



State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly's remarks as prepared for delivery for Wisconsin State Education Convention

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By State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

Good morning, and welcome to the Wisconsin State Education Convention. Thank you for inviting me to be here with you today. I know this year's theme for the convention is "Forward Together: for our students," and I can't think of a more appropriate – or inspiring – phrase to use as the frame of our time together. And as someone who deeply values the lessons that history has to teach us, I'm going to get us started moving forward together today by taking a look at the past for some more inspiration.

Earlier this week, I published an editorial on our future as a function of education. It was inspired by a quotation from a 1947 edition of the Morehouse College campus newspaper. The article, entitled "The Purpose of Education," argued that "education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from fiction." I think this is brilliant insight from the 18-year-old who wrote it. You can probably see where this is going – the student author was Martin Luther King, Jr. It may not be his most famous piece of writing, but it is arguably his most relevant for us here today.

I love this quote because it speaks to me as an educator who cares deeply about civics, and I love the next sentence even more. King writes, "The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." Again, I couldn't agree more. What could be more important than teaching intensive and critical thinking? I've said it before – public education is the foundation of our democracy, and this is why.

This essay's argument is not far off of the quote that is on a plaque at the entrance of Bascom Hall by Charles Ely, in 1895: "Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."

When I think about the outcome of public education and what it means for our young people, their communities, and our state, there's another great piece of lesser-known history that comes to mind.

Edward Everett isn't a name most people recognize from U.S. history class; I doubt he's mentioned anywhere outside of Massachusetts where he was governor for five years in the 1800s. But in our world – the world of state education agencies and school boards and public schools – he was an important figure.

One of his biggest accomplishments, in my opinion, was that he established schools to train teachers. At that time, these were called "normal schools," but what they really were were teachers colleges. (The word, Normal, in this context, is the "norming" of instruction and standards in teaching.)

In 1839, the first state supported teacher training school opened. It was located on Lexington Battle Green, the site of the first battle of the Revolutionary War. And the fact that it stood where the shot heard 'round the world was fired is rather fitting considering Edward Everett's most famous quote (and the reason I am telling you this story). He said, "Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army."

Here is a leader who implemented these changes in typical education policy with the one goal: to move public education Forward Together: for our students. When we think about the purpose of public schools, I think of democracy and of liberty. I think of sifting and winnowing of information and knowledge. I think of the founders of our country, and the authors of our United States and Wisconsin constitutions. Those authors knew the importance of Common Schools, of an educated public – education that is essential for democracy to thrive.

The purpose of our public schools was – and is – to educate our children, our future of this country, so they can be responsible participants in a democratic republic. The purpose of our public schools is to move our society forward. To make things better for the next generation. To do this, we have to invest - like a savings account, or a retirement account - because unless we continue that investment, we won't have anything left if we continue to spend down the principal.

Somewhere along the way, we got away from that investment, that idea that public schools are for the common good to move our society forward.

Originally, the purpose of our education system was to educate everyone so that they can participate in our democracy and be responsible citizens. The purpose of public schools was for the PUBLIC good. So that our future citizens can make informed decisions. So that they could think critically. So that they can sift and winnow the information given to them and act on it thoughtfully and with conviction. So that they can actively and thoughtfully participate in our democracy.

Let's focus on our common goals, on the fact that we all want the same things, that we are united in wanting great teachers, great schools, and great outcomes for all kids – these are all instrumental for the success of our great state of Wisconsin and of our democratic republic. These are also instrumental to our state's economic success, but also instrumental to the health and well-being of our children throughout their lifetime.

It is also a selfish wish for us as well, as we age - these young people will be supporting us - as our doctors and nurses, as engineers designing the cars we drive, figuring out how to save our planet, or the educators teaching our children and grandchildren.

The cycle continues, and the purpose is to leave our world a little bit better after we pass the baton on to the next generation. So, let's focus on the strategies that we know work, and that will move us forward together to achieving those goals.

We know early childhood education works. It gets all kids the even and strong start they deserve. It helps parents, it helps employers. It sets kids up for a lifetime of success: better literacy and math outcomes in elementary school, interventions for students with disabilities and autism, strong high school course-taking and high school graduation, and a direct track to post-secondary apprenticeships, technical college, or 4-year college. Or all the above.

Investing in early childhood education means investing in our youngest Wisconsinites AND reinvesting in our state. There is research that shows that a strong start in school has better health outcomes for those children once they reach adulthood, and there is a strong chance that if they had high quality K-12 education that they will not interact with the criminal justice system. High quality preschool and K-12 are just the things that make our state stronger and our future brighter.

We know our children learn best from high quality teachers. And they deserve to be paid like the highly skilled professionals they are. We need to compensate our dedicated staff, including support staff and administrators, for their educational experience and their expertise. I absolutely believe that teaching IS the most important job in the world.

Our children are our most precious resource, and you, teachers, are the experts needed to teach our most precious resource. You earned that degree, you show up every day to a difficult and, yes, rewarding but also emotionally and physically taxing job. You should demand that respect from our legislators, and they should give it! You are teaching our future. I am grateful to you, and you deserve better.

For the rest of us here, imagine a school system where the teachers have collectively little experience; where they are led by principals and administrators with few years of experience as well. What we know is that teaching experience and building and district leadership matter.

For our schools to be successful, for our students to reach their full potential - we need experienced leadership and experienced teachers. But what we are learning is that individuals are leaving teaching and administration at very alarming rates. Step back for a moment, and if this trend continues, what does this mean for the future of public schools?

We know mental health challenges were an unmet need before the pandemic, and that need has only intensified over the past two years. All of our kids need access to mental health support, school counselors and social workers, and robust nursing services.

