

State of Education Address

September 17, 2015 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you Isabelle Abbott for that introduction. Congratulations to you and Jacob Cavaiani, the elected 2015 Boys and Girls Badger State Superintendents, and thank you for participating today.

Thank you Rob Wagner for serving as our master of ceremonies. I was fortunate to visit the Lancaster School District last year, and you are doing amazing things.

Thank you also to my good friend Jonathan Overby and the Joint Color Guard from the Wisconsin Army and Air National Guard for your performances and presentation. It is always special to have you here.

Wasn't the Tremper High School Wind Ensemble amazing? Let's take a moment and recognize their hard work and the leadership of Director Kathryn Ripley.

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

- Secretary John Scocos of the important Department of Veterans Affairs;
- Education Commission of the States Executive Director Jeremy Anderson; and
- All our state legislators, school board members, and other elected officials who are with us today.

We thank you and ask you to continue to support public education. Please join me in showing our appreciation for these public servants.

I also thank Woody Wiedenhoef, WASBO; Jim Lynch, AWSA; Betsy Kippers, WEAC; 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.

And, this is really important. This year, I want to acknowledge all the parent and citizens groups that have become increasingly active across our state. Some of these local groups include — the Mad City GRUMPS, Fox Cities for Public Education, Citizen Advocates for Public Education of Lake Mills, Advocates for Education of Whitefish Bay, Wauwatosa SOS — and at the state level the Wisconsin Public Education Network. I ask all of you to applaud these parents and citizens who are standing up for strong public schools.

The best part of my job is visiting schools and meeting kids, educators, school leaders, and families in every part of our state. As I sat down to reflect on the past year, I thought about all of the public schools and libraries I have the privilege of visiting.

From Amery to Lancaster and Oshkosh to Cameron (twice) and dozens in between, I have never once been disappointed in the dedication of our educators and the engagement of our kids. We have a lot to be proud of in Wisconsin. I consistently see parent involvement, great leadership, and a supportive business community. But, I also hear about the struggles: squeezed budgets, teacher shortages, and harmful political rhetoric.

It is those visits that give me the context to talk to you today about the state of education in Wisconsin. Much like our educators and the citizen groups that have worked so hard in the past year, the state of education in Wisconsin

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can be described as **resilient**. Our educators prove once again, that they are able to withstand or recover quickly from difficult conditions and do incredible things.

Let me share with you one teacher's story that demonstrates this resilience. This summer, I met with my Teacher of the Year Council. The council members are wise, thoughtful, and inspiring. They are the perfect representation of all of the 60,000 educators of this state.

One of these educators described how the political controversy over the past few years may have had an unintended, yet positive, consequence. She said that she has never seen more cohesiveness and collaboration among her colleagues. This is a perfect example of resilience, grit, and perseverance. Let's take a moment to appreciate that resilience and recognize our new Wisconsin Teachers of the Year and the Teacher of the Year Council.

For the past six years, in particular the last school year, educators have engaged in a great deal of difficult work; the work we call Agenda 2017.

- We have raised our expectations in terms of college and career ready standards.
- We have updated our state assessment system from an outdated paper and pencil test to something that is more useful and measures the increased rigor in our classrooms.
- We have implemented more efficient and effective ways to collect, display, and examine data, and are developing new tools to use that will improve instruction.
- We have begun the difficult task of defining what it means to be a highly effective educator and school leader, as well as what it means to have a highly effective school and district. Our accountability system must be about supporting improvement at the educator, school, and district level. It is not about punishing educators or shaming schools.

As an aside, we need to make sure this agenda is not just about systems, but rather how these initiatives connect to our kids, our educators, and our state. Our messaging will reflect this going forward.

In school finance, as we saw in the latest budget, there are real concerns about how we fund schools. The credit goes to the courageous educators, citizens, school leaders, and school board members, for bringing this issue to the local forefront.

In the end, the Legislature responded to these local groups and changed what would have been yet another drastic cut to education by holding school aids flat for this year and a small increase for next year. At the same time though, they made major educational policy changes in charter schools, open enrollment, and voucher programs which will cost our public schools millions of dollars that are desperately needed.

Folks, we need to keep the conversation going. The need and opportunity for real school finance reform has never been more evident. We are becoming a state of haves and have nots. I want Keyton and my other grandkids, all kids, to attend a "have" school.

We cannot continue to neglect our obligation to provide students with a fundamental right to an equal opportunity for a sound basic education. The school funding system in Wisconsin has changed in the past 20 years, and we can no longer say that all our students are receiving that basic right.

Another important part of Agenda 2017 that I want to talk about is the work of our Promoting Excellence for All task force. We continue to deliver new materials and videos on ways to increase achievement and close gaps. Today, the first web module went live on our website, so educators and administrators can use what we know has worked to close achievement gaps in Wisconsin.

