

State of Education Address

September 15, 2016 — State Capitol Rotunda

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you all for being here today. And thank you to the 2016 Badger Girls State Superintendent, Rebecca Jacobson for the introduction. Talking to Rebecca and our Badger Boys State Superintendent, Xang, gives me hope for the future of our state.

In fact, I spoke to our 2014 Badger Girls State Superintendent, Alethia Tilford, just this week. I am happy to report that the former Milwaukee Public School graduate is thriving at Howard University in our nation's Capital. Once again, she told me she wanted my job when she is older.

Thank you to our emcee this year, Superintendent Mary Randall from Bloomer School District, and to the Honor Guard from Volk Field for being a part of our ceremony.

And how about the kids from the Beloit Memorial Jazz Orchestra? I was lucky enough to visit them this year during Fine Arts Month, and I knew we were in for a treat today. Director Chris Behrens does an amazing job.

I'd also like to recognize some of the special guests we have with us today:

- Supreme Court Justices Shirley Abrahamson, Ann Walsh Bradley, and Patience Roggensack.
- All our state legislators, school board members, and other elected officials who are with us today.

Thank you for your continued support of our students and educators.

I want to give a special thanks to the leaders of our state's educational organizations: Woody Wiedenhoef from WASBO; Joe Schroeder from AWSA; Arlene Braden from WEAC; Gary Myrah from WCASS; and John Ashley from WASB, as well as WASDA Executive Director Jon Bales and all the members of our school district administrators' association who are gathered for their annual conference. Thank you for your leadership.

I value input from local communities, and I'd like to recognize the hundreds of Wisconsin citizens that serve on one of over 30 councils that provide advice and support our work. Some of you are here today. We are stronger because of your willingness to serve.

Finally, I want to thank my friend Jonathan Overby, who is here in large part due to a personal request of my wife, Kathy. Dr. Overby, thanks.

Today, I would like to talk about the exciting changes and often difficult challenges our schools face. Lately, I've been thinking about this year's kindergarten class because my granddaughter, Kendall, is now in kindergarten at Lapham School here in Madison. I think about what kindergartners across the state will need to succeed, the challenges their teachers will face, and, of course, how will we pay for it all.

Some of you may know this, but Kathy and I first met in kindergarten in Plymouth, Wisconsin, in Ms. Potter's class. While Kathy remains a constant in my life, the field of education has changed: the layout of our classrooms, how we approach teaching, our school and public libraries... even our playgrounds are different!

Part I – Changing Faces

In the midst of all of this change, our state has also become more diverse. Growing up as a small-town kid, the first time I met someone who wasn't white was at a summer job at the canning factory down the road. I think that my

story may be similar to many Wisconsinites my age. And while this may seem like a recollection from a bygone era, there are still places where this story could still be true today. So, what has changed, and what remains the same?

In most classrooms across our state, the kindergartners who showed up to learn this fall are more diverse, in all kinds of ways. They will come to schools with different life experiences and needs.

I believe the opportunity for each and every child to excel, especially our students of color, is one of the great moral issues of our time. To succeed, we need honest talk about the shared benefit of a system that promotes excellence for all.

I spent some time this summer with educational leaders from around the country talking about equity.

One of the things I took from this work is that while Wisconsin's achievement gaps are large, they are not unique. What inspired me though, was the honesty of my peers and the urgency they have to address root causes of inequity. They did not shy from courageous conversations, and yet they were also incredibly hopeful that this will be the era that improves the lives of kids of color in U.S. schools.

And quite frankly, we cannot afford to lose that momentum. Our state and nation must not leave this fall's kindergartners a problem that today's leaders are unwilling to recognize.

Equity cannot become a discussion about improving the lives of other people's children. If we see this as an issue of one school or district, we all falter. This is about ensuring the prosperity of the next generation of students, no matter their race, no matter if they have a disability, no matter who they love, all of them.

As a white guy from Plymouth, I know this can be uncomfortable at times. Believe me there are growing pains. But much like building relationships is critical to helping kindergartners succeed, the same holds true for solving adult problems.

It's hard to have honest conversations without getting defensive. But I'm pretty sure folks of color didn't invent racism, women didn't ask for sexism, gay kids didn't create homophobia, and babies are not born bigots. Those powerful and persistent barriers won't go away unless we tackle them together.

If you have been to a school recently, you saw how our educators are working to make sure each student meets his or her full potential, and they recognize that each kid may need an extra lift to get there.

While I always say that every day I visit a classroom is my favorite day, one visit this year really stuck with me. I was on a high school fine arts visit in Milwaukee, talking with students about their work. Now you must know that I'm not particularly artsy, so I was a little out of my element in woodworking, pottery, graphics, and design. I spotted a student with red hair — and when I say red — I mean red enough for me to walk over and ask her about her work.

