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How to leave a legacy: funding public schools and libraries

Testimony as prepared for delivery by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

MADISON – *The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction today released the following testimony, as prepared for delivery by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly on the 2023-23 biennial budget. While the DPI was not called to testify before the Joint Committee on Finance in an agency hearing, Dr. Underly and other members of her Cabinet will continue to use every opportunity to advocate for the passage of Gov. Tony Evers' biennial budget, which provides historic support of public schools and libraries during a time of critical need. Below is Dr. Underly's testimony as prepared for delivery if the DPI had been called to testify before the committee.*

Thank you for the opportunity to share the current situation of our public districts, schools, and libraries, and to discuss with you the best way to fund our schools, strengthen our communities, and most of all, support our families and our children in Wisconsin. Because the most important person for you to think about today is the child sitting in a classroom in Wisconsin – what do they need from us today for them to grow into the future leaders of our state tomorrow?

Before I was elected to this office, I was a teacher, a principal, and the superintendent of a rural Wisconsin district where my two children attended school. They are both in high school now, so I experience our public schools as an educator and also as a parent, specifically as the mother of a child with special needs. Of course, before I was any of these, I was a student in a public school where I found teachers who helped me grow into the learner I needed to be to develop into the leader I wanted to become. All of this combined is why I wanted to be state superintendent in the first place. When you add it all up, it's also why I'm excited to share our budget priorities with you, because public schools and public libraries are good for all of us.

The current situation for our districts, our schools and educators, our families, and our students... it's a tough one. I'm not saying this to be defeatist; in fact, I want to paint a picture of the reality we are facing precisely because I am hopeful! I deeply believe that we all want great public schools in our state; we have an incredible opportunity in this budget to create a legacy of well-funded K-12 public education in

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Wisconsin. I appreciate that we might approach this goal through different policies, and I also appreciate that rich discussion. However, to have it, we need to understand the reality we are facing in our state, the reality of that child sitting in a desk in any and every classroom in Wisconsin.

Our districts, our teachers, our families, and most significantly, our kids are hurting. We can change that if we come together on some budget solutions.

Our districts are hurting because they are not effectively funded by the state, and because they are facing a stark reality in the form of a looming deadline for the spending of their federal funds. Those one-time federal funds were designed to solve a specific problem: to address the specific challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on our schools. But our districts have also had to use these one-time federal funds to address the challenge of running schools during intense inflation, a nationwide and multi-sector staffing shortage, and a youth mental health crisis, all without being able to rely on increased, ongoing state funding. This is why so many districts – dare I say most or even all of them – have had to use their one-time federal funds for ongoing work, valuable ongoing work, all of which will come to an abrupt (and harmful) halt if we don't do something fast.

The good news is that we can do something fast, and that is to pass Governor Evers' budget as it currently stands.

I know that I've been saying that districts are facing a fiscal cliff for a while now, and it's an apt comparison, but I'm not sure it really does the situation justice. To better illustrate what this cliff looks like in a district, I'm going to use the example of one to better paint the picture for all.

Take the School District of Jefferson. In talking to Superintendent Charles Urness, I heard how thankful he was to be able to invest in new, high quality, evidence-based curriculum thanks to his federal funds, although he also pointed out that his district needed that new curriculum long before COVID-19. He was even more thankful for the ability to hire staff to help respond to the needs he is seeing in his schools; specifically his ability to hire a behavior interventionist at the middle school level, a reading interventionist at the elementary level, and a math interventionist to work with students at both the middle and elementary schools. However, he was quick to identify the impact of hiring staff with one-time federal funding: the funding was designed in reaction to the impacts of COVID, and those impacts are not done even though the funding almost is. He talked about how difficult it is to plan in the face of so much uncertainty, and about the tough decisions he worries he may have to make about these staff. The reality is that the federal funding will end, which means so will their contracts, but the kids will still need their services.

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I hear echoes of these same challenges from superintendents of districts across our state: districts with both declining enrollment and with increasing, districts that have gone to referendum and those that have not, districts in rural and urban and suburban areas. Our districts are hurting.

