

American Education Week Editorial

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Public schools, our great strength

An American Education Week editorial by State Superintendent Tony Evers

It's time to celebrate Wisconsin's great public schools. American Education Week is Nov. 16 to 20, an opportunity to reflect on the importance of our schools and to encourage all of us to stay invested in this vital public institution.

American Education Week began in 1921 in response to news that a quarter or more of World War I draftees were not ready for combat. Many were unfit, couldn't read, or lacked a high school diploma. Since that time, we've witnessed a sea change in expectations for young people. Into the mid-1900s, a breadwinner could support a family with minimal formal education. Today, there's no doubt that a high school diploma is needed to succeed in America. In fact, most family supporting jobs require some education beyond high school.

Our public school teachers are ready to do their part. I'm so proud of them. With all that has swirled around in the political and budget spheres, they haven't given up. Each time I visit a school, no matter where I am in the state, I see tremendous energy and engagement in helping our students learn. Our public school educators are dedicated to teaching rigorous academic content. But subject area knowledge isn't enough. Our teachers also are providing students with skills and habits that will help them become successful citizens. Woven into the lessons are critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. I see our teachers nurturing habits like perseverance and adaptability so that students know how to keep going even when the going gets tough.

And, the going is tough. Education in Wisconsin is a portrait of extremes. We have some of the top overall graduation rates and ACT results in the nation. We also have some of the largest graduation and achievement gaps among the states. The cost in human lives of these gaps is staggering. It's unacceptable that 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. Clearly, we have work to do.

Our efforts to close the gaps span many fronts to ensure everyone graduates ready for college and careers. They have to. The thing with kids is that there's no "just one thing" that works. One student may respond to hands-on learning or extra academic challenges, another may engage with an out-of-school club or mentor, still another

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may need special services to overcome a disability. Our public school teachers work to meet individual needs and build relationships that support student success.

Earlier this year, my Parent Advisory Council issued recommendations for strengthening relationships between schools, families, and communities. The council centered its work in the Promoting Excellence for All initiative, which advocates a race-conscious focus to meet students and families where they are and propel achievement. Valuing backgrounds and cultures is vital in this work.

Yet the success of our students isn't only for schools. It is bigger than just the families with students in classes. During American Education Week, and throughout the year, I'm asking citizens and business people, elected officials and policymakers to engage with your local public schools. We all have something to offer. We all have a stake in the success of our students and public schools.

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American Education Week Proclamation: http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/2015_aew_proclamation.pdf

NOTE: This news release is available electronically at http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2015_110.pdf.