

State of Education Address

September 19, 2019 – Wisconsin State Capitol Rotunda

State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor

Thank you, Anna, for that introduction. Congratulations to you and Flynn, the 2019 Girls and Boys Badger State Superintendents, and thank you for your participation today.

Thank you to our wonderful emcee, the incredible student performers, and the Wisconsin National Guard. Please join me in thanking all of them for making today such a remarkable event.

In addition to our performers, I'd like to recognize some of our honored guests who are here today: Governor Tony Evers and Mrs. Evers, Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes, Supreme Court Justice Rebecca Bradley, Supreme Court Justice Rebecca Dallet, Supreme Court Justice Annette Ziegler, Attorney General Josh Kaul, President Marlon White-Eagle from the Ho-Chunk nation, all our state legislators, school board members, and other elected officials, and cabinet secretaries. I thank you for joining me today and for your support for Wisconsin's public schools and students. Please join me in showing our appreciation for their service.

I would like to recognize the important work of Wisconsin's education organizations who partner with the department: John Ashley, WASB; Mike Barry, WASBO; Gary Myrah, WCASS; Jim Lynch, AWSA; as well as Jon Bales, WASDA, and all the members of our school district administrators' association who are here today. Thank you to the leaders of our colleges and universities, Wisconsin's public libraries, the Cooperative Educational Service Agencies, and my colleagues at the Department of Public Instruction, whose efforts strengthen public education in Wisconsin.

A special thank you to my husband, Larry, my daughter, Carlettra, and family members present today for your love and continued support.

It is indeed an honor to address you today as your State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

I am grateful to Governor Tony Evers, our previous state superintendent, a lifelong educator, a tireless advocate for Wisconsin's children, and friend for entrusting me with this opportunity to serve our students, schools, libraries, and state.

I have spent nearly forty years in education – as a teacher and a principal in the Madison school district and an assistant state superintendent – and I feel more energized than ever to make a difference in the lives of our children.

One of the best parts of this job is traveling across the state and witnessing the innovation and collaboration happening in our schools and communities every day. Wisconsin has excellent schools, amazing educators and staff, and bright, thoughtful students filled with curiosity, wonder, and possibility. I am so blessed to be an ambassador and advocate on behalf of our students and families.

In May, I had the pleasure of visiting one of the state's smallest school districts, Washington Island. I spent the day talking with students, staff, and community members. The visit reaffirmed my belief that Wisconsin schools are truly the heart of the local community.

Also, in May, I presented the 2020 Teacher of the Year awards to exceptional educators in Ashland, Greendale, Jefferson, and Milwaukee. The energy from the students, teachers, and staff during their all-school celebration was infectious and heartwarming.

Wisconsin's educators are second to none, and I was honored to be a part of celebrating the achievements of four of our best, each of whom we will recognize later in our program.

This is why, at a time when far too many teachers are leaving the profession and too few students are aspiring to become teachers, it is so important we commit to doing all we can to recruit the next generation of educators and embrace the ones we have. At the end of the day, teachers are critical to the success of our students, and supporting them is one of the most important investments we can make.

I would like to take a moment to recognize another exceptional educator in the audience today, someone near and dear to my heart. Ms. Geraldine Bernard was one of the first African-American educators to be hired in the Madison school district, a trailblazer in this community and our state.

Gerry was my supervising teacher during my senior year and became a mentor and role model. She helped to form my personal foundation, as an educator, a leader, and as an active citizen. She embodies the very best of us. Educators, like Gerry, are everyday heroes and sheroes, playing crucial roles in our students' lives. Thank you, Gerry, for all you've done for children, families, our community, our state, and me.

While I could celebrate our dedicated educators for hours, it is my visits with our students that truly energize and nourish my soul. From visiting classrooms around the state, to meeting students from military families, from Skills USA and the FFA, students across our state are stepping up and leading in visionary ways exhibiting skills we want all students to possess.

I had the chance to participate in the Badger State Girls government and leadership conference. I met bright young women with incredible strength and optimism, which gives me great hope for Wisconsin's future. With young people like these, Wisconsin's future burns bright.

We have so much to be proud of, yet so much more work to do. While we have some of the highest graduation rates, ACT scores, and Advanced Placement participation in the country, we have yet to fully reconcile that success with the deep, persistent gaps in achievement, access, and opportunity that exist for far too many Wisconsin children.

Like many of you, the power and promise of education — particularly for our most underserved students — is central to who I am.

You see, I came from humble beginnings. The ninth of 14 children, born in the segregated South to hard-working parents, Leroy and Lena Stanford.

I grew up in Marks, Mississippi, one of the poorest communities in the country at the time and the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor Peoples' Campaign for economic justice and equality.

My parents had limited formal education, but despite the enormity of the challenges they faced, they knew education was the key to a better life. They instilled these values in my siblings and me, and, as our unrelenting advocates, fought for us to be among the first black children to attend the all-white public school in our town.

Of course, as a young child, I didn't fully realize how pivotal school integration would be on our nation's arc toward justice. What I saw was the opportunity to access things I did not have, like new books, better facilities, and even a swimming pool at my new school.