Our schools and educators are hurting, too – struggling with finding and hiring staff, and then struggling to keep them. Teaching is an incredibly difficult (and absolutely essential) job, and we need to pay our teachers well and keep them in the classroom. Jefferson is struggling in this space, but Jefferson is also not alone. Districts across Wisconsin are using their one-time federal funding for staff. What happens to these staff after the deadline, when our districts reach the fiscal cliff? Because I can tell you what happens to the children and families. They get hurt. This is where the reality of our districts and their budgets become the reality of our children in those classrooms, sitting in their desks across Wisconsin.

The reality is that our families and our children are already hurting, even before this fiscal cliff. It's been a tough few years, and prior to that, a tough decade. The emotional, and sometimes physical and medical, stress of the pandemic coupled with stressors like inflation potentially leading to food insecurity – these are significant sources of pressure.

When I speak to parents in particular, they are concerned about one thing more than anything: mental health. The fact is that our children and youth were experiencing significant mental health challenges long before now, and now that we know that, we cannot look away, we cannot do nothing. I want you to think of five children in your life: your own, perhaps a grandchild, niece or nephew, or a neighbor. Think about them while I share this data: one-third of our high school students are reporting depression, one-half are reporting anxiety, one student out of five has seriously considered suicide in the previous year, and almost one in 10 actually tried. That information is from our Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and I also know it is a reality that parents, educators, and caregivers across our state are all too aware of. We must take action. School-based mental health makes a difference. After all, for mental health services to work, they have to really reach kids. We know how to reach kids, because we know they are in our classrooms. Meeting the kids where they're at – in school – is meaningful action.

We know we have work to do to support our children's mental health, and we also have work to do to improve their academic outcomes. Those two things – their emotional well-being and their academic success – are intricately connected, we must take action on both. We must take action to improve both for all our students, and also to specifically address the egregious disparities in our data. We know (and frankly have known for a very long time) that the disparity in our test scores between Black and white children is

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unacceptable. It is also actionable. We can, and must, take steps to get the resources and strategies our students need into their classrooms, and we do that by ongoing, robust investment in what we know works to support every single kid in every single classroom in Wisconsin.

This is our reality. And still, in the face of all this hurt, I have a lot of hope. Because there are solutions to these problems! There are investments and policies and best practices that can – and will – address these challenges.

We all want a strong Wisconsin. We want a strong, growing future for our state – a strong economy, a growing population, and rich contributions from our state across our nation. We want thriving, healthy communities. And we know public schools and public libraries are the heart of their towns.

We want strong individuals, strong residents, strong citizens of Wisconsin. It might sound selfish, but I think we all want to retire someday, and I want to be able to canoe in rivers full of fish, and drive over structurally sound bridges to see my grandkids, and be well-cared for if I have medical complications. The reality of our collective future is that we need adults in that future who can make all of that possible – who can monitor water quality, and engineer and construct bridges, and staff our health care facilities. Those future adults are the children sitting in our classrooms today.

All of this – from the economic strength of our state to the state of our retirements – it all rests on the shoulders of strong public schools and libraries. We ensure our strength and our future by robustly funding public education in Wisconsin. What an incredible legacy for all of us to leave – to shore up a strong future for our kids, for ourselves, and for our state.

We create all that strength by passing this budget. The good news here is that our legislature has this once-in-a-lifetime historic opportunity to leave a legacy that can do all of these things. Let's get specific.

We know that kids learn better with breakfast and lunch in their bellies. Ask any kid who has had to skip breakfast how well they can concentrate on their studies. That is why we need to increase the breakfast reimbursement rate, incentivize buying local, and why we need to fully fund school meals for all children by investing \$120.2 million starting in the second year of the biennium. We learned from the federal programs that provided universal access to free meals during the height of COVID-19; it helped families and reduced stigma for our kids. In talking to district superintendents, I hear about the growing negative lunch balance they now have to try and collect. Let's make a change and make universal free meals the new reality. What an incredible legacy that our legislature can provide to our families, and follow in the footsteps of other states that have already begun this process.

