

News Release

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Framework for education's future centers on four powerful questions

MADISON — Despite the rancor and shattered trust of the state's politics, State Superintendent Tony Evers struck a serious tone in his State of Education address Thursday to move education past the problems of adults to an urgent focus on children and their future.

"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," he said. "This is good news, but the work is not done. We must continue working to ensure all children graduate ready for college and careers. But we are nowhere near that goal when one in ten Wisconsin students drops out of high school."

Evers pointed out that dropouts earn less, rely more on social services, and are four times more likely to be unemployed than college graduates. He called on school leaders, legislators, policymakers, and civic leaders to move beyond harsh rhetoric and begin the slow process of rebuilding the trust that was so swiftly shattered during last winter's budget debates.

Wisconsin's public schools opened two weeks ago, facing historic cuts in state aid, a "stumbling block rather than a stepping stone on the pathway to prosperity" that education holds for rebuilding our economy and the American Dream. To reinvigorate education, Evers said his department and educators throughout the state have been focusing on four simple, but powerful questions that set the framework for modernizing education in Wisconsin.

- 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?

Wisconsin has adopted the Common Core State Standards, which are internationally benchmarked and is working to bring these new English language arts and mathematics standards into the classroom. The state is putting a new emphasis on early reading, the foundational skill for other learning. In addition to strengthening early learning standards, Wisconsin is exploring statewide early literacy screening and improving educator preparation and ongoing

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professional development to promote early reading success. The Next Generation Learning projects will bring more technology into education to personalize and support student learning beyond the classroom. Additionally, the state continues work 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.

New assessments that are tied to the Common Core State Standards will provide students, parents, and teachers the timely feedback they need to improve learning. The state is upgrading its data systems to provide information regarding student progress. Wisconsin also is helping districts use data to customize interventions and support for struggling and gifted students.

With stakeholders across Wisconsin, the state is leading the way in advancing educator effectiveness and school accountability with a focus on supporting improvement. Wisconsin is crafting a fair and robust educator evaluation system that is being developed *with* teachers and education leaders — not imposed upon them. For school and district accountability, Wisconsin is developing a new system to replace No Child Left Behind. The 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 the highest performers.

To pay for schools, Evers promoted Fair Funding for Our Future, the school finance reform package introduced last year. The plan lays the groundwork to prioritize existing resources and creates a pathway for significant and necessary re-investment in public schools.

“In these rancorous and difficult times, working together has never been harder, or more important,” Evers said. “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,” he said. “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,” Evers said.

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State of Education Address Excerpts

September 15, 2011 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

Education is our pathway to prosperity, our pathway to a strong middle class. ... 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.

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. ... 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.

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