

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The riches of reading

We can improve children's literacy through authentic family engagement, not increased assessment

To create students who stay curious and inquisitive throughout their lives – active participants in democracy, critical consumers of information, creative contributors to our communities – we need to ensure our students are literate. When it comes to literacy in Wisconsin, I know we have a distance to go. And yet that distance also represents a great opportunity for our state: the opportunity to build on the rich literacy practices we find in every family, culture, and community that make up this great state and, in doing so, create equitable and sustainable systems to continue that valuable work.

We do this by centering authentic family engagement rather than focusing on parental notification concerning assessment results. Rich family engagement revolves around communication, but only if it is a collaborative process, not a one-way street. We do this by using assessments to gather purposeful evidence that can inform and improve universal instruction. I appreciate that our legislature recognizes the need to concentrate on literacy, but we must remember that increased assessment is not the end goal; improved reading is the end goal, and to achieve that, we need to focus our resources on what we know works. We do this by ensuring our educators have the support they need to engage families, interpret assessments, and implement meaningful instruction and interventions.

And we start by remembering that families are a child's first literacy teacher, which also makes them every educator's most important partner when they can be authentically engaged. This is why our Literacy Task Force will explore meaningful family and community engagement as part of their mission to achieve the vision of strengthening early literacy learning in Wisconsin's schools in order to foster students reading to understand themselves and others, acquire knowledge, and participate in a democratic society.

Every Wisconsin family has literacy practices, and they are as varied as the number of families in Wisconsin. The father who tells a new story about his child's imaginary friend every night at bedtime. The parent who keeps board books in multiple languages on the shelf and gives their toddler blocks with

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numbers in ASL printed on them during playtime. The siblings who make up new words to songs on the radio, not realizing they are teaching their younger sister rhyming while she sings along. The mom who helps her son sign the back of his first library card; he is so excited to show his mom his favorite graphic novel so they can read it together. It's exciting to know families are reading and singing and playing, and it is even more exciting to think about the opportunities they represent in terms of rich family engagement when we take the time to build a Literacy Task Force that honors that richness.

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NOTE: A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly is available at https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/news/Jill_Underly.jpg. This guest editorial is available electronically at <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2021/the-riches-of-reading-op-ed>.