

State of Education Address

September 20, 2012 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you Reven McGee for that introduction. Congratulations to you and Rebecca Green, the 2012 Boys and Girls Badger State Superintendents, and thank you for your participation today.

Thank you Mary Pfeiffer for serving as our master of ceremonies. Neenah Joint School District is fortunate you are its leader.

Thank you also to the Milwaukee High School of the Arts Concert Chorale, Jonathan Overby, Tim Wurgler of the Wisconsin School Music Association, and the Joint Force Headquarters Wisconsin, for your performances and presentation.

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,
 - Justice David Prosser, and
 - Justice Annette Ziegler;
- Tribal Presidents;
- Jon Greendeer, president of the Ho-Chunk 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,
- Jim Zylstra, representing the Wisconsin Technical College System, and
- Rolf Wegenke, president of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.
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Furthermore, we recognize

- all staff in our schools, public libraries, institutions of higher education,
- my colleagues at the Department of Public Instruction,
- the CESAs,

(more)

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- the Wisconsin Education Association Council represented today by Executive Director Dan Burkhalter,
 - AFT-Wisconsin led by President Bryan Kennedy,
 - AWSA led by Executive Director Jim Lynch,
 - WASBO led by Executive Director Woody Wiedenhoef,
 - WCASS led by Executive Director Gary Myrah
 - WASB led by Executive Director John Ashley,
 - the Wisconsin Library Association led by President Ron McCabe, and
 - WEMTA led by President-elect Donna Smith.

And a special welcome to Miles Turner, who is in his last year at WASDA, and all our school district superintendents from throughout our great state.

Thanks to the citizens of Wisconsin, I am blessed to travel Wisconsin and see outstanding students, educators, and librarians in action.

I meet high-schoolers who are getting a jump on becoming nurses, IT specialists, auto mechanics, or engineers through dual enrollment programs and apprenticeships. I read with kindergarteners and hear from their teachers about how they are personalizing learning. I visit libraries where patrons search online for jobs, seniors learn about genealogy, and preschoolers enjoy story time with the librarian.

We have amazing public schools and libraries in this state, and it is humbling to serve as your state superintendent.

It's an exciting time to be in public education. We're changing what children learn, how they're taught and tested, and how schools and teachers are evaluated. The scope and pace of change is unprecedented, and we're blessed to start from a position of strength.

Our libraries are national leaders in usage and sharing of resources. Our students scored second in the country on the ACT, and Wisconsin leads the Midwest in achievement on Advanced Placement. We consistently lead the nation in high school graduation, and our graduation rates rose dramatically in the past year.

We should celebrate our accomplishments. They are many! But we also know there's much more to do.

Despite nation-leading graduation rates, nearly 6,000 Wisconsin students drop out every year. Graduation gaps are unacceptable when Hispanic and American Indian students drop out at a rate of one in four, and African American students at a rate of one in three. Wide gaps persist for students with disabilities, English learners, and students in poverty. High school dropouts earn far less and are far more likely to be unemployed. For their futures and ours, Wisconsin must fight to make Every Child a Graduate.

We've got a long way to go when too many of Wisconsin's youngest students struggle to read and when a surprising number are not even coming to school. Thanks to our work with the Governor and support from the Legislature, we're providing every kindergartener with early literacy screening, helping teachers target instruction to improve fundamental reading skills. However, improved reading instruction will only help if kids are in school.

Last year, 16,000 students in kindergarten through third grade missed 20 or more days of school. We need every student to show up to school ready to read.

We've got a long way to go to provide all Wisconsin children the support they need to succeed. Child poverty and homelessness have reached the highest levels in recent memory. Schools and libraries are dealing with the largest budget cuts in state history. Cuts to public libraries have led to shorter hours and fewer resources. School districts cut nearly 2,400 staff last year, and nearly 75 percent of districts cut teachers. The largest cuts were to school librarians and career and technical education, special education, and reading teachers — critical areas where we need more investment, not less.

We've got more to do to provide every Wisconsin child a pathway to a family-supporting career. Too many high school and college graduates struggle to find good jobs, while too many Wisconsin employers struggle to find skilled workers.