Her name was Lesley and she came to the U.S. at the age of five and started school as an English learner. She is one of our immigrant students. She navigated me through her portfolio and explained how her art has followed her journey through life: good times and bad. She talked about the role her teachers played in her life. She explained how her art grew with her. Needless to say, I was impressed.

She told me that she had secured over \$90,000 in scholarships to go to a university in Wisconsin. She was so confident in describing her next steps that I knew I could push her a little. I hope I found a nice way to ask her what I was thinking. "What on earth will you do with an art degree?" She smiled and told me she was not planning to become an artist.

She was going to school for biology. She told me, the skills she learned as an artist, like perseverance, precision, and determination, translate perfectly to the study of biology. Her school experience instilled the ability to persevere in any field.

So while we talk about change in education, one of the constants is the determination of our educators to serve kids like Lesley. In kindergartens across the state, you will find classrooms being led by people that give their hearts and

souls to these kids — day in and out. And thank goodness they do, because when our students need that extra lift, we need great educators more today than ever before.

Part II – Student Supports

But here's the question: how long can we lean on educators to manage the change alone? Our state must take action to support our educators so their focus can be on supporting every child. There are issues that we can no longer afford to ignore. Issues our educators should not be left to tackle alone.

Mental health supports for families and kids are stretched thin or are non-existent in many parts of our state. According to a recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention study, up to one in five Wisconsin students has a mental health challenge. One in five.

Get this, over half of our school-aged children face at least one identified form of adversity, and these numbers cut across demographic groups. Whether it's because mom lost her job, parents divorced, or other traumas, it means almost half of Wisconsin's 60,000 kindergartners will need an extra lift to help them achieve their potential. And our educators will need help with this extra lift.

Throughout our state, I see schools working across sectors to provide mental health services for our kids. The state must ratchet up its financial commitment in this area.

The community school model is another example of providing that extra lift. These schools drive a child's success by removing barriers to learning. By providing services like health care, or extending building hours and facility use for families, or coordinating job training and counseling services, students and families can reach their full potential. School as community. Community as school.

School nutrition programs can provide that extra lift.

This year in Superior, I learned how critical a nutrition program can be to helping kids achieve. They are one of the growing number of districts that serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner to students and families. The director of the program trains his staff to watch for kids faltering in line on Monday morning because that may mean a student did not eat over the weekend.

And we cannot forget about the valuable role our libraries play. All across the state, school and public libraries are responding to children and their families who need an extra lift.

Let me be clear, community schools, libraries, and top-notch nutrition programs are not silver bullets. In fact, one of the things that keeps me up at night is wondering how far our system is stretched by changes without the proper supports.

Part III - Educators

To promote excellence for every student, we cannot ignore the critical staffing shortages many of our districts face. The most important factor to student success is access to high quality teachers. It was true 60 years ago when I was in kindergarten, and holds true today.

To put it simply, not enough of our young people are considering careers in education.

As a member of the Board of Regents, I've eaten lunch in my fair share of college cafeterias. And if you want to talk change, holy cow have those places changed. I think the food got better. In my eight years of eating shoulder-to-shoulder with college students, I have never sat down next to someone who told me they were pursuing a career in education. Not once.

Now that is anecdotal evidence. Here is some hard data. Graduation and enrollment in Wisconsin educator preparation programs is way down when compared to 2009 levels. ACT's survey of test takers indicates that fewer students are preferring education as a career. And according to data collected from our district staffing survey, districts are having a harder and harder time filling high demand positions like special education, bilingual instruction, and career and technical education.

Last month, I began an effort to address staffing shortages through emergency rules designed to reduce hurdles for districts facing staffing issues. These changes were identified by a group of administrators and teachers intent on making an impact without dumbing down the quality of the profession. No matter what we do to remove barriers, we still need the best and the brightest, and we cannot compromise on quality. That won't change.

Some of these changes may require us to engage policymakers to build long-term solutions. But one strategy to send a positive message to our young people is free, and we can do it today. We need to end the negative rhetoric surrounding the teaching profession.

No one decides to become a teacher thinking they will become a millionaire. That said, I firmly believe that educators across Wisconsin are undercompensated for the amazing complexity of the work they do.

If you need an example, look no further than last year's national Wisconsin Teacher of the Year representative, Roger King from Holmen High School. Let me tell you how Roger defines the word "teacher."

Roger believes in parental and family involvement, and he practices what he preaches. He uses advisory committees made up of parents and families to inform his teaching. He pushes his students to investigate real world problems. His classes retooled their school greenhouse to leverage a year-round growing cycle.

