

Stanford Taylor's remarks as prepared for delivery for 2020 Virtual State of Education Address

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By State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor

It is my honor to address the people of Wisconsin in the first ever virtual State of Education. I am so incredibly proud of Wisconsin's students, parents and families, our educators and staff, and our many community partners and leaders for coming together in some of the most amazing ways during this extraordinary time. Thank you for your perseverance, kindness, and grace.

2020 has been a year of profound change. Each of us has been challenged individually and collectively in ways we could not have foreseen. While the road ahead remains uncertain, what is clear is our commitment to our children - to building a better future and better world for them.

As state superintendent, my focus - and that of the Department of Public Instruction - is to build on the vision of Every Child a Graduate, College and Career Ready while advancing educational equity for every child. Though the pandemic has created new obstacles to this work, our education community continues to work tirelessly to help meet the needs of every child.

Consider just a few examples from the past six months:

- This spring, educators across Wisconsin re-envisioned their entire educational delivery models within a span of weeks. Together, we raced to break down barriers and forge new partnerships to provide meals, devices, internet access, instructional materials, and other supports to students in a safe and secure way.
- Since the onset of the pandemic, Wisconsin has provided over 31 million meals across our school lunch, breakfast, and summer food service programs. Our school meal programs are the definition of essential services. We know if a child is hungry, that child cannot learn. I am extremely proud and grateful to DPI's School Nutrition Team and all those across our state who have worked so hard to fill this critical need for our students and families.
- As schools were closed and instruction moved online, school districts, internet service providers, and other partners stepped up with forward solutions to address the wide disparities in technology access. Based on one analysis from Education Superhighway, as many as 15% of Wisconsin households, representing approximately 125,000 Wisconsin children, lacked internet access in 2019 with substantially higher rates of disparity among children of color and children experiencing poverty. The data suggests as many as 1 of every 3 Black and Latinx students did not have internet access.

The response of our education community was swift. School buses were redeployed as mobile hotspots. School staff delivered Chromebooks or mobile hotspots to children's homes. DPI partnered with the Public Service Commission to identify public Wi-Fi locations so students and families could continue learning. We continue to work with rural schools and First Nations to connect them with broadband service providers. Our agency also worked with schools and libraries to keep Wi-Fi available, even as buildings were closed, providing another option for free internet access in school or library parking lots.

Service providers waived fees. Districts across Wisconsin went the extra mile to help get students the resources they needed to participate in academic instruction during school closures.

- Educators stepped up to ensure children without access to remote learning were provided written learning materials, dropping off packets at students' homes or along bus routes. Our PBS partners have been providing children and parents access to high-quality content and resources through television programming and streaming platforms, with the ability to reach into nearly every home in the state.
- Communities came together to make sure our graduates were celebrated for their achievements when traditional rites of passage were canceled. Schools set up drive-thru or virtual graduation ceremonies, principals hand-delivered diplomas, and communities, such as Dodgeville, honored its graduating seniors with a full-size billboard displaying all of the students' faces.

Over the summer, our school districts and community partners continued to provide a multitude of services to our children and families, at the same time our educators and leaders devised strategies to move beyond the early emergency response. I am immensely proud of their work, and the work of the DPI, which has mobilized across every content area to provide support, guidance, and best practices to our schools. School leaders and board members have worked tirelessly with state and local public health officials to create school reopening plans that prioritize the health and safety of students and staff, while working to meet the academic, social-emotional, and nutritional needs of every child.

The result of these efforts is the start of a school year unlike any other in our state's history with some of our students learning from home, while others are back part-time or full-time in school buildings that look and feel dramatically different than when students left last March. We know more today than we did in the early days of the pandemic, but we still have more questions than answers, no perfect solutions, and a multitude of difficult decisions every school leader, educator, and parent has had to confront.

Still, 2020 has provided us with an unparalleled opportunity to reframe and reimagine in a more inclusive manner.

This fall, the first weeks of school may look different from community to community, the collaboration among schools, families, and neighbors in service to our students is nothing short of amazing. Educators are looking forward to reconnecting with families, be it virtually, hybrid, or in-person, because they understand meaningful student-teacher relationships are critical for students' well-being. In a society that can sometimes seem incredibly divided, I continue to believe our collective commitment to our children and their education is one of the things that unites us.