One of the surest pathways to the middle class in Wisconsin is career and technical education or CTE. Forecasts show that job openings in manufacturing, health care, IT, and service industries will continue to grow. But, statewide, our relative share of investment in CTE has decreased 40 percent in 20 years. Since 2004, districts have cut 20 percent of our CTE workforce, with 50 percent of those cuts in the past two years alone.

This year, I visited robust CTE programs in the Sun Prairie, Superior, Milwaukee, Beloit and Hartford Union school districts. I toured training centers run by Wisconsin unions, like the plumbers and steamfitters in the Superior and Duluth area, the carpenters in Kaukauna, and the operating engineers in Coloma. Thanks to programs like these, Wisconsin's CTE students graduate at a rate of over 95 percent.

That's why I'm working with business and education leaders across the state to reinvigorate CTE and create personalized academic and career plans for every student. It's why I'll be calling on the Legislature to support new investments in STEM, CTE, and industry certifications. To be pro-business, you have to be pro-education.

This is critical, reinvigorating CTE will only succeed if students and parents believe it's a viable route to a career. We all need to change the message that sometimes surrounds CTE. A bachelor's degree will always be an important path to a family-supporting career. But it's not the only one, and it's not the path that most kids take. Further, expanding CTE does NOT mean devaluing academics. Today's machinists, welders, and nursing assistants need high-level math and reading skills, as well as problem solving, creativity, and collaboration skills, as much as anybody seeking a four-year degree. Students, parents, and schools need to know all of the opportunities available.

Over the next five years, Wisconsin is transforming our education system so that every child can graduate from high school prepared for that next step — whether it's directly into a career, college, or the military. We have higher expectations for our kids and for ourselves.

That's why I've launched Agenda 2017, a comprehensive agenda that sets aggressive but achievable goals and lays out a plan to meet them. Through improved standards and instruction, assessments and data systems, school and educator accountability, and school finance reform, we'll work to increase graduation rates, close gaps, and increase college and career readiness.

As part of Agenda 2017:

We've adopted the Common Core State Standards so teachers, parents, and students can focus on the important stuff. We'll no longer have curriculum that's a mile wide and an inch deep.

We're partnering with the UW Colleges, and continuing to work with technical colleges and private universities, to expand opportunities for students to earn college credit and employment skills while still in high school.

Through investments in technology, we're entering the promised land of personalized learning. My budget asks for resources so all Wisconsin children, no matter where they live, can benefit from online and blended learning, and every Wisconsin teacher, parent, and policymaker can monitor progress at the click of a button.

In two years, we're finally kicking the reading and math portions of the WKCE to the curb. In grades three through eight, it will be replaced with an online, adaptive test that will provide meaningful, timely data to students, teachers, and parents.

In high school, we're asking the Legislature to fund the ACT for all juniors, along with the preparatory tests EXPLORE and PLAN, and the job readiness assessment, WorkKeys. Adopting the ACT suite, which will be aligned with the Common Core State Standards, is a win-win-win for students, parents, and schools. It saves parents money, reduces barriers to college and employment, and allows us to measure student progress throughout high school.

The WKCE is not the only thing to get the boot. We've finally kicked NCLB to the curb, as well.

With the great work of a statewide design team and our federal waiver, we've developed an accountability system that's based on multiple measures of college and career readiness. As we get better data on things like dual enrollment and industry certifications, we'll adapt our system so it can measure more of what we value. And, next session, we'll work with the Governor and Legislature to provide support for struggling schools, replicate successful ones, and, once and for all, extend the accountability system to choice schools.

We've collaborated with educators to create a fair, valid teacher and principal evaluation system. It uses professional practice and student growth data to determine effectiveness and will tailor support to teachers' strengths and weaknesses. It will take time and resources, but it's critical that we get this new evaluation system right.

As I go around the state talking about Agenda 2017, I hear story after story about schools that are struggling to keep afloat financially. Just a few days ago, school officials in Eau Claire told me that they are relying on their reserves to just make ends meet this year. Next year comes the absolute crunch.

We've all heard the claims that the past cuts did no harm or somehow even helped. I am here to tell you that is not the case. Fewer CTE teachers to prepare Wisconsin's workforce, fewer reading teachers to intervene early, fewer counselors to connect kids with colleges or apprenticeship programs, fewer library-media specialists to facilitate digital learning — these cuts are real, and they are taking a toll.