We are working on creative solutions to try and meet these needs, like partnering with UW to support social workers who are currently in schools under a license with stipulation. These social workers are provided with mentorship, education, and tuition support while simultaneously being in schools where they are needed. This is just one example, but it is an exciting one, and it is also not enough.

But humor me for yet another moment. Imagine a school system where these ongoing needs remain unmet; where children continue to struggle, who cannot learn, because they cannot have their basic health needs met. This is not right, and we must do something about this if we are to move Forward Together: for our students.

Because we also know we need more school funding. This is the thread that binds all of the rest together, because if we don't have adequate public school funding, then none of the rest is really possible. And honestly, I take issue with the word "adequate." Why are we happy with adequate? Why are we satisfied with the crumbs, again, when we know the resources exist in our state. We need robust, equitable, and consistent school funding. I know that, you know that, and you know who else knows that? Our kids.

The conversation needs to change. Again, picture us 10 years from now - are things better or are they worse? The past 10 years we've suffered with budgets designed with austerity in mind. But going forward,

how is it possible to continue to educate with even LESS when the needs are so great? We have to move forward. And our public schools need your help. We need to begin to rethink public schools as infrastructure. Our schools are just as important (I would argue more so) as that bridge you drove over the Wisconsin River, or the St. Croix River. I would argue that they are just as important as the airplanes we fly in to get us safely to visit family or take us on a vacation.

Who educated those engineers or trained those pilots? Who paid for that education? The public. Because common schools, public schools, are for the public good. When our schools crumble, when we cannot staff them any longer, when we continually squeeze them dry of any life or fun or joy – what are we left with? And if we invested minimally in our bridges, in our roads, or our airplanes or our high rises or our homes... what are we left with in the end? And are we willing to prescribe that same fate to our public schools?

A couple weeks ago, I was talking with a colleague at DPI. She's another former civics teacher, and we were recounting favorite lessons and "ah-ha!" moments from students – those treasured times we saw the lightbulb turn on when a student learned a new concept or discovered a new connection to some aspect of social studies. She told me one of her favorite lessons was the way her students studied how a bill becomes a law.

Instead of a School House Rock jingle, students studied how a bill becomes a law by learning the policymaking process and then by writing their elected officials to share their ideas for new bills or proposals for changes in current law. She said there were some great ideas – from pay equity to tax code changes to environmental measures and more – but the reason she was telling me this story was this: one of her students had written, "If I could change one law, it would be how much money public schools get. Public schools can barely afford what they need, which is stupid, because one day, we'll be the ones running the country and economy, and we need a good education." He was in eighth grade, and he's right. Her student wrote that six years ago. It's still true, and to be honest, it's been true his entire education. This former teacher keeps those bill ideas in a folder, and she knows that a couple of those students met with their state legislators on their own time the summer after middle school. I hope they listened.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Omicron and the COVID virus. It is a wildcard isn't it? And who knew nearly two years ago when all of this went down in March 2020, that we would still be dealing with it today. We MUST move forward together. Arms linked. In lock-step. Same hymnal. When faced with a crisis, what works best? Division? Mavericks? Abdication of leadership and responsibility? No. What works is unity. Cohesiveness. Collaboration.

I reflect on previous times in U.S. history when we could argue that we faced trauma and a defining moment in our society: the Great Depression, the homefront during World War II. September 11th. Those were tumultuous times. But what stands out to me is leadership. We would have never made it through those moments STRONGER than when we entered them had it not been for steadfast leadership.

In all those examples, we moved forward as a country, together. Sure there was dissension. That's healthy. Yes, people disagreed. But we also have to acknowledge that in all those cases - we all wanted the same things.

So, I appeal to you - school board members, district administrators, educators, community leaders. You are needed. We need you to lead. We need you to imagine our schools in a year from now. Think of that second grader right now who has not had a normal year of school since she was in 4K.

In 10 years, she will be a senior in high school. Are we paralyzed as we are right now with COVID, masking flip flops, and science deniers?

Are we stuck in the same cycle of underfunding our schools, Hail Mary passes for an operational referendum, and duct tape hoping that the roof will hold for one more year? Are you OK maintaining the status quo? Or are we tired of it all, and are we entering a new phase post-Covid, where we can say “we are leaving the past behind us, and we are coming out of this BETTER than when we entered it.”

And that senior in high school who lived through COVID in her early elementary years - she is STRONGER. She is graduating high school, she is going to be a health care professional, she reads novels in her spare time and volunteers at the hospital – all because she had adults in her childhood who had the vision to support her school district through this pandemic - to fight for the resources - to fight for the things we collectively care about - to fight to keep her schools opened and well-staffed - to fight for the mental health care she desperately needed to overcome the anxiety that this pandemic has caused her and her friends - and to fight for the after school programming that gave her the individual tutoring she needed to recover from the learning loss she experienced those early years of her education.

That, my friends, is what strong leadership is. It's visionary. It researches the facts. It sifts and it winnows. It listens. It's collaborative, and it's consistent. It makes the tough calls, when the easy thing to do would be to abdicate responsibility because it otherwise is just too hard. It leads for the common good. It leads to making things better than they were before.

It's no secret that these kids are gonna change the world someday, but we can't wait that long. And they'll only be ready to change the world if we prepare them well. If we get their schools and their teachers the resources they need so that they can be there to help them and provide those opportunities.

Indeed, we must move forward together, for our students and for our state. Thank you all for the work you are doing, and for the work we will do together. I am hopeful that we are going to get this done so that our children can change the world. But we need to help them. We need to move Forward Together: for our students.