

WASB • WASDA • WASBO State Education Convention Address

January 22, 2014 — Wisconsin Center, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Dave Polashek, for that introduction, your leadership in the Oconto Falls School District and as WASDA president.

And thank you to the Oconomowoc High School Wind Symphony, directed by Michael Krofta.

I would like to thank and recognize the efforts of your associations' and their executive directors:

- John Ashley WASB,
- Jon Bales, WASDA, and
- Woody Wiedenhoft, WASBO.

They are all great leaders, and I appreciate their partnership in supporting public education and student success. Let's give John, Woody, and Jon a hand.

As your state superintendent, I am humbled by the work that goes on in public schools across Wisconsin.

And, thanks to the citizens of Wisconsin who re-elected me last year, I get to visit Wisconsin's schools and see outstanding students, educators, administrators, and school board members in action. I share with you tremendous pride in the accomplishments of our public schools.

It's both an exciting time and a challenging time for public education. As part of our Agenda 2017, we have increased graduation rates to nation-leading levels, set rigorous standards, modernized testing, improved reading instruction, and reformed accountability systems for educators and schools. Our schools are investing in innovation and pursuing excellence at an unprecedented pace.

And, of course, all of you in this room are leading the way.

And, while the scope and pace of change can sometimes seem overwhelming, we must keep fighting for the changes that we know will make a difference in the lives of kids, the changes that will better prepare them to succeed.

We must keep fighting for changes like Wisconsin's Common Core State Standards, which set a much higher — and much more realistic — bar for what students need to know and able to do to succeed in today's economy.

As local leaders, you are closest to the reality of this debate. You know better than anyone that setting higher standards is actually about providing more opportunities for all kids to succeed in college and career. You've done the hard work associated with implementing higher standards and higher expectations, and the stories you have to tell about the early results are compelling. I thank you for the work that you've done to stand up for our kids and bring truth to this debate. Facts do matter.

We must keep fighting for changes like better, more meaningful assessments for our students, parents, and teachers, and better, more meaningful accountability for our schools and educators.

As of this fall, we've finally kicked the WKCE to the curb. Next year starts a new set of online, adaptive state assessments in English language arts and mathematics. In high school, all students will take the ACT suite of

assessments. As a result, we'll have new, valuable information that will not only inform instruction, but will better inform kids and parents about a child's readiness for college and career.

Next year also marks the first year of our new educator effectiveness system, a sea change in the way we work to increase student achievement and customize professional development for our teachers. These are important strides forward, and I thank you for your continued hard work.

And, we must continue to fight for an overhaul of our broken school funding system.

We need a school funding system that provides all children in this state an equal opportunity to a high quality public education — one that prepares them for future success, no matter what their zip code is or how much money their parents make. We must make good on this constitutional and moral obligation to our kids. It's really that simple.

As I go around the state talking about our *Agenda 2017*, I hear story after story about schools that are struggling to keep afloat financially. And guess what? We've got a plan that will fix the way we fund our schools. Our "Fair Funding for Our Future" plan is a comprehensive school finance reform plan that is still a priority for all of us.

And, with another round of headlines about state surpluses, elected officials in Madison no longer have an excuse to avoid the debate.

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.

We need your active leadership in every Wisconsin community, and in Madison. We need you to keep up the fight.

Wisconsin has always embraced public education as a shared value, as the great equalizer. Yet, today, it seems as if the very idea of public education itself is being called into question. At the state level, many of those in power continue to tie themselves up in knots about how to expand choices for the few, without focusing on their constitutional obligation to serve all Wisconsin children.

This divisiveness doesn't help our kids or our state. Setting up a second, third, or fourth publicly funded education system with lower standards and less 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.

I'm sure many of you were troubled, like I was, by last week's story of a voucher school here in Milwaukee that, after taking in millions of taxpayer dollars, closed its doors literally "in the dead of night." With no notice, these children and families were left scrambling in the middle of the school year. The state can't get back its funding, and the kids can't get back their lost time. The owners of this troubled school are now reported to be running a school for special needs students who receive vouchers under Florida's special needs voucher program.

Now, let me tell you that there are many high quality voucher schools, and many public schools that need improvement. But this story, like stories that preceded it, should keep all of us awake at night. With the expansion of vouchers statewide and a new push for statewide special needs vouchers, it's a story that will only become more common.

Isn't it long past the time that we hold all schools that receive public dollars to the same standards of public accountability?

Taxpayers and parents need accountability from voucher schools now, not next year or next decade.

Instead of arguing year in and year out about which system produces better results for minority children, isn't it time we find the will to come together to tackle our state's staggering achievement and graduation gaps? No one sector has figured out the answer and everyone — public, private, voucher, charter — needs to be part of the solution.

As your state superintendent, I remain committed to our agenda, to finding common ground, and to working together with whomever, wherever possible, to improve education for all of Wisconsin's children. While we must fight the fights that need fighting, we also must find common ground wherever it exists. Our kids deserve no less from us.

Those of you who know me know that I am a glass half full person, and here is my belief: despite the often mind-numbing political rhetoric and partisan polarization, the people of Wisconsin believe in their public schools, value the work of our educators, and support our collective efforts to ensure student success.

And, despite our challenges, it's a fact that we are national leaders in graduation rates and ACT scores, and lead the Midwest in Advanced Placement course results. Facts do matter.

During my second term, we will continue to deliver on our Agenda 2017. We will also work to expand high speed Internet access to all schools and libraries; invest in personalized learning, and create customized academic and career plans for all students. In addition, we will expand access to career and technical education, course options, and dual credit opportunities; and, with your help, reform school finance.

Through investments in technology, we're entering the promised land of personalized learning. My budget asked for, and the governor and Legislature supported, 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.

Now, we're working with partners across state government to ensure that all kids — in their schools, at their libraries, and in their homes — have access to high speed Internet to take full advantage of these new opportunities.

We're also national leaders in the Innovation Lab Network, an exciting effort to transform education through innovations in teaching, learning, and technology. In Wisconsin, this partnership is focused on changing instruction to personalize learning in new ways that keep the child at the center, and to help each child learn and grow at his or her own pace.

Another way we're working to customize education is through the creation of personalized Academic and Career Plans for every student by 2017.

These Academic and Career Plans will help all students identify their passions and their pathways to success, and will help connect them with the resources they need to achieve their full potential — resources like apprenticeships, school-to-work opportunities, industrial certifications, and dual credit courses.

Late last year, the Legislature passed and Governor Walker signed my proposal to provide high schools with incentive funds to expand industry certifications in high-need areas. These incentive grants are a critical investment that will give more Wisconsin kids the opportunity to graduate from high school ready to step into a family-supporting career with a stackable credential in hand.

We're also expanding the options students have to customize their learning. Starting next month, we will begin rolling out a new statewide Course Options program. Passed as part of last year's budget, Course Options allows students to take up to two courses at a time from a provider outside of their home school district.

This new program, which replaced part-time open enrollment, will provide another way for kids to access courses at the UW, technical colleges, private colleges, approved nonprofit education providers, and other school districts. Course Options is one more tool that students will have to expand their opportunities, accelerate their learning experience, and earn college credits while in high school.

In fact, it's my goal that every Wisconsin child graduates from high school with college credit or an industry certification already in their pocket. Course Options, dual credit, Academic and Career Plans, and reinvesting in CTE are all strategies to get us there.

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 end with a shout out for our dedicated, hard working teachers and education support professionals and their administrators.

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. We are stressing these hard working folks too much.

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 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 fight for our kids — for all of Wisconsin's children.

Join me in standing up for our kids, our public 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. On Wisconsin!

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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/dpinr2014_07.pdf.