

State of Education Address

September 15, 2011 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Ryan Yentz for that introduction. Congratulations to you and Jessica Hanneman, the 2011 Boys and Girls Badger State Superintendents, and thank you for your participation today.

Thank you, Don Stevens for serving as our master of ceremonies. CESA 5 is fortunate you are its leader.

Thank you also to Forward Brass, Jonathan Overby, and the 1st Squadron of the 105th Cavalry, Wisconsin Army National Guard, for your presentations.

We have in attendance today a number of distinguished individuals. I would like to introduce them and ask them to stand:

- Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen
- Supreme Court Justices:
Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson
Justice Ann Walsh Bradley
Justice N. Patrick Crooks
Justice Patience Roggensack, and
Justice Annette Kingsland Ziegler
- Tribal Chairs:
Kimberly Vele of the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians, and
Lisa Waukau, Menominee Nation, and
- All our state legislators who are with us today.

We thank you, and ask for your continued support for public education.

A special thanks to all tribal leaders, school board members, and other elected officials who have joined us. Please join me in showing our appreciation for their public service.

Also thanks to the heads of our institutions of higher education:

- Kevin Reilly, president of the University of Wisconsin System,
- Dan Clancy, president of the Wisconsin Technical College System, and
- Rolf Wegenke, president of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

Furthermore, we recognize:

- all staff in our schools, public libraries, institutions of higher education,
- my colleagues at the Department of Public Instruction,
- the CESAs,
- the Wisconsin Education Association Council led by President Mary Bell,
- AFT-Wisconsin led by President Bryan Kennedy,
- AWSA led by Executive Director Jim Lynch,
- WASBO led by Executive Director Woody Wiedenhoft,

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- WCASS led by Executive Director Gary Myrah,
 - WASB led by Executive Director John Ashley,
 - the Wisconsin Library Association led by President Rhonda Puntney, and
 - WEMTA led by President Sandy Heiden.

And a special welcome to Miles Turner of WASDA and all our school district superintendents from throughout our great state.

As your state superintendent, I am humbled by the work that goes on in public schools and libraries across Wisconsin to educate and serve our children and our citizens. I am tremendously proud of the accomplishments of our public schools, once again leading the nation in graduation rates, and our libraries, which are national leaders in patron use and system collaboration.

Yes, that is good news, but the work is not done. We must continue working to ensure *all* children graduate ready for college and careers. We are nowhere near that goal when one in ten Wisconsin students drops out of high school. For Native American and Hispanic students, that number is one in four. For our African American students, one in three. Graduation gaps persist for students with disabilities, English-language learners, and students in poverty. High school dropouts earn less, rely more on social services, and are four times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates. For their futures and ours, we must continue our fight to make Every Child a Graduate prepared for the next step.

I cannot stand here today without talking about what has occurred in Wisconsin over the past few months.

Without a doubt, the last eight months of political turmoil have taken a toll on our state, including our public schools and educators.

Rancor over state funding cuts, the elimination of collective bargaining, unprecedented educator retirements, recall elections, and fears around the national economy have pitted community and family members against one another. This toxic political environment has generated anger toward those who have dedicated their lives to public service, with echoing memories of Hortonville resounding for many of us. This is not the Wisconsin I know, the Wisconsin I love.

Now is the time to move beyond the harsh rhetoric and begin the slow process of rebuilding the trust that was so swiftly shattered. *And it will take more than words; it will take action.* It is not enough to say that we respect teachers and value education; our leaders must demonstrate it. We must reinvest in our schools, fix our broken system of school funding, and ensure our educators have a seat at the table. That is how we can move forward together.

At the heart of it, this year's battles were really about economics, not education. And our precarious economic situation was long in the making. Every generation of Americans, from 1620 to 1970, was economically better off than the generation before. However, since the mid-1970s real wages have stagnated for the vast majority of people. Income inequality has grown and too many families now have to rely on several jobs to make ends meet.

Working families and their children didn't cause our economic condition, but it has hit them hard. Child poverty in Wisconsin is the highest in recent history and is growing at a faster rate than the nation — a fact that is playing out in schools and classrooms across our state.

We cannot watch the American Dream and middle-class opportunities fade away. This cannot be the legacy of our generation. Our kids, our grandkids, my grandkids, deserve better.

To rebuild our economy, to rebuild the American Dream, we need more than just jobs; we need family-supporting careers. *And investing in public education will help get us there!*

Public education is — as it has always been — our pathway to prosperity, our pathway to a strong middle class. It is the great equalizer.

Our public schools opened two weeks ago, facing historic cuts in state aid. According to one recent report, this dramatic cut in aid for schools amounted to \$635 less per student — the largest single-year reduction in per pupil spending among the states studied. A larger per pupil cut than California. New York. Ohio. Michigan. Texas. This same study found that education cuts have extended the recession, slowed the recovery, and undermined education reform and the ability of school districts to deliver high-quality education.

Not every state made the drastic choices that Wisconsin made. I'll say it again. Education is our pathway to prosperity, our pathway to a strong middle class. *Public education can help get us there again.*

There are probably some who are saying, "So what? Schools opened, buses are running, teachers and students are in classes, and kids have computers. The cuts didn't hurt." And to those, I say, Schools have to balance their budgets every year — there isn't anything newsworthy about that. The real story is that, this year, balanced budgets came at the expense of kids and working families. We are seeing a tidal wave of retirements, growing class sizes, and fewer course offerings. And this is only the beginning, unless we change course.

In a time of economic peril, we have put stumbling blocks, rather than stepping stones, on the pathway to prosperity.

