

News Release

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Inaugural Address

11 a.m., July 6, 2009 — Hi-Mount Community School, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Justice Ann Walsh Bradley. I am very honored to take my oath of office administered by you—an oath to serve the people of Wisconsin as the State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Thank you, First Lady Jessica Doyle for joining us today. Gov. Jim Doyle and Jessica Doyle are champions for our public schools. Thank you State Treasurer Dawn Marie Sass and Legislators Sony Pope-Roberts, John Lehman, Polly Williams, Lena Taylor, and Peggy Krusick. And, thank you to Mayor Tom Barrett and Milwaukee County District Attorney John Chisholm for being here and for their work for Milwaukee’s children. Thank you to Superintendent Demond Means for doing a great job as our master of ceremonies. Thank you to MPS Board President Michael Bonds, all the Board of Directors, Superintendent Bill Andrekopolous, and Principal Toni Dinkins for opening this wonderful school for this ceremony.

Thank you to all the students from Lincoln Center of the Arts Middle School for performing for us today and to Jonathon Irias of Vieau School for reciting our Pledge of Allegiance. My gratitude goes out to the students and teachers of Hi-Mount for extending their summer school time to be here today. And thanks to former State Superintendent Libby Burmaster for her eight years of dedicated service and to my friend and former boss State Superintendent Barbara Thompson who joins us today. And, I want to recognize the hard working staff of the Department of Public Instruction, especially those who helped organize this event.

Thank you to my family, my wife, Kathy; our children, Erin, Nick, and Katie; grandchildren, Tessa, Casey, Laura, Teagan; and **all** of you here today from throughout our great state for joining me and my administration in this celebration.

We are assembled here in this beautiful elementary school to state our unwavering commitment to public education in our state, to make sure that every child in Wisconsin is a graduate, no matter where they live. As we entered this auditorium today, we passed a plaque bearing the Hi-Mount class of 1932 creed. It reads: “I will strive to do all in my power to benefit my school in every way and make it better for my having been here.” Those are great words to live by. Generations of Hi-Mount students, parents, and educators have worked together to make their lives, this neighborhood, city, our state, and nation better.

The difficulties of the past year have many in Wisconsin and here in Milwaukee thinking of challenges faced by past generations. While it is always easy to assume that things were easier “back then,” I feel confident there were many struggles to overcome. The children who came to Hi-Mount school in 1932 were part of an amazing generation of Americans – a generation that some call the greatest generation. This greatest generation fought both a Great Depression and a world war. And, they earned prosperity and freedom for their children and

(more)

grandchildren. They fought injustice and racism in this country, and they started the civil rights movement and opened our minds to justice for all. We have much to thank them for. But most importantly in the end, this generation of Wisconsinites did leave our communities better for having been here. But while they did leave a great legacy, their work didn't end.

In our great nation, every generation leaves work to be done. Every generation needs to embrace this ongoing work to leave a legacy of excellence to build a strong foundation for the future.

Think about it — our schools in every part of Wisconsin have helped our children to become active citizens, productive and skilled workers, and leaders who have risen to the challenges they face, generation after generation. Our long-standing commitment to public education continues to earn nation-leading graduation rates, college entrance exam scores, and strong increases in students taking rigorous college level courses.

Our public system of schools has much that we can be proud of. Daily, teachers and students across this great state create learning that could not have been imagined in 1932. While we are proud of our students' accomplishments, just as they were in 1932, our commitment must be to meet the present-day needs of a global society.

In other words, we must get better. Our democracy is made stronger by our constant effort to change and renew, to strive for the common good. And ensuring strong public schools and libraries delivers the opportunity for our next generation of leaders to be our greatest.

Now, we gather in this public school, in a metropolitan area that is in the grips of the largest economic downturn we have faced since the 1930s. We gather at a time when the nation's hard times play out in lost state revenues, leading to the most difficult state budget in years, which challenge our schools and libraries. All this happens

- at a time when achievement gaps are too large and too many of our students drop out;
- at a time when many are struggling with lost earnings, lost jobs, lost homes; and
- at a time when families increasingly find it hard to afford health care, a roof over their heads, or even the next meal.

We know that the struggles of families too often hit hardest on those we aim to protect and help flourish; our children. In many cases, our schools and public libraries are the only place of certainty and security for our children.

Even one drop out is too many. One homeless, hungry child is too much. A child struggling alone to read, write, or multiply is more than we should accept. Now is the time to focus on that which will last. A quality education with every child a graduate prepared for the workplace and further education lasts a lifetime.

We must cast aside fear, and instead hold onto compassion and kindness. We must strive to make our students' lives better through our public schools. And, we can create the foundation for a renewal of our society, and our collective spirit. For economic and moral reasons, we must continue our long-standing commitment to public education. We must fix what's broken and build upon what works.

