

State of Education Address

September 25, 2014 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Alethia Tilford for that introduction. Congratulations to you and Max Jacinto, the 2014 Boys and Girls Badger State Superintendents, and thank you for your participation today.

Thank you, Mary Bowen-Eggebraaten for serving as our master of ceremonies. The Hudson School District is fortunate to have you as its leader.

Thank you also to Jonathan Overby, always a homerun, and the Recruiting and Retention Battalion, for your performances and presentation.

Weren't those Vocal Point kids amazing? How about some more love for them?

Vocal Point reminds me of the countless ways our schools teach our kids the skills they need to succeed — skills like teamwork and tenacity, critical thinking and creativity. While core content like reading, math, and science will always be essential, opportunities in fine arts, physical education and sports, career and technical education, world languages, school clubs, and more, are equally important in preparing our kids to be college and career ready. Thanks to Vocal Point for reminding us of this lesson, and best wishes as you head to New York City's Carnegie Hall this spring!

Besides our student performers, let's recognize some of our very important guests here today. I would ask them to stand.

- Supreme Court Justices: N. Patrick Crooks, Patience Roggensack, and Ann Walsh Bradley.
- All our state legislators, school board members, and other elected officials who are with us today. We thank you and ask for continued support for public education. Please join me in showing our appreciation for their service.
- I also thank Woody Wiedenhoef, WASBO; Jim Lynch, AWSA; Betsy Kippers, WEAC; Kim Kohlhas AFT-Wisconsin; Gary Myrah, WCASS; and John Ashley, WASB; for their dedicated work as well as WASDA Executive Director Jon Bales and all the members of our school district administrators' association who are here today.
- We thank you, our leaders of our higher education institutions, our leaders of our many education organizations, and public libraries, and my colleagues at the DPI, who make public service in Wisconsin strong.

Let me share some facts that should make us all jazzed about public schools and libraries in Wisconsin.

Did you know that over 35 percent of our school districts are led by women? When I started out, you could count them on one hand. Of the 10 highest enrollment districts, seven are led by women: Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Racine, Kenosha, Janesville, and Eau Claire.

Another step forward, thanks to major collaboration among our tribes and the Wisconsin Indian Education Association, our state now has the most robust collection of materials in my memory about the important role our American Indian tribes played in our history and the importance that tribal sovereignty has in the fabric of our state.

An impressive factoid from the public library world. More people visit public libraries than visit Packer, Brewer, and Bucks games combined. Who knew? Go public libraries!

So, the other day I read a quote from Teddy Roosevelt how change is realized by women and men “who take the *next step*, instead of worrying about the next thousand steps.” This stuck with me, and reminded me of the hard work — the daily steps — going on in our schools to transform teaching and learning.

Around the same time, I read a column about how this could be a blah year in K-12 education — not much exciting or new going on.

Give me a break! How about: higher, rigorous new academic standards; better assessments; a new educator evaluation system; new investments in career readiness; and continued improvements in our accountability system. What? Nothing new?

This year, thanks to higher academic standards, embraced by Wisconsin educators, our students are learning more in mathematics, English language arts, and reading.

As Terry Kaldahusdal, a former Wisconsin Teacher of the Year, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, “The Common Core State Standards changed how I teach, and that change has had a profound impact on my students’ learning. It has changed their motivation, their conversations, and their understanding.”

Terry and several members of my Teachers of the Year Council have joined us here today. We all know that we can’t have great schools without great teachers. During this time of great change in our schools and in their profession, our teachers deserve our thanks and our support more than ever. Council members please stand and be recognized for your work and the work of your colleagues in our classrooms across Wisconsin.

This year, students will take new assessments — Smarter Balanced in grades 3-8 and the ACT suite in high school. These online tests will offer teachers and students quicker and more meaningful feedback. At the high school level, we finally have a relevant measure of college and career readiness.

This year, educators and students will benefit from our new statewide educator effectiveness system that was built collaboratively with teachers and principals.

Betsy Kippers, head of WEAC, recently said “In the world of teachers moving to new districts, it’s the same framework, same level of expectation,” and that the new evaluations link well with other efforts to ensure “high-quality teachers in every classroom.”

This year, we’re continuing our efforts to help students graduate high school with stackable credentials in hand. Thanks to partnerships between K-12 and higher education, more high school students are earning college credits. **And this year**, our new incentive program gives more students the chance to earn industry certifications.

Last month I met Lacey Holcomb, a Sun Prairie High School student, in her apprenticeship site at E.K. Machine Company in Fall River. She said of her apprenticeship, “This is more hands on learning than school, so that’s probably my favorite part about it. It’s a great experience, and it’s one I wouldn’t want to trade for anything in the world. It’s taught me so much, from being professional and what it’s like to have a real career.”

And, this year, the Education Commission of the States rated Wisconsin’s school report cards as among the nation’s best. ECS parent reviewers found them to be one of the few school report cards in the country that are “informative, readable, and useful,” and the ECS president called Wisconsin “a state dedicated to creating a high-quality accountability system.”

We will continue to improve our report cards and find new ways to recognize what we value — things like career and technical education and more. And we’re well on our way to making sure all schools that receive public funds, including voucher schools, receive a public report card.

These are huge initiatives, big Teddy Roosevelt steps forward in our Agenda 2017: Every Child a Graduate College and Career Ready. Far from blah, we’re doing more in this year than in any of my previous 37 years in public education.

So you can see, I am proud of the work that goes on in our public schools. I’m proud that Wisconsin is a national leader in graduation rates, ACT scores, and Advanced Placement results. However, we have much more to do to reach our goals for *every* child.