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We've also been learning from other states, and from our own districts, when it comes to improving literacy outcomes in Wisconsin, and we've seen so many of our districts use their one-time federal funding for reading specialists and professional development. We want to build on the coaching model that has seen success elsewhere with \$20 million to invest in literacy coaches and professionals trained in evidence-based instructional strategies, as well as almost \$5 million to engage with stakeholders on this work. Building on the literacies of our families with these strategies will help make our children not only strong readers but also kids who love to read!

We are in a youth mental health crisis, and we have the opportunity, not to mention the moral imperative, to take action to save lives. We do that with the almost \$273 million investment this budget makes in mental health supports at school. Again, school is where the kids are! Think of those five kids I mentioned previously who leave an imprint on your lives. We know they are hurting, and we know we can reach them at school. This investment is designed to be enough funding to make it possible for every district, no matter how small, to hire and retain a school-based mental health professional, with increased funding per pupil. Superintendent Urness from Jefferson was sure to point out the importance of student services staff; he wanted us to know that student services staff are needed in rural districts, too, and that it is an incorrect mindset to assume that this need is concentrated only in urban districts. I can attest to that fact. This funding will be a game-changer. In fact, it will be a life-saver for years to come. I am not being hyperbolic; I am being realistic. We know that some of the children in our classrooms are dealing with mental health challenges; in fact, we know some of them are thinking about suicide. I know some of these kids; I know their families. I am sure you do, too. They're scared and they need help. Let's make a difference for these kids and their families. This funding can, and will, save lives.

We've seen so many of our districts devote some of their one-time federal funds to special education, and we have an incredible opportunity to make a difference in the lives of our students and families here, too, in the form of increased special education reimbursement rates. About 15 percent of Wisconsin students are classified as having special needs, and families have been calling for this increase for years – actually, for decades. In fact, the bipartisan Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding recommended increasing the reimbursement rate to 60 percent back in 2019. But due to our abysmal current reimbursement rate of less than 30 percent, we are forcing our districts to make difficult but required decisions. In Jefferson, the superintendent told me, "It's one of the saddest things that every single district has to work with; the low reimbursement rate has an impact." In speaking to our district

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superintendents, I hear it again and again from across Wisconsin, not only the impact on a single year's budget, but also the fact that the impact increases every year.

That is why providing a reimbursement at 60 percent will improve education for every single student - if they receive special education services or if they do not. Our districts also need more funding invested in supporting our English learners, who represent over 6 percent of our student population, which is why the budget calls for over \$48 million to increase reimbursement costs along with other programs and process improvements.

Our kids who receive special education services, who receive ELL services, who have exited these programs or who have never participated in them (but who have had their classrooms enriched by being inclusive) – every kid stands to benefit from these increased reimbursement rates. Again, what an incredible opportunity the legislature has to make a real difference, and leave an incredible legacy. Doing this would prevent school districts from having to make difficult choices and help them finish the school year with sound budgets intact.

We all believe in the power of great teachers; I'm willing to bet every one of us can name a few teachers who made an impact on the trajectory of our lives. We want that for all children, which is why we need to ensure that we not only get great teachers into our classrooms, but also that we support them and their development enough that they stay and continue to impact lives. Teaching is the most meaningful job in the world, and teachers do it because they love it, but if we expect them to do this incredible work day in and day out, we need to support our teachers. Yes, it is a meaningful job, but like I said before, our teachers are hurting, and the truth is that they could make more money doing something else far easier and far less stressful. We must do more to retain our current teaching staff as we also continue to grow it. We need to encourage the incredible people already working in other positions in our schools to become licensed teachers, we need to make it more affordable to become a teacher through our educator prep programs, and we need to support our teachers who take on mentorship roles in their schools and districts. We do this through investments in "grow your own" programs that create a pathway to teacher licensure for staff in non-teacher roles, through stipends for student and intern teachers so they don't need to work multiple jobs while also pursuing their degree, and stipends for the cooperating teachers who supervise them. We need to invest in professional development for our teachers as well, so that they can grow in their profession and learn to help even more kids, but not have to do it during their evenings and weekends. With innovative solutions like these, we can strengthen the educator workforce and, in turn, impact our children's futures,