To do this in Wisconsin, we must:

- recruit and retain quality educators,
- invest in innovation,
- ensure safe and respectful schools,

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- advance common sense and transparent accountability, and
 - work toward fair and sustainable school funding.

Around 65,000 public school students in our state graduate each year. And almost 7,000 of our students drop-out of school each year. Between students who drop-out and those who graduate there are large disparities by race, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status. And of course we all know, this is wrong. Simply put, too many of our students drop-out. Dropping out of school plays out over a life-time for the student and our society. Not only does this play out in decreased lifetime earnings, but also in a lower quality of life for all.

In December, we will hold the Wisconsin Graduation Summit to focus our state's attention and efforts on increasing graduation rates and reducing the numbers of students who drop-out of school. This summit will be a beginning as we focus our efforts on the school districts with the largest numbers of drop-outs or the greatest disparities. The strength of this lies in gaining the support of the community – parents, educators, faith-based leaders, social service agencies, post-secondary education, law enforcement, tribal nations, elected leaders, boys and girls clubs – and all others who serve children and families. Collectively, we must work to ensure that every child graduates.

In this, our state's largest city, I will work with state and community leaders to aggressively transform Milwaukee Public Schools. I am appointing a Federal Funds Trustee for MPS to provide guidance and information to the district, Mayor Barrett, Gov. Doyle, the new Milwaukee Public Schools Innovation and Improvement Advisory Council, and me.

I will reinvigorate and expand the DPI's Urban Education Office in Milwaukee and hold office hours there. I will work with all community and state partners to improve education in this city. We need to leave behind blame and excuses, and build on the good being done here by hard working educators, parents, and students. Regardless of how MPS is governed and regardless of assorted controversies that face tough choices and change, the people of Milwaukee dare to care, and so do I, that kids learn in all of Milwaukee's public schools.

Let me be clear – more of the same is not enough.

And, all schools in our state must be able to provide educational opportunities needed in this competitive global economy. I will expand the work of my Rural Advisory Council to ensure that a quality education is available no matter where a student lives in Wisconsin. We will work to support our quality schools and turn around our chronically low-achieving schools, no matter where they are.

I will join with our congressional delegation, state, and education leaders to leverage federal funds to bring innovation to our schools and be prepared for the eventual decline in federal funding. And we will work to ensure that federal education law makes our schools accountable not just to Washington, but to the parents and residents of Wisconsin.

I have traveled the state seeing the great work of our students, educators, and libraries. Recently, I visited Plymouth, Wisconsin, where public schooling began for me in Miss Potter's kindergarten class and where I graduated from high school. It is where my father, a doctor, and my mother, a nurse, taught me the importance of education, service, and kindness. And, it is where my grade school and high school classmate, Kathy, became my wife, my partner for life.

Frankly, visiting communities across Wisconsin meeting our educators, students, their families, and advocating for schools and public libraries is a vital role that I will really enjoy. From rural Wauzeka to Wausau, from Valders to

Verona, from Mellen to Milwaukee, we must strive to do better for our public schools. While we can feel pride in our accomplishments, the status quo is neither sustainable nor acceptable. We must bring meaningful change to struggling schools. We must deliver hope through the power of public education.

One of the tragedies of federal policy over the past decade is that we have cared about only that which is tested. As a result, the emotional and social needs of our children have taken a back seat. We must invest in the lives of our children, especially those in need, both inside and outside the schoolhouse doors. Wisconsin knows what to do. The students of Hi-Mount generations ago and today know what we need.

Students, love your families and friends, study hard, graduate, work hard, and give back to your loved ones, your neighbors, your city, and state.

Parents, please turn off the TV, read to your children, and as the most important teacher in their lives, teach them to respect themselves and others.

Educators, the work will only get harder, but the stakes are so much higher. You are up to the challenge — expectations have never been higher for us. I will do my best to continue to tell your stories of success across the state and nation.

And, to all adults gathered here today and across our state, join us. We need every child to graduate. Support your public schools, libraries, and their students. I'll be there, but we all need to step forward.

I am honored and blessed to stand here today with Hi-Mount's students. My 2009 creed is: I will strive to do all in my power to benefit Wisconsin students, their schools and libraries in every way and make it better for my having been here. Plainly speaking, you are looking at a cancer survivor who has been given a second chance. I am ready to work with you to fix what doesn't work and to build upon what does. In this effort to be the best, it will take all of us.

Thank you for being here today and God bless all of our children.

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Tony Evers was elected to the nonpartisan, constitutional office of state superintendent of public instruction in April. His term of office is for four years.

NOTES: 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 electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2009_03.pdf.