We can't keep expecting districts to balance their budgets on the backs of kids and working families. We can't keep viewing education as an expense that must face the chopping block each year when the going gets rough. Education is a necessity, as is road construction; both are investments in our future. We must reinvest in public education in the next state budget.

And, while we're at it, we must finally fix our broken school funding system. Leaders across Wisconsin support my Fair Funding plan because they know it makes common sense. The system is broken when a district with high student poverty receives no state aid. The system is broken when it fails to take into account any measure of income. The system is broken when the state pours money into tax credits and calls it school funding when that money doesn't directly educate a single child.

My Fair Funding plan addresses all of these issues and more. Let's work together to reinvest in our schools and pass Fair Funding in the next budget.

Finally, as we work together to reinvest in our schools and prepare every child for college and career, we know that the state of public education cannot be strong without strong teachers.

In Wisconsin, we've always been proud of the women and men who have dedicated themselves to teaching and supporting kids. But, over the past year and a half, the contentious state budget dialogue was driven to the local level and put targets on the backs of our teachers and public servants. Our teachers keep these feelings out of the classroom, but we can't pretend that the past year and a half has not taken a toll on our teachers as people and on teaching as a profession.

This is critical. In this time of great change, we need our educators invested and involved. But I've heard from too many educators — who feel undervalued and under attack:

- The teacher in Southwestern Wisconsin who drives to a grocery store two towns over so she can shop in peace,
- The teacher in Northeast Wisconsin who broke down in tears when I asked her what advice she'd give aspiring educators,
- The teacher who said, "Tony, when I meet new people, I no longer tell them I am a teacher, because I don't know where that conversation will go."

These teachers, like every teacher, didn't choose this profession for the pay or benefits, though they rightfully expect to make enough to raise a family like any professional does. They chose this profession, like I did, because they love kids, they want to inspire a love of learning, they want to change lives.

Reasonable people can disagree about how the budget was balanced and about the necessity of Act 10. But every citizen in Wisconsin should be alarmed when teachers don't feel valued and respected by their communities and their state. No other profession deserves more respect. No other profession is more responsible for securing our economic future.

So, let's work together to restore respect for our educators by bringing civility and collaboration back to education. Let's get back to the time when we could have a civil discussion over a glass of milk or a beer. Let's reinvest in our schools and reform school funding so that every kid can succeed in college and careers, and let's make sure our educators have a seat at the table. Together, during this era of transformation, we need all hands on deck.

As state superintendent, I often talk about my oldest granddaughter, Tessa. When I was first elected, she was in kindergarten. She's now in fourth grade, the year of learning "all things Wisconsin." She and my other grandchildren attend Wisconsin public schools, as did my children, my wife, and I.

When I think about what it is we are fighting for, why we need to reinvest in education, why we need to reduce barriers to college and careers, and why we need to restore respect to the teaching profession, I think about Tessa.

I know what she's gaining from a well-rounded public education. I know the career skills she's already experiencing and mastering, like respect, teamwork, and time management. I listen to her read and sing. Watch her do math, and perform in sports. She's gaining lasting skills she'll use in life, work, and citizenship.

I know the value of a Wisconsin public education because it's the gift I was given. It's part of who I am, and part of what drove me to become an educator. And I know what we have to lose if we don't preserve and strengthen public education for generations to come.

As an educator, I've been answering the bell for 36 years now, and I'm well aware of the challenges we face. Yet, I continue to be a glass half-full person. I think this is a common trait in those of us who devote our lives to working with children.

So, I am jazzed about the future. I hope you are too. This school year, and the next few to come, will bring many important, exciting changes to Wisconsin schools. We've got much to be proud of, and a lot yet to do.

As your state superintendent, I will drive our agenda forward and fiercely advocate for all those who dedicate their lives to public education and most of all, for our kids. For Tessa. For all Wisconsin's children.

Join me in standing up for our kids, our public schools and libraries, and all the parents, educators, staff, and leaders who work daily to build a more prosperous future for Wisconsin.

Thank you. God bless Wisconsin and God bless our children.

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