It’s *unacceptable* that Wisconsin is worst in the nation when it comes to the well-being of African American children. It’s *unacceptable* when Hispanic and American Indian students drop out of school at a rate of one in four, and African American students at a rate of one in three. It’s *unacceptable* that wide gaps still persist for students with disabilities, English learners, and students in poverty.

I get it. Many factors contribute to a child’s well-being and academic achievement, and it’s true that schools can’t solve every problem. But education has long been and remains the great equalizer, and we must act with urgency to change what we can.

This spring, I formed the Promoting Excellence for All Task Force. Chaired by Mequon-Thiensville Superintendent Demond Means, we brought together some of the best educators from schools that are increasing achievement and closing gaps. We included principals and teachers from traditional public, charter, and choice schools, and asked them to share what’s making a difference in their classrooms so that we all can learn from their success.

Today, our task force released its final report and launched a website — resources developed by Wisconsin educators, for Wisconsin educators.

This group did not disappoint — they zeroed in on the real issues and proposed real solutions to classroom life with diverse groups of kids. They clearly understood that poverty matters. However, and this is very important, the task force concluded that if we don’t address the issue of race head on, we will have failed. I agree.

Many of their recommendations revolve around the importance of relationships: between educator and student, and among adults, as well as honoring cultures that are not our own. These are changes of heart and mind, and will be the most difficult to navigate. But, if we follow our moral compasses, we can change.

The task force also reinforced the importance of meaningful family engagement. Families must be more than informed — they must be involved and invested in their child’s learning on a daily basis from the classroom, school, and district level. We can all do better at this.

As Task Force Chair Demond Means said at the group’s first meeting, “We made a commitment as educators when we walked into our classrooms for the first time that we will reach every kid. We didn’t make a commitment to reach only 75 percent of our students.”

Every school in the state can benefit from the task force's work, embracing these strategies to reach every kid. Some of our Promoting Excellence for All Task Force members are here today. Please stand and let's recognize their leadership.

Another thing that impressed me about this group is that, despite the fact that they represented all different types of schools, not once did they engage in the governance debate that so often dominates the discussion in this building. What mattered was the common ground they found in their daily work to help all children reach their full potential. Their focus was right where it belongs — on the kids, on the classroom, on achievement.

Heading into the next legislative session, this is a lesson we can all take to heart. There certainly will be proposals that will divide and distract us. But we can accomplish so much more when we tackle the harder work of finding common ground.

In that spirit, I was encouraged by the recent work of the Speaker's Task Force on Rural Schools, a group of bipartisan legislators focused on the challenges facing rural schools. I commend Chairman Swearingen, Vice Chairman Clark and all the members of the Speaker's Task Force and look forward to working together with the governor and Legislature to support our rural schools, from broadband and technology to school finance reform.

The Speaker's Task Force heard loud and clear what we've long known: Our school funding system is broken. Every superintendent in this rotunda will tell you that. Am I right? Cuts, freezes, caps, and a failure to reform our system have all taken their toll. Increasingly, we see a growing divide among our rural, suburban, and urban school districts. The haves and the have nots.

In its 2000 *Vincent v. Voight* decision, Wisconsin's Supreme Court found our school finance system constitutionally sound, so long as it met certain conditions. In that ruling, the court said:

“...Wisconsin students have a fundamental right to an equal opportunity for a sound basic education....

...An equal opportunity takes into account districts with disproportionate numbers of disabled students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with limited English language skills. So long as the legislature is providing sufficient resources so that school districts offer students the equal opportunity for a sound basic education as required by the constitution, the state school finance system will pass constitutional muster.”

The Supreme Court got it right. Yet, school funding decisions since have gone the other way. Let's check out that report card:

- State aid to schools is lower today than it was in 2006, and has not kept pace with inflation in recent years.
- Special education aid has been frozen since 2008, and now covers just over a quarter of district special education costs.
- State funding for English learners is lower today than it was in 2005, now covering only 8.5 percent of eligible costs for this growing population.
- Over 100,000 more students qualify for free and reduced price lunch in the past 10 years with over 43 percent eligible today.
- The number of reported homeless students has tripled in 10 years.
- The number of districts with declining enrollment has increased from 30 percent in 1997, to over 60 percent today, leaving our rural districts poorer, with fewer kids.

What's the grade of this report card?

We can no longer ignore these realities, and what they mean for our students. Action is needed in *this budget*. Not in five, 10, or 20 years.

This November, I will again propose Fair Funding for Our Future — a comprehensive school funding reform package. I'll propose increases in general aid and revenue limits and more support for special needs students, English learners, students in poverty, and rural schools.

I call on our governor and Legislature to finally tackle this issue and adopt these long overdue reforms. And I look to you in this room to help make it happen.

It is a big year for Wisconsin public schools and libraries.

Let's support and honor our educators and public librarians.

Let's deliver on higher standards and expectations for all our kids, great teaching and learning, and increased parental involvement.

Let's synchronize our moral compasses and begin the difficult journey to promote excellence so every Wisconsin child — regardless of race, and also poverty, disability, and language background — can graduate ready to succeed in college and careers.

Let's fight for and finally achieve meaningful school finance reform that provides *all* students from *all* parts of the state the equal opportunities they deserve.

Let's stay focused. Let's stay positive. Let's work together to find common ground that unites us and stand strong on behalf of our kids.

Thank you to the public school leaders and citizens gathered here today, and to educators, volunteers, parents, and students across Wisconsin that make our public schools and libraries great. 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_104.pdf.