I thank Governor Tony Evers for his efforts to prioritize our children and our public schools during this historic 2020-21 school year. The governor allocated over \$46 million in discretionary federal relief funds to school districts most impacted by COVID-19. These efforts are in addition to the nearly \$175 million in federal funding made available to all Wisconsin's K-12 schools from the federal CARES Act. Moreover, this summer, with support from Wisconsin Emergency Management, schools received over 2 million cloth masks and over 4,200 infrared thermometers to help support re-openings. The Governor's Task Force on Broadband Access, which was formed in July and includes several members of my Equity Council, will help build strategies for digital inclusion and expansion of high speed internet access to every Wisconsin household.

Taken together, these resources are supporting remote learning and technology access, and assisting schools in their efforts to implement health checks, physical distancing, facial covering requirements, and other public health and safety measures. These funds are also addressing the escalation in mental health and other social-emotional needs during this time of disruption in our children's lives.

In addition, the dollars are being applied to the massive professional development efforts needed to facilitate high-quality online and virtual learning. Every teacher needs on-going professional learning and support especially in facilitating and implementing effective literacy instruction. We cannot lose sight of the important work needed to get done regardless of the mode of instruction. For instance, we are supporting classroom teachers through a series of webinars about explicit and systematic phonics instruction in face-to-face and virtual-learning environments. Explicit and systematic phonics instruction - along with engaging instruction that builds background knowledge, develops oral language, and builds comprehension skills - allows learners to have a deep understanding of what they are reading.

Now, more than ever, it is critical for citizens - even our youngest citizens - to be able to use literacy to acquire information about our world and communicate the ways they want to see their communities change. The simple way we can do this is to work with our libraries - school and public libraries - to ensure children experience texts that reflect their identities and teach them about other identities.

Although these funds are certainly helping to offset costs and we are grateful for them, we know districts are facing substantial financial pressures far exceeding the financial relief that has been provided to date. We also know Wisconsin, like states across the country, will be responding to the economic fallout of this pandemic for years to come.

COVID-19 has reinforced for many what we in education have always known: our schools are essential to students, families, and communities, and fundamental to our society.

Every child has been impacted in some way by COVID-19. This pandemic has laid bare the enormity of the access and opportunity gaps facing too many of Wisconsin's children of color, children living in poverty, children with special needs, and English learners. At a time when more Wisconsin families are facing unemployment and economic anxiety, homelessness and hunger - on top of the health impacts of a disease that itself disproportionately affects communities of color - it is imperative schools and educators have the resources, equipment, and support they need to deliver the education and school services every child deserves.

We are clear-eyed about the realities economic challenges will play in state budget decisions. However, it is my hope our leaders can and will continue to prioritize public education and the needs of our most vulnerable learners. To that end, the biennial budget, which I plan to submit to the governor, will be grounded in educational equity, and seek the resources all schools need to provide each child a quality education. For example:

- While every family has struggled during this pandemic, extended school closures have been particularly devastating for students with special needs and their families. As districts work to provide special education services in this unprecedented environment, our leaders must ensure schools have the funding needed to meet their requirements under law. Before the pandemic, districts' unfunded special education costs already exceeded \$1 billion - a funding gap affecting all students. That is why I will be proposing an increase to the Special Education Categorical Aid.
- I will also be requesting an increase in funding for our mental health services. Wisconsin leaders have long recognized the need for greater investment in school-based mental health services. With at least one in five students facing a mental health issue and nearly 60% of high school students self-reporting significant mental health needs before the extended school closures, we know the need for mental health services will be substantially greater as students grapple with the effects of this pandemic.

The pandemic has also underscored the critical role teachers play in the lives of their students. Yet, far too many teachers are leaving the profession, and too few students are aspiring to become teachers - conditions I fear will only worsen this year. I believe it is important we support our educators, respect their voices, their concerns, and their feedback - in times of calm and crisis. And it is why we must commit

to doing all we can to recruit the next generation of educators and substantially diversify Wisconsin's educator workforce, so all students can benefit from having teachers of color. DPI is working with our education preparation programs to help develop new teachers and support innovative ways districts are growing their own future staff.