Despite these enormous challenges, we are doing everything we can to build this pathway to prosperity, to ensure Every Child is a Graduate ready for college or a career. We are working to create this pathway by focusing on four simple, but powerful questions:

- What and how should kids learn?
- How do we know if they learned it?
- What do we do if they don't? and
- How do we pay for it?

These questions are the cornerstones for modernizing our education system, and we've aggressively tackled each one.

First, with regard to — What and how should kids learn?:

- We adopted the Common Core State Standards, rigorous, internationally benchmarked English language arts and mathematics standards that are now shared across 46 states and territories, and we are working to bring these new standards into the classroom.
- We are putting a new emphasis on early reading. Wisconsin used to be a national leader in elementary reading performance, but the reality is too many of our children aren't reading on grade level, and other states are closing early reading achievement gaps faster than we are. To address this, we are working to strengthen our early learning standards, exploring statewide early literacy screening, and improving educator preparation and ongoing professional development to promote early reading success.
- We are also engaging in Next Generation of Learning projects that use technology to customize the student experience. Technology-driven instruction personalizes and supports student learning beyond the classroom walls, creating the possibility of individual learning plans for each student in the not too distant future.
- We also must continue to bridge the divide between high school, college, and career by expanding opportunities for every student to earn college credit or secure industry certifications while in high school.

Second, with regard to — How do we know if kids learned?:

- We are developing next generation assessments tied to our new standards. Soon, these online adaptive exams will provide students, parents, and teachers the timely feedback they need to improve learning.

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- We are also upgrading our data systems to provide a wealth of information regarding student progress. For the first time, we are matching student progress from K-12 into higher education. And, we are exploring ways to capture critical early learning data as well.
 - The state is also helping districts across Wisconsin use data to customize interventions and support for struggling and gifted students. In Milwaukee, these efforts, coupled with strong local leadership, are driving remarkable improvement in keeping kids in school and making meaningful gains in academic achievement.

The third question — What do we do if students are not learning? — focuses on supporting improvement through accountability:

- With stakeholders across Wisconsin, we are leading the way in advancing educator effectiveness and school accountability.
- Together with a team of education leaders, we are crafting a fair and robust educator evaluation system. The reforms we are building *are being developed with teachers and education leaders* — not imposed upon them. Bringing our world-class educators to the table to advance meaningful reforms not only values their role as professionals, but results in a better product for kids.
- On school and district accountability, we have long known that the system imposed by No Child Left Behind is broken. Congress is five years overdue in reauthorizing this broken law, and, without changes, every school in the country could soon be labeled as “failing.” My fellow state education chiefs and I have pushed Congress and the U.S. Department of Education, and, as a result, Secretary Duncan has agreed to give states waivers in exchange for comprehensive, state-led reform.
- As a result, *Wisconsin is leading a nationwide movement to build state accountability systems* that will replace NCLB. Our new system will include growth and attainment and will focus on graduating all students ready for college or careers. It will identify and support struggling schools, as well as reward and replicate the practices of our highest performers. And, perhaps most importantly, our system will include all publicly funded schools — traditional public schools, charter schools, and choice schools.
- We know with Wisconsin voices at the table, we can create something better than what Washington has imposed. More importantly, this is a remarkable opportunity to have a statewide conversation about what we value about our schools and then build an accountability system that mirrors those values.

And, of course, the final question — How should we pay for schools?:

- We advanced the first comprehensive school finance reform plan in decades, our Fair Funding for Our Future plan. The plan laid the groundwork to prioritize existing resources and created a pathway for significant and necessary re-investment in our public schools. I urge our leaders to take this up now.

Our education partners and leaders here today recognize the importance of this agenda and are working with me to ensure that every child is a graduate prepared for future success and prosperity. And I thank them for it. We are the agents of change.

In these rancorous and difficult times, working together has never been harder, or more important.

Some have questioned why I would work together with the governor or legislative leaders on any initiative, when we have so strongly disagreed.

I stood steadfast with parents, teachers, and community leaders in opposition to the devastating state budget cuts; the expansion of vouchers, while cutting public schools; and elimination of collective bargaining. And I stand with them still today. I believe as strongly today, as I did then, that these were the wrong choices for our kids, our communities, and Wisconsin.

However, we cannot afford to let conflicts among adults rob our children of the educational opportunities they need to succeed. I am committed to finding common ground and working together to improve education for Wisconsin's children wherever possible. Our kids deserve no less from us.

So, with eyes wide open, I will continue to drive this agenda forward and fiercely advocate for our kids. We will work together where we can, and stand opposed where we cannot, because that is what leaders do. But I will always put the best interests of our kids first.

Over 50 years ago, President Dwight Eisenhower captured the essence of what we must remember today. He said, "Teachers need our active support and encouragement. They are doing one of the most necessary and exacting jobs in the land. They are developing our most precious national resource: our children, our future citizens."

This Five Star General understood the essential role educators and our schools have in our democracy, our prosperity.

We know our challenges. Declining wages, growing income and wealth inequality, and disinvestment in education are threatening the foundations of our economy and democracy.

As I said before, I love Wisconsin. I was born, raised, and educated in the public schools of Plymouth and the University of Wisconsin. I am married to a Wisconsin educator. My three kids went to public schools as do three of my school-aged grandkids. I will always stand up for Wisconsin children, parents, educators, public libraries, and public education.

I ask that you join me in rallying around our public schools and libraries and to support our students, and all the educators, librarians, and support staff who work daily to build a more prosperous future for Wisconsin.

Thank you and God bless the United States of America. God bless Wisconsin.

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Tony Evers is Wisconsin's elected state superintendent of public instruction.