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With gratitude and appreciation

An open letter to Wisconsin teachers by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly during Teacher Appreciation Week

Dear teachers,

Thank you. Thank you for the work you do every day, and for the difference you make in the lives of our children and their families. We – myself, your students, Wisconsin’s families – appreciate you. And yet gratitude and appreciation are not enough to thank you for all the contributions you make to positively impact children’s lives and the future of this great state.

I believe teaching is the most important job in the world. I also know it is also one of the most difficult. You make thousands of decisions every day, and they all matter so much because they all have an impact on young people. Which is, of course, also why teaching is also the most meaningful job in the world. I know you don’t need me to tell you how wonderful it is to witness students making discoveries about themselves and the world around them. You are shaping Wisconsin’s future, and we owe you such a debt of gratitude.

The past two years have brought with them a lot of stress and more loss than we ever expected. It sounds trite to say you rose to the occasion, because I wish you hadn’t needed to, but it’s true – you’ve taken on so many challenges and you have so much to be proud of. We also have so much to grieve. The grieving process is important for all of us. As reflective practitioners, we must allow ourselves the space to grieve what we have lost in the past two years, and to reflect about what we have learned and how we can continue to help our students with these changes. Doing so will help us move through the pandemic and come out better on the other side.

We must remember that we cannot, and we will not, move through this alone. We will do it together. We have the collective scars and the collective healing as educators who taught a cohort of students who will see the world differently because of the past two years. Our students have themselves lost a lot; they may have lost people in their lives, or housing, or they’re dealing with food insecurity or a parent’s job loss, or maybe they’re dealing with increased mental health challenges. You know this is their

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reality because you spend every day with them. So many of our students are feeling a loss of safety and connectedness, and you are doing heroic work helping them build community and connect to each other. And through all of this, you are still teaching and they are still learning. They've even learned to give each other, and hopefully themselves, some grace. The world has asked a lot of our kids, and they are moving through this crisis as best they can, with the help of family and friends, and with the help of you, their teachers. Never forget that we have accomplished so much.

On that note, I must acknowledge that the world has asked a lot of you. Too much, to be honest. I had a student tell me once that she thought teaching was about changing the world because you got to help open a world up to students and learn alongside them. I agreed with her then, but when I reflect on it today, I would take it a step further. Teaching is about changing the world because the world is always changing, and we teach students how to harness that change and make sense of it, and to use those lessons to make their lives and our world better. That has never been more true than right now. You are changing the world by teaching kids about change.

Thank you for doing what you do, for going above and beyond every day. I appreciate you and I see you. Thank you for loving Wisconsin's children – our students – and thank you for continuing to change the world.

Sincerely,

Jill Underly

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