

State of Education Address

September 26, 2013 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you Jeremy Kloss for that introduction. Congratulations to you and Monika, the 2013 Boys and Girls Badger State Superintendents, and thank you for your participation today.

Thank you Eric Runez for serving as our master of ceremonies. The Whitewater Unified School District is fortunate to have you as its leader.

Thank you also to the Red Feather Singers, Jonathan Overby, and the 64th Troop Command, 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.

- Supreme Court Justices: Justice Ann Walsh Bradley, Justice N. Patrick Crooks, Justice David Prosser;
- Tribal President: Jon Greendeer, president of the Ho-Chunk Nation;
- Secretary Reggie Newson of the Department of Workforce Development; 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,
- Myrna Foy, 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 Betsy Kippers;
- AFT-Wisconsin led by President Bryan Kennedy,
- AWSA led by Executive Director Jim Lynch,
- WASBO led by Executive Director Woody Wiedenhoft,
- WCASS led by Executive Director Gary Myrah
- WASB led by Executive Director John Ashley,
- the Wisconsin Library Association led by President Paula Ganyard, and
- WEMTA led by President Joel Verduin.

And a special welcome to Jon Bales, who is in his first 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 public librarians in action.

It's both an exciting time and a challenging time for public schools and public libraries. We're changing what children learn, how they're taught and tested, and how schools and educators are evaluated. Our schools are investing in innovation and pursuing excellence at an unprecedented pace.

And, while the scope and pace of change can sometimes seem overwhelming, we absolutely need to deliver on this work. For our kids, for their futures, it's the right thing to do.

But to succeed, we need to stay the course and find common ground. Wisconsin has always embraced a shared value of public education — the great equalizer. But, the battle lines that have been drawn in recent years have divided communities, turned educators into enemies, and drained resources from our public schools. It has sometimes seemed as if the very idea of public education itself is being called into question.

Yet, over the past few years, we have found common ground with the Governor and legislative leaders around preparing all kids to be college and career ready. Together, we've forged partnerships on reading, school report cards, educator effectiveness, new state tests including the ACT, early childhood investments, and more. All of these efforts are grounded in our shared belief that higher standards and higher expectations for all kids are necessary to better prepare them for the world that they will enter when they leave the school house door.

Wisconsin's Common Core State Standards are world class, and set a much higher bar for all kids in the state to reach. We cannot go back to a time when our standards were a mile wide and an inch deep, leaving too many kids ill prepared for the demands of college and a career. We cannot pull the rug out from under thousands of kids, parents, and educators who have spent the past three years working to reach these new, higher expectations that we have set for them. To do so would have deep and far reaching consequences for our kids, and for our state. We must put our kids above our politics. And we owe it to them to stay the course.

However, here's my belief: our persistent pursuit of high standards, innovation, and excellence will eventually overshadow the present mind-numbing political rhetoric. Our kids deserve that from us.

Our local public schools and libraries are sources of pride in villages, towns, and cities across Wisconsin. We are national leaders in graduation rates and ACT scores, and lead the Midwest in Advanced Placement course results. **This is Wisconsin.**

However, we face serious work as a state.

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. It's unacceptable when wide gaps still persist for students with disabilities, English learners, and students in poverty. This, also, is Wisconsin.

As an educator, I've been answering the school bell for 37 years now, and I'm well aware of the challenges we face. Yet, I continue to be a glass half-full person. I believe in the people power we have in our public schools and public libraries — our students, educators, administrators, parents, volunteers, and local citizens.

For the future of all of Wisconsin's kids, and for the future of our state, I still believe that Wisconsinites remain committed to ensuring that every child, no matter where they live or how much money their parents make, can graduate from high school prepared for that next step — whether it's directly into a career, college, or the military.

That's why we've launched *Agenda 2017*, a comprehensive agenda that sets aggressive but achievable goals and lays out a plan to meet them.

As part of *Agenda 2017*, we have increased graduation rates to nation-leading levels, and set rigorous standards, modernized testing, improved reading instruction, and reformed accountability systems for educators and schools. And speaking of accountability, hey voucher schools — you get taxpayer money; you must be part of the new accountability system. No more excuses.

During my second term, we will tackle personalized learning, expand access to career and technical education and dual credit opportunities, create academic and career plans for all students, and reform school finance.

To help keep all kids on a path to graduation, we just delivered — with no new funding — a new statewide Dropout Early Warning System, called DEWS, to all districts. DEWS makes it possible to identify kids who may be at risk, and allows districts to intervene as early as middle school.

Through investments in technology, we're entering the promised land of personalized learning. My budget asked for, and the Governor and Legislature funded, resources so that all Wisconsin children can benefit from online and blended learning, and every Wisconsin teacher, parent, and policymaker can monitor progress at the click of a button.

We're also the top-performing state in the national Innovation Lab Network, an exciting effort to transform education through innovations in teaching, learning, and technology. This work customizes learning so that every child reaches his or her full potential. Presently, we have 26 school districts, 59 schools, 314 teachers and 4,493 students actively involved in personalizing learning through ILN.

