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Contact: DPI Media Line, (608) 266-3559, media.inquiries@dpi.wi.gov

Asking the innovative questions

*A commencement message to students, school staff, and Wisconsin communities
from State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly*

The school year is coming to an end, but instead of fixating on its conclusion, I would like to focus on the future and new beginnings; it is commencement season, after all, and what is a commencement if not the start of a new chapter? Here is my commencement message to Wisconsin students, school staff, and community members.

To Wisconsin's Class of 2022: no one has ever had a high school experience like yours. COVID-19 and all its accompanying challenges required a lot of sacrifice from you. I wish that weren't the case, but those challenges and your sacrifice are our reality, and as you commence on the next step in your journey, don't forget all the lessons you learned. You have a unique perspective; what you've experienced has been unlike any other graduating class, and you've succeeded in the face of challenges because you had to. Your high school years have been a crash course in flexibility and innovation, and you have shown yourselves to be incredibly resilient and creative. Take that flexibility, that innovation, that resilience, and that creativity along with you on your journey, and use it all to make the world a better place. There's a great saying from playwright George Bernard Shaw about perspective and innovation that many leaders have made their own, and I encourage you to embrace it, too: "some see things as they are and ask 'why?' I dream things that never were and ask 'why not?'" Dream big, ask why not, and then work to make those dreams our new reality.

To the educators: thank you for your public service. For providing our children the space and grace to readjust to school, and the stability and fierce support they've needed throughout this uncertain, challenging time. You have done – and I know you continue to do – heroic work for our children and for our state. These young people will grow up to teach our children, fix our roads, provide our health care, and even work in public health to prevent the next pandemic. They will dream big, and you will have made all their "why nots" possible.

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To all our Wisconsin communities: some leaders see these tumultuous times as an opportunity to talk a lot about division because it's convenient to drive a wedge between schools and families in order to protect the status quo. I think that talk misses a key point – that schools, and the people who work at them, and the people who attend them, make up our communities. Why not use that to unify instead of to divide? Public schooling at its very core is about building communities. So, let's start a new conversation on how to unite and build as a state that innovates and looks to the future and always asks “why not?” instead of merely bemoaning the way things currently are.

Asking the big questions and building stronger communities are how we move forward as a state. I am proud of our students, our educators, and our communities for their dedication to public schools, and I look forward to our work together next school year.

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