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and our state's. In fact, maybe that child we've each been thinking of will decide they want to step up to the front of the classroom and become a teacher with the help of these programs! It's not even just these innovations that will help. There is also the rather obvious but very needed fact that teachers need to be paid more, and increasing their salaries is only possible if the state increases our investment in schools. While we like to think that teachers would work for less salary because it's a noble profession, it's not charity, nor should it be. Our educators are paid through our tax dollars; our legislature needs to step in and allocate more funding to our schools through our state tax dollars so that our schools can pay teachers, and our kids and communities can continue to thrive.

We know these targeted investments are important because they address specific challenges we hear from our districts and schools, educators, and families. But what we hear most of all is the need for increased general funding – an increase in per-pupil funding and in revenue limits. Our schools have been underfunded for so long that we have an entire generation of students who have been raised on austerity and of teachers who have been paid too little while their benefits were also slashed. We have to change this if we want our state to prosper. The fact is that the School District of Jefferson is not unique in its challenges, but its challenges may have uniquely local solutions. That is why our schools need an increase in general funding, enabling each district to respond to its specific challenges in the way that best addresses them. For example, in the case of Jefferson, that means addressing the challenge of having three elementary schools despite only 1,752 total district student enrollment; the superintendent shared their deep commitment to maintaining these schools all while recognizing the funding challenges that commitment entails. Let's get every district more funding to meet their unique challenges.

Before I end my testimony, I want to share the story of another district, Stratford School District in Marathon County. Superintendent Lehman explained it this way: "When you look at the funding we receive from the state, which is the lowest at about \$10,000 per pupil, our enrollment starting to drop, and then state funding has not keeping up with inflation... it's the perfect storm." That storm has driven the district to referendum twice in the past two years, both of which failed, and there is another on the ballot this April. He told me the district has cut over a million dollars out of its budget in the past five years, and after the most recent referendum didn't pass, he met with every staff member in the district and asked, "What can we cut that is the furthest away from student achievement?" This time, if the referendum doesn't pass, the district will have to make even further cuts, starting with middle school athletics, despite the fact that over 80 percent of the district's students currently participate in extracurriculars, despite the fact that we know

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(and he can provide examples) that athletics support academics, attendance, and behavior, and despite the fact that Stratford has had a lot of success in athletics and that those teams help build such strong community, both within the school and beyond. The district is an integral part of its strong community, and that was also evident when Superintendent Lehman talked about how students obtained over 1,000 college credits last year; keep in mind that the entire student population of the district is 811 kids across all grades. As a former tech ed teacher, he was excited to tell me about a recent visit from over 30 area businesses hosted by the teachers and students in the CTE program, and added that the partnerships with businesses are especially exciting because of the specific challenges facing small towns. As he put it, "We want to continue building these partnerships, we want our kids working for our local businesses while focusing on every student becoming career and college ready. Let's get our students working with local businesses now instead of having them graduate, leave our town for college or another job, and then never come back." The district brings Stratford so much – workforce development, community pride, and a richer future. And when you add up all the districts of this state, they give this state the same: workforce development, community, a future.

The reality is that every district has these unique challenges and unique opportunities; every district deserves the investment to meet their challenges and provide these opportunities to the students sitting in their classrooms, opportunities that increased per-pupil funding and revenue limit adjustments can help make possible. Opportunities that you can help make possible.

Let me conclude with this: public schools and public libraries are for everyone. When we say that our public schools are for all, we're often talking about how they are for every student – the fact that we do not turn anyone away, the fact that every kid in every desk in every classroom and school in Wisconsin belongs. But the fact that public schools are for all is actually bigger than that. Public schools and public libraries are for everyone because they impact everyone. Public education is the cornerstone of our democracy, and it is the great equalizer. Our public schools and public libraries are economic engines, they improve our health outcomes, they provide space to come together as a community; in fact, their presence in our communities make our communities more stable, more desirable, and more connected. They are for everyone, and they deserve to get everything they need.

Thank you.

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NOTE: This news release is available online [on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's website](#).