Our educators are on the front lines of our collective efforts to disrupt systemic educational inequities to build a better Wisconsin for every child. At the DPI, we are working hard to support our educators and local school districts in this work, and have put educational equity at the center of everything we do. For example, over the past year:

- We have advanced recommendations from our Equity Council to implement high quality social and emotional learning services. Grounded in equity, we are building capacity for this work in districts around the state;
- Our guidance around school re-openings, Education Forward, was built in partnership with our education stakeholders and calls on district leaders to keep equity front and center when creating their re-opening and continuity plans;
- We have strengthened our partnerships and collaboration with Wisconsin's 5 largest school districts, which represent the majority of children experiencing the largest gaps. Together with WASDA, we have built a learning community with leaders in these districts to strategize on how best to meet the needs of our urban districts;
- We have created new partnerships and programs with our colleagues at the Department of Children and Families to invest in early childhood, to build school readiness and academic success for our youngest learners, including new support for American Indian languages and culture. Many districts have also worked with childcare agencies to provide care and supervision during virtual learning this fall.

Wisconsin schools have no shortage of challenges and needs. Times, like these, often present the greatest opportunity for change.

An unprecedented health crisis, economic challenges, and the clarion call for racial and social justice have served to further highlight many systems of inequity. Our schools are not immune.

This summer, I was inspired to see so many people - particularly young people - of all races and ethnicities coming together with one voice to acknowledge the lived experiences of Black Americans and demanding racial and social justice. Their voices and their leadership energizes many of us around the country and the world, and reminds us; change begins with us.

In a letter published upon his recent passing, the late Congressman John Lewis captured this sentiment, highlighting how "millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division" and stood together to "demand respect for human dignity." Harkening the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Congressman Lewis reminded all of us that, "Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part...."

I know the obstacles we face are many. I also know we must do our part by becoming an agent of change. It is time to finally shed the title of having the largest Black-White achievement gap in the country; to examine our systems, policies, programs, and ways of engaging with students, families, and each other; to truly listen to the voices of Black and other marginalized communities and deliver inclusive learning experiences that meet the needs of every child.

Together, we must have the difficult conversations about race and equity in our schools and communities and tackle our achievement, access, and opportunity gaps directly and intentionally. We can build

confidence and skills in our staff to lead challenging conversations and deliver critical content to our students about race and racism in our country. We can create spaces where all students feel belonging, are valued and appreciated for who they are and what they bring, and are supported and empowered to advocate for their beliefs.

Like so many of you who have answered the call to teach, I am passionate about this work - about lifting up the next generation and helping them reach their limitless potential. I am grateful to Governor Evers for entrusting me with this role and providing me the opportunity to affect change for Wisconsin's students and families on a statewide scale. Although I will not be seeking election next year, my work is far from over. Serving as your state superintendent and the chief advocate of our public schools and libraries has been the honor and privilege of a lifetime. Please know, wherever my path leads next, it will always be in service to our children and families.

The path we have all had to walk this year is far from the one we expected. But, as our response to COVID-19 forces us to think differently about many aspects of public education, this year also provides us an unparalleled opportunity to act.

Our schools are the hearts of our communities and the backbone of our democracy. Let us work together to create a new system of education where a child's race is no longer a predictor of success or failure in our schools. Where a child's location or family income does not determine their ability to access rigorous curriculum or online coursework. Where all education environments are inclusive, accessible, and equitable.

Let us reinvent systems that support the wellbeing of all children, reimagine how we make decisions together with all stakeholders, and invest the resources our public schools need so all children can thrive.

Let us rise together and seize this moment in history. Together, we can make meaningful, lasting change. Together, we can create the education system every child deserves.

Thank you for your leadership, your advocacy, and your dedication to our children, our schools, and our state. Be safe, and be well. God bless you, and On Wisconsin.

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Carolyn Stanford Taylor is Wisconsin's state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo and biography 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 <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2020/stanford-taylor-state-of-education-speech>.