Also, we're working with business and education leaders across the state to create personalized academic and career plans for every student, reinvigorate career and technical education, and expand upon our many successful dual credit programs. Just this week, Governor Walker and legislative leaders introduced my proposal to provide high schools with incentive funds to expand industry certifications in high-need areas — a critical investment that will give more Wisconsin kids the opportunity to graduate from high school ready to step into a family-supporting career. My goal is that every Wisconsin child graduates from high school with college credit or an industry certification already in their pocket. As any savvy business leader knows, to be pro-business, you have to be pro-education.

This is vital work, and it's hard work. It takes commitment, leadership at all levels, and the resources to get it done right. Yet, as I go around the state talking about *Agenda 2017*, I hear story after story about schools that are struggling to keep afloat financially.

That's why I've developed and am still advocating my school finance reform plan, "Fair Funding for Our Future."

We've all heard the claims that the past cuts did no harm or somehow even helped. I can tell you that is not the case. Recently released data shows that spending per student in Wisconsin has dropped by over 15 percent since 2008 when adjusted for inflation. This is the seventh steepest drop in the nation. And, in dollar amounts, those cuts put Wisconsin second only to Alabama. The report says the decline continues this year. Folks, we can't expect that the current, broken system of school finance is going to fix itself. Not gonna happen.

Now is the time to gather the public support and the political will to stay the course on our fundamental reforms, fix our broken school funding system, and expand opportunities for all of Wisconsin's children.

I am here to tell you that despite these challenges, I know firsthand that Wisconsin is a state that embraces innovation and excellence. From charter schools to flipped classrooms to hybrid learning, customized and

personalized for each child, we are a leader. Our 424 school districts take a back seat to no one when it comes to innovation.

I'd like to take a few moments to share with you some stories that embody what our innovative Wisconsin public schools and libraries are all about.

Several months ago, I had the chance to visit schools in the Menomonee Falls School District, which recently established a full scale partnership with the Carnegie Foundation. I visited a kindergarten classroom at Riverside Elementary School. It was not a high tech classroom; there was one teacher and maybe 20 students. It looked like many kindergarten classrooms I have visited. But, wow what a difference. Each student could tell you where they stood on their reading and math goals for the year, each child could tell you exactly what they needed to do to reach the next level and how they were going to do it. Their progress was mapped on every single wall in the room. These kindergartners owned their learning, and it was amazing. And, the Menomonee Falls School District totally embraces the Common Core State Standards, and those standards are directly related to what was happening in that classroom.

Everyone knows that student engagement is at the core of great learning. Engagement is at the core of the Common Core State Standards. Innovation must have engagement. A visit to Eleva-Strum confirmed this. They have a great tech-ed program, focusing on metal fabrication. The students do piece work for various fabricators in northwest Wisconsin, who do not have the time to do single customized work.

The class was run like a business: Cardinal Industries. They even had a manager of the business, a young woman who was a business ed student. The students did everything from soliciting orders, doing the piece work, really sophisticated work, and shipping the order to the customer.

Underclassmen were tutored by seniors, all under the watchful eye of a talented teacher. These students received high school credit, along with technical college credit. And at the end of the year they did profit sharing — \$1,200 per student. This innovation has been recognized nationally through *Modern Machine Shop Magazine*.

And, our public libraries are innovating. Recently, I visited Abbotsford Public Library —a rural library located in a shared facility in Clark County. There I met an energetic librarian who works with her community and school district to provide services tailored to families. In La Crosse, the public library provides job seekers a range of computer training programs and the Milwaukee Public Library offers drop-in job search help in addition to offering skills training. Our public libraries anchor their communities.

We have all read about innovations around urban agriculture. Our largest urban center, Milwaukee, is considered a leader in Urban Ag, improving access to fresh food for residents, building stronger communities and creating jobs. How did the Milwaukee Public Schools respond? Well, after a 30-year hiatus, agriculture, rather urban agriculture, returned to Milwaukee Vincent High School.

The new agricultural program has a distinct 21st century focus, merging science and technology. Students can sign up for courses in botany, biotechnology/biofuels, urban agriculture, urban gardening/horticulture, landscape and design, greenhouse techniques, and aquaponics. I recently was able to welcome Vincent's FFA team to the Wisconsin FFA Convention. The bluecoats have come to Milwaukee.

I could tell stories like these from each of the scores of schools I have visited as state superintendent. I encourage everyone in public education, parents, and local citizens to help me tell stories of their great schools.

I'd like to end this storytelling about innovation with a shout out for our dedicated, hard working teachers and education support professionals. A recent survey told us that almost one third of our teachers say if they had to do it over again, they would not be a teacher.

Public education in Wisconsin cannot be strong without strong teachers. In this time of great change, we need our educators invested and involved. We must once again find a way to value, honor, and invest in public service, especially teaching. Teachers chose this profession, like many gathered here today, like I did, because they love kids, they want to inspire a love of learning, they want to change lives.

Let's turn the corner on this, and get back to a time when teachers are valued and respected for the contributions they make to our children, and our state. If we focus on innovation and excellence, I know we can do this.

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 and positive changes to Wisconsin schools. We've got much to be proud of, and a lot yet to do.

As your state superintendent, I will continue to drive our agenda forward and advocate for our kids — for all of Wisconsin's children.

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

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

###

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://news.dpi.wi.gov/eis_vm-media. This speech is available on the DPI website at http://news.dpi.wi.gov/files/eis/pdf/dpinr2013_118.pdf.