

Inaugural Address

July 1, 2013 — Robert M. La Follette High School, Madison

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Justice Bradley. I am honored to have you administer my oath of office. Thank you, also, to the state and local elected officials here today, as well as the educators and students, DPI staff, colleagues, and friends who are joining in today's celebration. A special thank you to my family — my wife, Kathy; our children, Erin, Nick, and Katie; and our grandchildren, Tessa, Casey, Laura, Teagan and Kendall.

Most of all, thank you to the citizens of Wisconsin, for once again placing your trust in me to serve as your State Superintendent of Public Instruction.

To mark this occasion, and the four years ahead of us, I ask that you join me in rallying around our kids and our schools. Public education remains our great equalizer, our pathway to future prosperity. Public schools, like the one we are in today, represent the very best of us. And, congratulations to La Follette High School on celebrating 50 years. Here with us today is Judith Crain, the daughter of August VanderMeulen, the first principal at La Follette.

It's both an exciting time and a challenging time for public education. 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 stay the course. For our kids and for their futures, it's the right thing to do.

At the same time, the very idea of public education itself is being called into question. In a state that has always prided itself on our strong public schools, educators have been declared enemies, communities have been divided, and resources have been drained. At the state level, many of those in power have tied themselves up in knots about how to expand choices for the few, without focusing on their constitutional obligation to serve all Wisconsin children.

The budget just signed, while it advances some of our transformational work, simply represents a retreat from the values around public education and the common good on which Wisconsin was founded. This was an ideologically driven, partisan budget that was advanced despite bipartisan opposition in both houses. Setting up a second publicly-funded education system with lower standards and accountability will have long-term negative consequences, resulting in an escalation of battles over funding and resources for children in Wisconsin's public schools. This is unsustainable. Unsustainable.

This divisiveness doesn't help our kids, or our state. Now, all sides of this debate spend enormous amounts of time and money obsessing about which system is better, not obsessing about improving the lives of all children, regardless of the system. To that end, I remain committed to finding common ground and working together to improve education for Wisconsin's children wherever possible. Our kids deserve no less from us.

Despite the great battles that are being waged in this state over the future direction of education, I still believe that we, as Wisconsinites, can come together in the pursuit of innovation and excellence.

I still believe that our local schools and libraries are sources of pride in villages, towns, and cities across Wisconsin, as we lead the nation in graduation rates and ACT scores, and lead the Midwest in Advanced Placement course results.

I still believe that citizens across this state want to work together to address our challenges. We know that 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.

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 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're working to increase graduation rates, close gaps, and increase college and career readiness.

As part of *Agenda 2017*:

- We've adopted rigorous new standards in English language arts and mathematics that are benchmarked to the highest performing countries. By focusing on the fundamentals, we'll no longer have a curriculum that is a mile wide and an inch deep.
- We're developing next generation assessments tied to our new standards that will provide students, parents, and teachers the timely feedback they need to improve learning.
- We're on the road to improving elementary reading performance with a new statewide kindergarten screener and improved educator preparation.
- We've adopted the ACT suite for our high-schoolers, 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.

We've not only raised expectations for our kids, but for our educators and schools, as well. We've created a new, fair and robust educator evaluation system in partnership with teachers, administrators, and school boards that we are piloting this year. For schools, we have kicked the broken No Child Left Behind law to the curb, creating a school accountability system that was homegrown by a multitude of partners here in Wisconsin.

Through investments in technology, we're entering the promised land of personalized learning. My budget asked for, and the 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 lead state in the national Innovation Lab Network, an exciting effort to transform education through innovations in teaching, learning, and technology. This work keeps the student at the center and focuses on how to customize learning so that every child reaches his or her full potential.

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. My goal is that every Wisconsin child leaves high school with college credit or an industrial 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. And, while the cuts have been deeper in recent years, the pattern of disinvestment in public education is decades in the making.

We can't keep viewing education as an expense that must face the chopping block each year when the going gets rough. And we can't expect that the current, broken system of school finance is going to fix itself.

Now is the time to gather the public support and the political will to truly reinvest in our schools, fix our broken school funding system, and expand opportunities for all of Wisconsin's children.

As an educator, I've been answering the school 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 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.

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

Several months ago, I had the chance to visit several 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.

Across the state, schools are embracing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports or PBIS, a nationally known program for all students that increases academic performance, improves safety, decreases problem behavior, and establishes a positive school culture.

This past fall, I visited Washington Elementary School in Merrill. Let me tell you, at Washington Elementary, they live and breathe PBIS. I took part in an all school assembly, where the teachers role-played students in various situations, and the entire student body could judge what was and wasn't good behavior. The teachers had a blast, the kids learned a lot, and the many parents in the audience had a chance to see up close what this program was all about.

Everyone knows that student engagement is at the core of great learning. Innovation must have engagement. True story — here I was, in Eau Claire one cruddy morning, watching the sleety weather and the winter storm warnings come across the news screen. I was scheduled to be at Eleva-Strum High School at 8 a.m. to visit their tech ed program. But, because of the weather, they were on a two hour delay, and we began to rearrange my schedule, assuming no school visit. However, I got a call — the students were so excited to show what they could do, they were going to get themselves to school by 8 a.m., bus or no bus. How many high-schoolers would do that? It was amazing. A great program — focusing on metal fabrication. The class did piece work for various fabricators in northwest Wisconsin, who did 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*.

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, beautifying neighborhoods, 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, aquaponics, and veterinary science. I recently was able to welcome Vincent's FFA team to the Wisconsin FFA Convention.

This spring I visited Gilmore Middle School in Racine and got a lesson in what hybrid classrooms are all about. There, the sixth-grade teachers, across all subject areas, used technology to take customizing of instruction to scale. All students had identified their best learning styles, and teachers provided individualized content via laptops. Most class time was spent with teachers working with small groups of students, monitoring progress, engaging in deeper learning and assessing results. Students were engaged in their learning because what they were learning was meaningful to them. Innovation at its best.

I'd like to end this storytelling about innovation with a shout out for our MC, Leah Luke. Leah is a former Teacher of the Year, an English and Spanish teacher from Mauston High School. During this tumultuous time for our teachers, Leah Luke stood tall and spoke out publicly, as a Teacher, as a Teacher of the Year, reminding us of our values and the importance of teaching to our future. We all thank you for that.

Public education in Wisconsin cannot be strong without strong teachers. In this time of great change, we need our educators invested and involved.

If we get anything from this gathering — we must once again find a way to value and honor public service, especially teaching. Teachers chose this profession, like Leah did, 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. 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 drive our agenda forward and advocate for our kids — for all of Wisconsin's children.

Join me in standing up for our kids, our schools, and all the parents, educators, 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.

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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://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_86.pdf.