Today I am releasing my Parent Advisory Council's report on Family and Community Engagement. Over the past year, these dedicated parents articulated their own tips which have given us valuable perspective on the Promoting Excellence for All strategies.

I have to tell you about some of the wonderful things happening in our public schools and libraries. Our schools are not failing. In every year since the 2009-10 school year:

- The graduation rate, including graduation for students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are economically disadvantaged has increased;
- Fewer students, including students of color, have dropped out of high school;
- Fewer students were being suspended or expelled;
- The truancy rate has decreased;
- Student attendance has increased;
- Students reported less alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use;
- Students spent more time being physically active;
- More students are participating in co-curricular academic activities and athletic activities; and
- More students are receiving college credit for coursework they do in high school.

Once again, these steps forward are due to the perseverance, grit, and resilience of our students and educators at the local level.

I am proud of the work we do to ensure kids have access to healthy meals at school. Last school year, we administered grants that served over 81 million lunches and nearly 28 million breakfasts.

Our public libraries are doing their part to bridge the digital divide. Nearly every Wisconsin public library, 99 percent, provides free Wi-Fi. All good stuff.

The governor and many in the Legislature praise the strength and success of our public schools. However, this week, while we are focusing on celebrating our kids' public schools and libraries, our Teachers of the Year, and our Friends of Education, it is unfortunate that a single legislator introduces another divisive distraction directed at our schools.

The founders of our state believed the duties and the direct election of a state superintendent of public instruction to be so important they enshrined those powers in the constitution. That action helped to create a strong system of public schools that are the envy of many states across the country. Taking that vote away from parents and other folks at the local level is a sad attack at the heart of our democracy and our state's history.

Haven't our strong public schools had enough upheaval and change? At a time when most leaders are working together to focus on kids and classrooms, it is unfortunate that there is a single legislator who wants to re-politicize a battle around public education.

Now, we have both worked with and disagreed with Governor Walker and legislative leaders on numerous issues in the past five years. At the end of the day, most people think that schools are doing good things for kids in Wisconsin. That will continue to be the focus of our work.

That work is about college and career readiness for all our children. What does this catch phrase really mean here in Wisconsin?

Our vision for college and career readiness is not a political fad, and it is not just about academic preparation. Meeting proficiency on a statewide summative test is important, but it is not all that we want for our kids.

The Wisconsin way of college and career readiness also values social and emotional competence and includes the skills and habits we collectively value. Our graduates must be critical thinkers, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, and use creativity to solve real problems. Our kids must also persist and adapt to survive difficult times that are inevitable in life.

These skills and habits aren't just learned in the classroom. They are developed through the kinds of experiences the Tremper High School Wind Ensemble, Isabelle, and Jacob had today. Every school staff member has a part to play in this preparation. We are making the future here. The future of our state depends on the success of our schools in these non-tested areas.

I can't leave without telling you what keeps me awake at the night. The impact the ongoing assault on public education happening in this state and across the nation may make for great political theatre, but it is making it more and more difficult for our teachers to stay the course. Grit, perseverance, and resilience can only go so far when our educators' work is challenged regularly.

Now, I support the right of the Legislature to enact laws as they see fit. The people who have elected them have given them that authority. However, when policy conflicts with the needs of our kids, it eventually floods into the classroom. Whether its school funding, lowering licensing requirements, or mandating another test, the drumbeat is deafening and deflating. The impact may not be immediate, but it will happen.

- Good people are leaving the profession and young people are choosing not to become teachers.
- Enrollment in Wisconsin education preparation programs has gone down every year since 2011.
- Over 2,000 fewer students were preparing to be teachers in 2014 than in 2011.
- 12 percent fewer teachers are receiving a license just in the past two years.

The teacher's voice is missing from the public narrative. As the state superintendent, I have a responsibility to ensure it is shared. Here is a sampling of what I am hearing across the state:

- Quit marginalizing our profession by lowering the requirements to be a teacher;
- Ask our advice before making policy changes;
- Give us adequate time to implement initiatives before changing course; and
- We need autonomy to have professional ownership.

I call on the governor and the Legislature to adopt the lens of these educators from across our state. Visit public schools across the state, even those outside of your own area. See the good work that is happening. Talk to parents of our school children. And ask educators for their input.

And I ask you, those of you in the rotunda with me today, to continue to share your voice. Our educators need our support and stability.

We need to stay focused, obnoxiously positive, and take one step at a time. We need to work together to find the common ground that unites us and continue to stand strong on behalf of our kids.

Thank you to all the school leaders, public servants, and citizens gathered here today. Thank you to our educators, volunteers, families, students, school staff, and library staff who keep our public schools and libraries great.

By educating every child — ensuring they are college and career ready — we move Wisconsin forward.

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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://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_89.pdf. Audio from the speech can be found at <http://dpi.wi.gov/statesupt/about/speeches>.