Roger is an FFA adviser, a 4-H leader, he coaches football, and he serves as the co-chair for the La Crosse County Interstate Fair Small Animal Barn Committee. I'm not sure when Roger sleeps.

I'm also convinced that Roger is not alone in his dedication to the job. He's part and parcel to what we can find when we seek to define "teacher" in Wisconsin. He and our other great Wisconsin educators deserve our thanks.

Teachers teach because they care about kids. It was true back in my kindergarten classroom, and is still true today. That doesn't mean we should ignore the facts. A recent study published by the Economic Policy Institute¹ showed U.S. public school teachers had weekly wages that were 17 percent lower than their college-educated peers. While that statistic contributes to our staffing shortages, it's a problem that is inherently tied to how we fund our schools.

From 2009 to 2014, Wisconsin ranked near the bottom for change in teacher pay according to the U.S. Census Bureau — a 2.4 percent decrease in take home pay over six years. The same stats show us among the lowest states for change in spending per student — just a 1 percent increase across the last five years. We cannot afford to continue these trends.²

Part IV - Funding

The founders of our state crafted a system of public education, and while they may not have ever pictured the Kendall's kindergarten classes of today, they put great value on the idea of an equitable system. The last time our state's funding system was reviewed by the Wisconsin Supreme Court³, the court outlined three student groups as key indicators of distress: English language learners, students with disabilities, and students in poverty. I worry that each year that we kick the can down the road instead of addressing our funding problems, we move closer to failing our obligation to all of our kids.

¹ Sylvia Allegretto and Lawrence Mishel. The teacher pay gap is wider than ever: *Teachers' pay continues to fall further behind pay of comparable workers*. Washington, DC. Economic Policy Institute, 2016. Accessed September 13, 2016. <https://www.epi.org/publication/the-teacher-pay-gap-is-wider-than-ever-teachers-pay-continues-to-fall-further-behind-pay-of-comparable-workers/>.

² National Center for Education Statistics. Digest of Education Statistics: Chapter 2, Table 211.60. Accessed September 13, 2016. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_211.60.asp.

³ Vincent v. Voight, Wisconsin Supreme Court Case Number 97-3174. Accessed September 13, 2016. <https://www.wicourts.gov/html/sc/97/97-3174.htm>.

I believe the public is with us on the need to address funding reform. In the past five years, passage rates for referenda have drastically increased. Today almost 80 percent of questions asked are approved.⁴ Citizens are voting to tax themselves more because the state is not pulling its weight. No district should have to go to referenda every three years to keep the doors open. Polling also continues to show that the public favors adding more state funding for our schools. But for every eight districts that can pass a referenda in today's environment, there are two that can't. That creates a system of haves and have nots — and it is not acceptable.

People around the state are starting to notice. It was two years ago, in the lead up to that budget cycle, that I first began to notice grassroots parent groups popping up around Wisconsin. A few weeks ago, I gave some remarks at their second annual summit and was floored by the number of groups that have organically formed to support their communities. I see some of them here today and want to thank them for what they have done to advance a bipartisan conversation around the school funding.

When I visit districts large and small, I see some very exciting things. Despite our challenges, there is constant innovation and a drive for excellence for all kids. From Fort Atkinson where a pond becomes a classroom, to Three Lakes, where the community works alongside our young people in a state-of-the-art Fab Lab. From the student portfolios in West Salem and Cudahy, to the top notch CTE programs in Menomonie and Nekoosa; I could not be prouder of the learning and innovation I see.

It's in part because when I visit schools, I meet young people like Lesley, the artist and future biologist. And it's in stories like Lesley's, stories of students growing and receiving the extra lift they need that illustrate the value our schools provide. And if you dig deeper, you'll find that her success was tied to a team of educators who helped her reach, explore, and grow. Without high quality educators and staff, those schools would be nothing more than bricks.

I want to close by asking something of each and every one of you. It's not small and it won't be easy, but you are here because you care, so you are the right people to shoulder this burden. We desperately need broad support to achieve excellence for each and every child. We also need people who are willing to be honest; people willing to talk to each other about inequities; people willing to find strength in the diversity that makes Wisconsin, and America, great.

I am convinced that if we can speak up together with candor, and without fear, solving our equity problems around school funding and school staffing will come. It will come for every kid in Wisconsin. We owe it to Kendall and her kindergartener buddies across the state to receive the extra lift to succeed. I hope you will join us.

Thank you.

###

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/dpinr2016_89.pdf.

⁴ School district referenda results. Query of referenda questions 1/1/2016 to 9/13/2016. Accessed September 13, 2016. <https://apps4.dpi.wi.gov/Referendum/CustomReporting.aspx>.