

WASB • WASDA • WASBO State Education Convention Address

January 19, 2011 — Frontier Airlines Center, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Jamie Benson, WASDA president for that introduction, your leadership in River Valley, and as WASDA president. And thank you to the Kimberly High School Concert Choir, directed by Luke Zaccaro. Let's give our student musicians and their teachers another round of applause.

I would like to thank and recognize the efforts of your associations' and their executive directors:

- John Ashley, and all of WASB,
- Miles Turner, WASDA, and
- Woody Wiedenhoef, WASBO.

They do a great job representing and bringing you together. Let's give them a hand.

I am honored to serve you as state superintendent, and I am grateful for the strong support of school board members, school district administrators, and school business officials.

I know you have some of the hardest jobs in the state. In these difficult times you make tough decisions to ensure we reach our goal of every child a graduate prepared for the workforce and higher education.

As your state superintendent, I am tremendously proud of the accomplishments of our public schools.

Wisconsin's long-standing commitment to public education continues to earn nation-leading graduation rates, college entrance exam scores, and a growing number of students taking rigorous college-level courses. We have a tradition of excellence, and there is much to celebrate. And in public education today, we all need to tell loudly our good news, our quality instruction provided to hundreds of thousands of Wisconsin children daily.

At the same time, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. Graduation and achievement gaps are too large. Too many students drop out of school — one in 10 students. And, we have a broken school finance system that erodes our ability to ensure all children graduate prepared for future success.

We need to work together to strengthen your ability to tackle these issues. The power of decision-making closest to our students — the power of local control — needs to be re-invigorated in our state and nation.

I am engaging your organizations, and you, on a number of efforts to improve student learning and our schools.

We know that improving educator effectiveness is one of the most direct and promising strategies for improving student achievement. We need to develop a meaningful educator evaluation system that is fair and valid, leads to improved student learning, and informs professional development. If we don't get this done through collaboration, there is a strong possibility we will get something shallow, superficial, and politically motivated imposed on us.

Your organizations' leadership is working with me through our Educator Effectiveness Design Team to take the lead on this. They are developing model performance-based evaluation systems for teachers and principals that include how student achievement data will be used, and recommendations for methods to support improvement and provide incentives for performance.

We also are working to ensure our school leaders, educators, and parents have the tools they need. Our new academic standards, assessment and data systems are central to our work.

Last year, we adopted new, rigorous academic state standards in mathematics and English language arts. These standards are aligned to college and workplace expectations, are benchmarked against those of the highest performing countries, and now are shared across 40 states. We are now working statewide to help our educators align their curriculum and instruction with our new standards.

Replacing the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam and transforming our assessment systems are major parts of preparing students to become college and career ready. The pieces are coming together on what our replacement for the WKCE will look like. Recently our collaborative effort with 30 states was awarded \$160 million dollars to develop an online, adaptive assessment system, aligned to the Common Core State Standards and ready for the 2014-15 school year.

However, we can and should do more now. I included two major requests in my budget for funding for your schools to use adaptive benchmark assessment data and adopt a set of college and career readiness tests of students — the EXPLORE/PLAN/ and ACT.

Our students, parents, and educators need data to inform course planning in high school and to assure that all students are on track for college or careers after high school. We are building state-level data systems to help you drive change in instruction.

We can also do more to ensure that all Wisconsin children have the opportunity to graduate from high school with some postsecondary credits or credentials. We have strong advanced placement courses, International Baccalaureate programs, youth options, youth apprenticeship, and career academies — at least in certain parts of the state. I am working at the state level with our partners in higher education to make new dual enrollment opportunities available to students throughout Wisconsin. And, I encourage you to explore opportunities with your local higher education partners to innovate and move schooling along for students in a way that meets their needs and prepares them well.

While some examples of these kinds of innovative high schools exist in Wisconsin — I visited one, Lakeview Technology Academy in Kenosha last week — we need more of them across our state.

To make these dual enrollment opportunities a reality takes a new way of thinking about mission of education.

