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

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

*By State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly*

Thank you for that kind introduction, and thank you all for being here this morning. And what a great morning it is – I mean, yes, it's a Wisconsin winter morning... which could mean a lot of different things from one day to the next weather-wise, as we all know... but more importantly, it's a great morning because we are all here together – leaders of education in Wisconsin, coming together in unity, forming community, and creating opportunity. How wonderful.

I'm going to start today with a quick science lesson – a science lesson about trees, in fact. Bear with me, I was a social studies teacher, although I do love a good metaphor, and anyone who knows me knows I'm also very curious and always looking to learn, especially about the natural world. So, naturally, I stumbled on some interesting facts about coast redwoods...and thought they were very, very relevant, so I really wanted to share my learning with you all.

Coast redwoods are the tallest trees on Earth; they can grow to taller than 350 feet. For reference, since a story of a building about ten feet, that's a 35 story building, that's the height of Milwaukee City Hall, and far taller than our State Capitol. And yet, coast redwoods have very shallow root systems – root systems that stay close to the surface of the earth and that extend up to 100 feet out from the base of the trunk. The roots of each individual redwood intertwine with the roots of other redwoods, and thanks to this shallow, intertwined root system, coast redwoods are incredibly stable during strong winds and floods. As a community of trees, they are very, very resilient.

Baby redwoods, when they germinate, often sprout at the base of a parent tree trunk. The young roots latch onto the parent roots for nutrients. Because of this, the trees grow in circles called "fairy rings."

Coast redwoods have thick, pithy bark that provides protection and insulation, which means they are resilient and strong as individual trees as well as a community of trees. This bark gives them a

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remarkable ability to survive – even a downed tree can live on and birth new trees. In the California redwood forest, you can see trees with blackened holes in their trunks, still alive almost a hundred years after a fire in 1926.

So, coast redwoods are resilient, but considering their low germination rate, we must make sure we retain the forests we already have as we also plant new ones because we can't rely solely on starting new forests.

Coast redwoods are key to the future of this planet thanks to their help in mitigating climate change. They have the ability – because they are so massive – to pull in and store more carbon than other trees. In fact, ancient forests of redwoods store as least three times more carbon above ground than any other forest on Earth. Which is, again, why restoration efforts are so important.

So... why am I telling you this? Well, first of all, how cool is the phenomenon of “fairy rings” ...? I'm pretty sure we need to replace the phrase “the apple didn't fall far from the tree” with something about fairy rings and parent roots just so we have the opportunity to say “fairy rings” on a more regular basis... but I digress.

So... why this particular science lesson? And why right now, why here? Like I said, I love a good metaphor, and this is a really good one. Our students are young redwoods. And we – schools – can be their interconnected root system – a system that helps them develop resilience together! We can be a root system that helps them grow their bark, their protective factors through social emotional learning and equity work. We can be a root system that provides them stability and connection, connection we know they need. We know school connectedness and the ability for children to identify supportive adults and seek help reduces mental health challenges, and is even suicide prevention. We can be a root system that enables them to draw the nutrients they need as we teach them the knowledge and develop the skills they need to grow into the successful (and tall!) adults we know they can be. They are the key to our future, just like the adult redwoods that mitigate climate change.

This metaphor begs the question – what's next? How do we ensure our root system of public schools stays strong and effectively intertwined to create this stability and interconnectedness for our students? Well, guess what? I can extend the metaphor to explain exactly that!

We must protect and grow our coast redwood forests, just as we must protect and grow public education. In the environmental science world, this means restoration or conservation. (Which are, apparently, two different things – it really does pay to be curious!) Restoration is about repairing

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ecosystems through human intervention in order to actively reverse degradation. Conservation focuses on preventing ongoing degradation by addressing the loss of biological resources. It starts with evaluating the human impacts on biological diversity and then develops practical approaches to prevent the extinction of species and maintain the integrity and sustainability of ecosystems.

Restoration and conservation are fitting explanations of where we're at in public education... although I also think restoring and conserving are not enough – but I'll get there.

Our ecosystem is our public school system. We know COVID-19 has disturbed and disrupted that system, and we also know our challenges have been ongoing – that we have, frankly, experienced ongoing degradation in the form of decreased support, lack of respect, and significant underfunding for some time now. We know public education is perpetually under threat, and that public education as it is currently funded is unsustainable. And this is why we need to take action, we need an intervention, and first, we need to evaluate where we're at and what we – our students, our educators, our schools and districts – really need.

That is why, over the course of the next six months, we will be working with our stakeholders to develop a strategic plan for the Department of Public Instruction. A true strategic plan that aligns the goals I've laid out of improving our funding system, early childhood opportunities, mental health options, and our education workforce. And a plan that is informed by the needs of our learners, communities, and professionals in the field.

We're taking this action with the ultimate goal of moving forward with innovation, instead of returning to stagnation and the pre-COVID status quo. Innovative actions that can build on what exists with imagination, and makes it possible for new growth and a sustainable ecosystem of public education – just like baby redwoods grow from the roots of their parent trees... we need innovative, imaginative ideas to create our very own fairy rings of growth and stability.

We do this by we, ourselves, being an interconnected root system of education leaders supporting each other through the high winds and floods – through the challenges – to stand tall and advocate for what our schools really need. Because, as we at DPI listen to you and collaboratively create our strategic plan of innovation, we must also simultaneously conserve and address the loss of resource set upon us by the absence of a state funding increase in the last budget, and the imminent fiscal cliff looming in front of us as federal COVID relief funds come to an end. We must advocate for practical, actionable steps, and I know advocating is easier – and more effective – when we do it together. So, I hope you join me in advocating for

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DPI's proposed budget. We believe this budget is what's best for our schools and our children, and what's best for public education is what's best for our state.

All of this – the metaphor, the coast redwoods, the restoration and conservation, the innovation, and the advocacy – all of this represents an incredible, possibly even a transformative, opportunity born of unity and community. I know this is your conference theme – unity, community, opportunity. It also needs to be our marching orders, our motivational phrase, our fueling thought. Because if the kids are our inspiration, then “unity, community, opportunity” is our call to action.

Thank you, and I look forward to connecting with you throughout this conference and beyond.

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