

## State of Education

September 20, 2018 – State Capitol

*By State Superintendent Tony Evers*

Welcome. Thanks to all of you for being here today.

This is my 10th time addressing you as your elected state superintendent. It's my great honor to serve our kids and families, our educators, our public schools and public libraries. After a decade at this, you'd think today would feel like old hat, but it never is a feeling of old hat. Being here with these wonderful student musicians and speaking to you in this beautiful Capitol building - I remain forever grateful for the honor you have provided to me.

In these 10 years, I marvel at how much has changed about the world we live in;

- My iPhone has gone from big to small to big again.
- Aaron Rodgers moved from Brett Favre's back-up to possibly Greatest of All Time
- And let's see... what else has changed? Oh yeah. I got blue glasses!

### Education as the Equalizer

Through it all...

Education remains - as it has always been - the great equalizer. The pathway to prosperity. The key to a skilled workforce and a robust economy.

I'm born and raised here, and for as long as I can remember, our world-class public schools and universities have been the envy of the country. We're home to the nation's first kindergarten. Home to one of the country's first land-grant colleges and public university systems.

And despite some efforts to strip it away, we are still home to the Wisconsin Idea, where the forces of education, innovation, and government have collaborated for over a century to bring revolutionary changes for public good.

We have a lot to be proud of.

Our deep history and commitment to public education is of *immense* pride to me, as I'm sure it is to all of you. It's personal. It's part of our DNA.

### Priorities Out Of Whack

But this legacy - these values - are being chipped away, piece by piece.

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I don't need to recount the past decade of disinvestment and frankly the toll that it's taken. As school district leaders, you've faced impossible tradeoffs:

- What maintenance do we put off, hoping it holds another year?
- Which programs, courses, or staff do we eliminate to make ends meet?
- How many kids can we squeeze into a classroom before we compromise their ability to learn?
- Which schools do we close?

Governing is about priorities. You live it every day. And right now, Wisconsin's priorities are *out of whack*.

### They Should Be Our Priority

Today in Wisconsin we're spending less on our public schools than we did eight years ago - putting us below the national average, and these choices have consequences.

You know, we serve over 50,000 English learners - and that number is growing. *They should be our priority*. But state aid to help them learn and succeed has been flat for over a decade while obviously costs continue to increase.

We serve over 120,000 students with disabilities. *They should be our priority*. But the state's primary special education aid has been frozen for over a decade, and now covers only a quarter of required costs. Local schools are left to somehow figure it out and make up the difference.

Four in every 10 kids are economically disadvantaged. *They should be our priority*. But our state increasingly ignores their needs and punishes their parents for being poor - making it harder for kids and families to access childcare, healthcare, and food assistance.

Now, our educators are on the front lines of these challenges, but they chose this profession - like we all did - because they love kids; they want to inspire a love of learning; they want to change lives. So when they speak up about bad education policy, deteriorating schools, and frankly, the massive teacher exodus we're facing, they're doing right by our kids. And we should listen. They're reminding us that education - like democracy - doesn't come free. It must be nurtured, sustained, and invested in over time.

Speaking of time, Time magazine recently profiled what it's like to be a teacher in America with a powerful cover story - and it's not an easy read, folks. Our nation's teachers, those highly educated, trained professionals who we trust with our kids... they are working extra jobs and making immense personal tradeoffs just to stay in a career they love.

In Wisconsin, one in three households is either below the poverty line or is coming very close to the poverty line. Those are our friends, our neighbors, and increasingly, those are our educators.

Public education will only remain the great equalizer - the pathway to prosperity and a better life - only as long as we remain committed to public education.

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## A Better Way

And guess what? A decade of *disinvestment* hasn't magically solved problems, increased student performance, or improved our competitive edge. Divisive solutions from Washington and Madison haven't made things better. These policies are failing us.

But the people of Wisconsin know there's a better way.

We see it in the conversation around school funding. Over the past few years, folks across Wisconsin began meeting and giving up their free time to learn about school funding. Go figure. They took that knowledge to their communities and local school boards and formed groups, like the Wisconsin Public Education Network.

And because of their advocacy, we have seen over 1.1 million residents from Shullsburg to Manitowoc rally behind public education and vote to raise taxes on themselves to support their schools. Over half the school districts in the state have passed referenda since 2011, and the success rate of questions jumped to roughly 70 percent. State leaders in Madison aren't getting the job done, so people of Wisconsin are doing it themselves.

We see it reflected in changing public opinion. Marquette University polling shows that nearly two-thirds of Wisconsin residents prefer increased school spending over cutting property taxes. That's a huge shift from just four years ago when the opposite was true. And, this is a wakeup call for anyone who thinks voters value tax cuts above all else. I believe the people of Wisconsin want honest leadership, genuine cooperation, and real solutions.

Let me tell you about a real solution I saw in Ashland a few weeks ago. Ashland voters passed a successful referendum in 2016 that funded building improvements, including new wellness spaces in each of their schools. But physical improvements were just one piece of the puzzle. I met with community therapists and school staff who are collaborating to meet children's mental health needs during the school day, breaking down barriers and reducing stigma. And I heard from courageous kids and brave parents who spoke about how this work is having a powerful impact on them. *How it is literally saving lives.*

I've been to a lot of places and met with a lot of people since the last time I stood at this podium. But I can tell you that sitting with these families in Ashland - hearing their voices and witnessing the power of what they've created together - that was perhaps the most important thing I've done this year. Real, collaborative solutions to build a better future for our kids.

*Now, that is the Wisconsin I know and love.*

## Budget

Folks, the pendulum is swinging. Back to a time where we value an investment in our kids' futures, and we demand our leaders do the same. Where we value working together to build up our schools and communities instead of adopting policies and politics that tear each other down.

Now is the time to adopt a transformational education budget that responds to this call. A budget that gives educators what they deserve: the resources they need to meet the needs of our kids. It's quite simple. A budget that increases opportunities, closes gaps, and allows for competitive compensation.

The budget I proposed finally fixes our school finance system. Our Fair Funding plan helps small and large districts alike give every kid a fair shot at a great education. It includes revenue limit fairness so lower

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spending districts can catch up, and restores the state's two-thirds commitment to funding our schools. Without any gimmicks, while holding the line on taxes. It's long past time for a real solution on school funding, and now's the time to get it done.

And frankly, the budget I proposed this week also gives an extra lift to kids who need it. We will make an unprecedented \$600 million investment in special education, or about \$4,000 extra per child with disabilities. Those extra funds will mean more support for kids who need it most, and more flexibility in those local budgets for community-powered solutions.

Our budget provides nearly \$64 million more in student mental health funding so more districts can follow Ashland's lead. It funds full-day 4K and provides Wisconsin's first state funding for afterschool programming. It strengthens opportunities for those English learners I talked about before, expands funding for rural schools, invests in our public libraries, and creates new supports for children in our largest urban districts.

## Conclusion

Here's the deal. It's not enough to just say that we respect our educators and value education. We must lead because we know there's a better way. We know it because that's the Wisconsin that we hear when we reach outside of this political echo chamber that is our capital.

We must continue raising our voices until they can no longer be ignored. *Together*, we can restore respect for Wisconsin schools and educators. *Together*, we can reinvest in our schools so that every kid can thrive. *Together*, we can bring civility and collaboration back to public education and to public life.

We know there's a better way. We know it's time for a change.

And change, folks, it is in the air.

Thank you, God bless you, and 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://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2018-86.pdf>.*