would provide funding especially to economically disadvantaged communities to provide them. Students should have access to safe drinking water at school, delivered by new point-of-use filtered water bubblers. And we assure greater safety and health for our kids by helping schools purchase defibrillators and opioid antagonists to respond quickly and appropriately to student health emergencies.

While passing this budget proposal is a positive step, we must recognize it's only the start of addressing the persistent challenges that our schools face due to years of neglect by the state legislature.

Adding to our difficulties, the Trump administration is threatening to cut critical federal funding that Wisconsin schools rely on. This, along with the underfunding of public schools within our state, has severe implications for our educational system and the future of our students.

Public education equips students with the ability to think critically, foster growth, drive innovation, and actively contribute to their communities. We must protect these essential resources from being compromised by political motives. All of us want schools that thrive, and it's time for the legislature to set politics aside and make the necessary investments. The well-being and future of our children hang in the balance.

It's what our kids deserve. It's what local taxpayers deserve so districts are not forced to go to referendum for operating costs. And it's the responsible thing to do.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to testify today.

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Please direct any follow-up questions to Tom McCarthy, Deputy State Superintendent, at [thomas.mccarthy@dpi.wi.gov](mailto:thomas.mccarthy@dpi.wi.gov).