

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DPI-NR 2023-43

Thursday, June 1, 2023

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## Lessons taught and lessons learned: Reflecting on a school year

*A graduation editorial by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly*

As educators, we are taught to be reflective practitioners, always looking at how a lesson went to learn how to teach it better next time. When I taught middle and high school social studies, it was an hour-by-hour, sometimes minute-by-minute, experience in reaction to how a lesson was being learned (or not) by my students. Sure, I was the one teaching the lesson, but we were all learning from it.

I often think about this – lessons taught and lessons learned – at this time of year as we approach final school bells, graduations, and the first days of summer break. And while I may not be leading a classroom’s lessons anymore, as the leader of public education in Wisconsin, I have the privilege to continue learning from the students in our classrooms, and to continue reflecting about how we can be better next time. As this school year comes to an end, I’d like to share some of my learning and reflect back to you, the residents and leaders of this state, a few of the lessons I’ve had the honor of learning from, Wisconsin’s students, so we can listen, learn, and grow as a state.

Our students want us to know that their lives, their childhoods, their experiences, are different than ours were. They’re right. None of us who are in state leadership today sat through active shooter drills as students, or scrolled on social media as a teenager, or tried to navigate a global pandemic and puberty at the same time. Our children are asking us for more support for their mental health and emotional well-being. Let’s give them that support, let’s reach out and ask if they’re ok, and let’s fund our schools enough to make sure they have the resources they need if the answer is “no, I need help.” We can make a huge difference by listening.

Our students are teaching us lessons every day in civic engagement. As I said at the beginning of this school year in my State of Education address, public education is the foundation of a strong democracy because our students need to know how to think critically and make informed decisions about their, and our, future. In that speech, I talked about how our students were going to be “future active participants in our

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democracy,” and I think I would change that phrase today. Because so many of them are already current active participants in our communities. I see it everywhere I go in Wisconsin: students advocating for composting programs in their school cafeterias, or working with staff and community leaders to make their schools greener and more environmentally conscious, or collaborating on letter writing campaigns like the ones we receive about mental health funding and LGBTQ+ inclusion and the importance of civics being taught in schools. I am perpetually impressed by their engagement and advocacy. I cannot wait to see what they do next.

Our students have an important lesson to teach us in finding joy, because there is so much joy in their classrooms and our communities. I saw it in the first-day-of-school excitement last fall, and it was on full display as we announced the 2024 Wisconsin Teachers of the Year in May. Children leapt to their feet, gave each other high fives, and screamed (a lot!) in celebration of their teachers. It filled my heart to see them show their love and appreciation for their teachers, and out of the five award-winning teachers, all five showed that love right back and thanked their students for making their jobs joyful and meaningful. We have so much to learn in that exchange about gratitude and celebration, and about telling the people in your life that you care for them. Let’s take the hint and celebrate each other more. We don’t have to (probably shouldn’t) show our appreciation by screaming, but we can spread the joy just the same.

This isn’t an exhaustive list, of course, and neither are these lessons new, which is all the more reason we need to reflect, learn, and grow joyfully. So, let me take this opportunity to reflect back to our Wisconsin students, and especially to our 2023 graduates, a moment of gratitude and of celebration. You teach us valuable lessons every day, and we are grateful to you for the inspiration you bring to our communities and for the joy you bring to our lives. I cannot wait to see what you do next, and I know that whatever it is, Wisconsin will be better for it. We already are.

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