

WASB • WASDA • WASBO State Education Convention Address

January 21, 2015 — Wisconsin Center, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you Kris, for the introduction, you're doing a fantastic job as emcee — and of course at D.C. Everest School District.

I'd also like to recognize the great partnership I have with the organizations hosting this event. I thank John Ashley, the WASB Board and their staff, John Bales, the WASDA Board and their staff, and Woody Wiedenhoef, the WASBO Board and their staff for your leadership.

This is my 30th year attending your conference. And thank you all for being here today. I know you all care deeply about the future of Wisconsin's schools.

One of my favorite aspects about my job is being able to see the many talents of Wisconsin's students. Today's group from Westby was a great example of that talent.

You know, our schools focus on the core subjects of math, reading, and science — and rightfully so. But these Westby students just gave us a clear demonstration of why we must equally value skills like teamwork and tenacity, critical thinking, and creativity. By providing kids with opportunities in fine arts, music, physical education and sports, career and technical education, world languages, school clubs, and more, we will make them better adults and better citizens.

I'm not telling you something you don't already know. That's why you all fight to give your students a comprehensive education.

2014-15 has been a challenging and rewarding school year. I thank you for your efforts to implement many important changes: new standards and assessments, a new educator evaluation system, and new accountability frameworks. The amount of change has been unparalleled.

What we, you and I, must remember is that these system changes are being made to improve the lives of our kids, or they have no value. In the same vein, these system changes will have no value if the people who do the actual work in our schools, in particular our teachers and principals, are in some way devalued in the process of implementing them.

So, we need to focus on the ways that we can work together to support our local classrooms and renew the professions of school leaders, support staff, and to teachers in our classrooms. Their jobs are incredibly important and change the lives of students. We need to recognize and support the folks amidst the sea of change.

As I travel the state, I enjoy meeting Wisconsin's educators. I hear lots of compelling stories about how they make a difference in the lives of our students. I hear about what works and what doesn't; and most importantly, where their passions lie.

Last school year, I convened a task force to study Wisconsin's persistent achievement gap issues. When I was putting the task force together, the first and only place I looked was to teachers and school leaders.

These task force members were outstanding experts, providing us with great ideas to move our state forward. And, their ideas formed the foundation of our "Promoting Excellence for All" report. I would also like to recognize Demond Means, superintendent from Mequon-Thiensville, who chaired the task force.

Many of the recommendations included in the report revolve around the importance of relationships: between educator and student, and among adults, as well as honoring cultures and races that are not our own.

What is even more impressive, though, is that these types of educators are the rule and not the exception within Wisconsin's public school community. Every single one of your staff members entered into the profession to change lives — and they do it every single day.

I see my role, and the role of the department, as a champion for the mission of public education. “Promoting Excellence for All” is an example of that idea.

This same goal of renewing the profession is also seen in the School Administrators Alliance's “Pathway to World-Class Student Success” report. I look forward to working with the SAA to find innovative ways to identify and recruit talented candidates into teaching and school administration in our public schools. Renewing our commitment to these professionals is a good first step.

The value of Wisconsin's individual communities and their needs is reflected in our proud tradition of local control of public education.

I may be a dreamer, but I believe, due to our great collaboration, we have found a good balance, a sweet spot, of local control and state control as was envisioned by our Constitutional writers in 1848.

While I believe we, you and I, have reached a good equilibrium in our collective responsibilities, I am very fearful that the balance will shift under the guise of school reform. Let's preserve our good working balance, which includes local control, by hitting the pause button on new mandates and conflicting priorities coming out of Madison. Our collective message must be: Our plates are full Madison.

Now, we have been able to strike this balance because everyone in this room shares the same values.

Think about why you decided to serve as a board member, or become a teacher, support person, a principal, district administrator, or a state superintendent. My guess is that it revolves around the idea of helping our future generation succeed. And, that you see public education as the most important path toward a democracy as our Wisconsin forebearers did when they established public schools in every community and enshrined this value in our 1848 State Constitution. It does not revolve around advancing political agendas.

We are at a tenuous crossroads in our state. Backroom discussions lead me to believe that more divisive mandates, along with constrained revenue are on the way. We must insist on a robust public dialogue about our constitutional guarantees to our children. We cannot afford to fail; we must do our part, share our viewpoints, and contribute to the important dialogue about the future of one of Wisconsin's greatest resources — our public schools.

No matter where you call home in this great state, know that your local community supports you in your goal to keep our schools top-notch and that your voice and expertise is valued and respected.

Thank you all for coming today and I hope you enjoy the rest of the convention.

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/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_07.pdf.