But I quickly learned an equal right to attend that school did not mean I would have equal opportunities. That message was driven home to me when the adults filled that swimming pool with cement to prevent the black children from using it, instead of allowing all of us to swim together.

We've come a long way since then, but so many challenges remain. Fifty years after the Civil Rights Act, we are still fighting for equitable educational opportunities for all children, no matter their background. But, I believe by joining together, with common purpose and common cause, we can deliver public education that meets the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students and prepares them for success wherever life takes them.

Together, we can have the difficult conversations about race and equity in our schools and our communities and tackle our achievement, access, and opportunity gap as the crisis it is.

Too many of our students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, and students from low-income families struggle to achieve their dreams and reach their full potential. We have to get learning right for our most underserved students on the front end, or Wisconsin, as a state, will never achieve true success.

So, while we celebrate and work together to build on Wisconsin's successes, we must also rise together to meet our challenges.

As state superintendent, the core of my agenda is to build on the vision of Every Child a Graduate, College and Career Ready while advancing educational equity for every child. Along with my talented and dedicated colleagues at the Department of Public Instruction, we are committed to collaborating with schools and districts to advance this vision.

Whether it is the work of our Equity Council around social and emotional learning, or our efforts to empower local solutions to closing gaps, preparing each and every Wisconsin child for future success is the cornerstone of everything we do.

This summer, I spoke to the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute, a first-of-its-kind effort to convene principals from Wisconsin's five largest urban districts to examine their work through an equity lens.

These five districts – Green Bay, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee, and Racine – educate nearly 20% of all Wisconsin students and represent disproportionate shares of student groups experiencing our largest gaps. Their work is important to moving the needle on equity in our state, and I look forward to the outcomes of this groundbreaking partnership.

I know our rural schools, as well, face unique challenges – like high poverty rates, declining enrollment, and often higher than average special education costs – affecting a school's ability to offer equitable opportunities for all learners. Investing in our rural schools is a critical component of our statewide equity strategy.

Every school in our state has a responsibility to ensure all students have access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education. To that end, we crafted an equity budget aimed at investing in students all across our state.

Many parents, teachers, school administrators, and board members continue to articulate what they believe is needed to improve outcomes for all children – ideas like increases in special education funding, more mental health services, more support for English learners, and investments in early childhood, afterschool programming, and school nutrition.

The budget, Governor Evers signed into law this summer, is a down payment on that commitment to equity. While it is not everything we asked for, this budget makes an investment in all of Wisconsin's children and begins to provide additional support to some of our most underserved.

As you know, student mental health is a challenge schools must address given the statistic of one in five students nationally experiencing a mental health issue. This budget doubles funding for our mental health grants.

We anticipate 120,000 students will be impacted. I thank the governor and the legislature for their efforts and applaud their bipartisan commitment to mental health supports for students.

There are other bright spots in the budget. School districts have the first revenue limit increase in five years, and new increases in per pupil funding. There is more investment in rural schools, through full funding of sparsity aid, increases in high cost transportation aid, and the Rural Teacher Talent Program.

Families will have more access to information, resources, and services through new funding for our public libraries.

Last, but not least, this budget finally shattered the decade-long freeze on special education funding, with an additional \$96 million investment.

While I am grateful special education funding finally got a long overdue increase, the reality is the state will still reimburse only a fraction of what districts are required to spend under the law. Districts' unfunded special education costs will still exceed \$1 billion, and school districts around the state will still have to find ways to make up that gap. That funding gap affects all students.

Although we did not get everything we asked for, there is positive forward momentum on issues we care about, and that is a good thing. Thank you to those who devoted countless hours in support of our budget request. This is evidence of the difference we can make when we work together focused on the right goal – improving the education of all students. I am committed to continue working with the legislature and the governor on achieving this goal.

While we know state policy cannot do everything needed to level the playing field for our children, we can work to ensure our system of school finance does as much as possible to give our students – all of our students – what they need to be successful.

The power and promise of public education has long been a beacon, the great equalizing force in our society and our democracy. It is the driving force behind so many of us who have dedicated our lives to this vocation, and what continues to fuel our fight for educational equity for all of our learners. Today, the unity we find in working together hand in hand on behalf of every Wisconsin child could not be more important.

Together, we have an unprecedented opportunity to make progress. To remove and reduce the barriers to student success.

Together, with our legislature and our governor, we can continue to make progress on a system of school funding that is responsive to the needs of every child.

Together, with our business partners, we can help prepare our students today to be successful when they create the jobs of tomorrow.

Together, we can deliver on the power and promise of a quality Wisconsin education for every child.

And together, as the beneficiaries of the strong public schools, colleges, and universities built and sustained by the generations that came before us, we can pay it forward. The torch has been passed to us, to build on our successes while confronting our deep-rooted challenges, to make the choices today that leave things better for all of our children tomorrow.

Thank you for your leadership, your advocacy, and your dedication to our children, our schools, and our state. I look forward to working with each of you on this journey.

God bless you, and On Wisconsin.

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Carolyn Stanford Taylor is Wisconsin's 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/dpinr2019-67.pdf>.