Also, we need to make clear the power you have as school boards to grant credits and graduate students when they are prepared for work and further education. School boards, in collaboration with their administrative and teaching staff, need to have the authority to grant competency-based credits not just credits that are based on seat time. I will work to make your authority to innovate clear through changes in administrative rules or new legislation and help disengage ourselves from an old static model of Carnegie units and credits.

The result will be young people succeeding in college-level courses during high school, graduating college and career ready, increasing the pipeline of students who will go on to college, and reducing their total time and cost to degree. It's the right thing to do for our students, and it's a wise use of public resources.

Finally, in Wisconsin we have a historic opportunity to change school finance for the better. We have heard from our citizens across Wisconsin; hearing loudly and clearly that our school finance system is broken. Despite decades of well-intended reform efforts led by academics and leaders from both political parties, the print-out politics of school funding reform have consistently left behind a graveyard of good ideas.

However, building upon those efforts, we have worked with education leaders, including the WASB leadership, school finance experts, business leaders, and elected officials to develop a plan for a fair, sustainable, and transparent school finance system.

Our "Fair Funding for Our Future" plan protects our students, schools and communities and enacts school funding reform, all while holding the line on property taxes. Recognizing the difficult economic times we are experiencing, it is a powerful first step that makes long overdue changes to the funding formula, maximizes existing resources, increases transparency, and sets the stage for greater state support in future years.

The "Fair Funding" plan proposes a minimum amount of \$3,000 in general school aid for every student, no matter where they live in Wisconsin. This provision will provide significant relief to dozens of school districts that receive little or no general school aid now. As state superintendent, I believe that a fair funding system must include every district in the state — no exceptions.

We have long heard complaints that Wisconsin's school funding system penalizes districts that are property wealthy, but income poor. For the first time, the "Fair Funding" plan would incorporate a 20 percent poverty factor, based on the number of children eligible for free and reduced-price lunch in a district. This provision shifts our system from one that measures equity only by property wealth to one that also accounts for family income and taxpayers' ability to pay.

And finally, the "Fair Funding for Our Future" plan promotes transparency, while providing direct property tax relief to homeowners. This plan holds the line on property taxes by providing additional state resources for schools over the next two years and by maintaining current revenue limits.

Transparency in state funding is vital in an educational system rooted in local control. How can the state expect parents and taxpayers to make well-informed decisions about local referenda if the true cost of schools is hidden in complicated tax credits?

To that end, this plan directs the nearly \$900 million in current school levy tax credits toward educating children, creating clarity and transparency around what schools actually cost. Simply put, it is unfair for the state to force school boards to levy taxes at an artificially high level, all the while knowing homeowners will pay much less due to tax credits. This is a move that legislators from both parties as well as the WASB have supported in the past.

I know we are in difficult economic times, and this proposal does include modest new funding. However, this is the smallest K-12 budget request by a state superintendent in nearly a decade. It will deliver an even bigger school property tax reduction than when the state instituted two-thirds funding in 1996, and it will be done at a significantly lower cost.

The responses from business and community leaders, the new Legislative majorities, and Governor Walker have been very positive that these ideas are good public policy and that this plan moves us in the right direction. Now, of course, they are understandably cautious about the level of funding available in this difficult budget. Nevertheless, we all remain committed to working together to implement school finance reform in this budget or the next.

In the end it is you our local leaders who will make school finance reform happen. Your actions and votes tomorrow at the delegate assembly will carry a powerful message that legislators, educators, and business leaders can work together to create a new fair, sustainable, and transparent school finance system. I look forward to continuing our work together.

We are working to provide a quality education with every child a graduate. We are raising academic standards, changing our assessment system, and working to put effective educators in every classroom. We have begun transforming our schools for all of Wisconsin's public school students. We are Wisconsin's education leaders.

With bold, positive actions, let's work together for our kids and their parents, our educators, and for Wisconsin's future.

Thank you for being here today.

God bless all of our children, their parents, school leaders, educators, and elected officials.

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Tony Evers is Wisconsin's elected 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/eis/vm-media.html>. This speech is available on the DPI website at http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/pdf/dpinr2011_08.pdf.