

Wisconsin State Education Convention Address

January 17, 2018 – Wisconsin Center, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you, Barb Sramek for the introduction. I want to start by recognizing John Ashley, his board, and his staff at WASB. This convention is always one of the highlights of my year, and I appreciate the work that goes in to making it a success. Let's give them a round of applause.

I also want to recognize the organizations, leaders, and their boards and staff that assist WASB in making this such a tremendous conference. Jon Bales and WASDA, and Woody Wiedenhoef and WASBO. Thank you for your leadership and your efforts on behalf of our kids. Let's hear it for all of them.

Serving on a school board is one of the most thankless acts of public service I can think of. Every year, this convention brings together people from all walks of life who have willingly subjected themselves to the long hours, the late nights, and the challenging decisions. Some people might call you crazy, but not me! I recognize the madness in you. In fact, I can point to the reason you do it without hesitation. You do it for the kids and for the communities you serve.

Often, the decisions you make are not easy. It's not easy to explain to your neighbors why you voted to raise their taxes, or why you approved the move of a favorite teacher to a new school. Those decisions require you to display a vital skill – leadership.

I love to watch leaders in action, and this is a true story – one of my favorite things about coming to this event every year is watching the general assembly because it is truly leadership on display. My friend, Mike Julka, has been the parliamentarian that governs that session for many years now. But it's not just him I'm interested in checking up on. It's your leadership on behalf of kids – it's selecting an agenda that will propel the state forward for the coming year. It's democracy at work.

Using those same leadership skills and talents, many of you have stood with me over the last eight years in calling on our leaders to come together to reform our school funding formula. This past year, we took some significant steps forward. And recently, the governor and legislative leaders announced their commitment to two critical pieces: an increase in sparsity aid payments and indexing of the low revenue ceiling.

Regardless of the motivations, advancement of these policies will absolutely benefit the kids and schools of Wisconsin. Our voices on this issue were loud and consistent, and could not be ignored. I thank you for your leadership on this, and we are not done yet. Now, the success of these proposals in the Legislature will depend on the leadership we all demonstrate back in our communities.

And while we are on the subject, I want to share another thought with you – this time, about the future leaders who will one day fill this auditorium – the kids who will inherit our great state. I'm very hopeful that future generations will be better prepared to tackle complex issues and work together to find solutions, due in part to some exciting work going on today in our schools. I'm hopeful because as I travel the state and meet students and teachers from Milwaukee Public Schools to Menominee Indian School District, I can tell you that schools are leading the way in preparing their students for the next steps of their lives, and making an excellent investment in the future of our state while they are at it.

These districts, along with many others represented in this room, are teaching their students the skills necessary to set and achieve positive goals, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This is called Social Emotional Learning, and according to a recent Columbia University study, social emotional learning returns \$11 in societal benefits for every dollar spent.

And it gets better. Kids in places like Adams Friendship and Waukesha – districts that I know are leading the way with social emotional learning – these kids will be better poised to compete for the jobs of the future. In fact, 59 percent of managers surveyed say they look for these skills – skills like communication, decision making, and problem solving – when they are hiring.

Just last week at a meeting of my Equity Council, which is a group I convene from across sectors to look at issues through the lens of educational equity, we began looking at social emotional learning as a long term strategy for student success. We heard an absolutely riveting presentation from the Menominee Indian School District on what they have done to ensure that kids in their community are ready to learn each day.

What I learned from Menominee Indian is that their approach to dealing with the social and emotional needs of their students through strategies like daily meditation, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and reflection, does not take the place of academics – in fact, it only serves to enhance their academic performance. These strategies are keeping kids engaged in school, learning how to interact positively, and building toward their own future goals. Menominee Indian School District is building our future Wisconsin workforce.

So let me connect my dots here. As leaders, we cannot afford to let the problems of today – the gridlock of ideas, the partisan politics, the nastiness and daily communication breakdowns – we can't let these habits persist in the future generation. It is well documented that Wisconsin faces a coming shortage of workers, across all trades and sectors. To combat this shortage, our state is right now investing millions to woo millennials riding trains in Chicago. That's one way to do it, but as I travel the state, I still believe our best workforce development strategy comes from within – back home in our schools and communities.

So I'll be the first to admit that I'm jazzed about this work happening in our schools, and to talk about it with a room full of leaders. I believe in our K-12 classrooms, our skilled education workforce, and our students who are learning to lead in tomorrow's economy. I acknowledge there is no panacea, no instant success, and no guarantee for future prosperity. What I'm presenting is a promising idea, and one I've seen in action across our great state.

Social emotional learning has potential to help develop the leaders of tomorrow and ensure that our kids are equipped to tackle the challenges they will face.

As I leave you, I do so with the day-in and day-out challenge to display and model the leadership, collaboration, and problem solving that we are asking of our youth. I know we can do it. Whether it's establishing work-based learning pathways with local businesses, growing social emotional learning practices in your schools, or developing your own innovative strategy; remember why you were called to serve and stay true to your own north star.

Thank you for all you do on behalf of our kids, our schools, our educators, and our communities, and have a great conference.

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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/dpinr2018-05.pdf>.