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State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly's remarks as prepared for delivery for 2023 State of Education Address

Good afternoon. Thank you, Genevieve, for that introduction. I can think of no one more fitting to speak alongside me today than students and teachers from schools across Wisconsin – from Neenah to Janesville, Green Bay to Delavan to Milwaukee. I am so excited for you to become the leaders of tomorrow – in fact, the education that is preparing you for our collective tomorrow is what I am here to talk about today. So, thank you, students, for your words, and thank you to all of you – those of you here in the Rotunda and those of you watching online – I'm so glad you're here to listen to these students and to hear what we all have to say about the state of education in Wisconsin.

I am Jill Underly, Wisconsin's State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and I am going to begin my speech today with a story – a beloved story by Eric Carle that I know so many of us read (or still read) to our kids and our early learning classrooms. “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” is such a well-loved picture book (and you might think it a rather odd place to start a major address on education). I beg to differ. The caterpillar is hungry – very hungry, in fact – and also curious and intent on growing. In addition to being a sweet story about stomach aches, it's one about metamorphosis and change... and it conveniently skips the messiest part of that change. In the book, the caterpillar builds a cocoon, waits two weeks, and emerges a butterfly. But the messy part – those two weeks – is the best, most important part of the story, because the messy part carries with it the most important lesson.

Let me tell you about that lesson.

It's kind of perfect that the first time I heard about the messy part was from a student ... who heard about it from a homeroom teacher... who taught it as a community building writing exercise. Here's what the student, Blue, wrote:

“When a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, there is a moment in the transition when the caterpillar must let go of its form in order to re-form into a butterfly. Inside the chrysalis, the body dissolves into a kind

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of soup. It's not the loveliest part of the process, but without it, there can be no progress. When you feel like everything is falling apart, remember the caterpillar, and be willing to be the soup."

I think it's a hopeful lesson, this story of mess and transformation. After all, change, transformation – it can be messy, and the process is rarely pretty, but it's where the hope lives. It can be easy to feel hopeless in times of change and transition. That's why it's easy to feel hopeless right now; it's true that there's a lot to be discouraged about, a lot shifting under our feet. We are in a moment of change.

There is, I know, a lot of mess. We're through a global pandemic. We're seeing mental health challenges that have been mounting for too long turn into a burgeoning crisis. There is so much division and hate – because it's easy to stoke fear in times of shifting and uncertainty and change.

When we're fearful, it's easy to fall into fighting stance – to feel like we need to be warriors suiting up for battle. But warriors, no matter how joyful, are still dealing in violence. And wars, even those ostensibly about culture, have casualties. Battles cause collateral damage, and we can't risk the hurt any fight stands to cause our kids just because we're scared of change. There's too much at stake – we could lose too much. Destruction is the polar opposite of hope.

It's true – choosing another path can be hard. Tearing something down is always easier than building it. And yet, sometimes what is hard can also be what is hopeful. As the poet Amanda Gorman writes, "the question isn't if we will weather this unknown, but how we will weather this unknown together" – and coming together in times of change is an act of hope.

Besides, teaching is not and has never been about doing what is easy – frankly, neither is governing. Teaching, like governing, is about doing what is necessary. What is necessary for the greater good (again, like governing). To prepare the next generation to create a future for ourselves, and for our children and beyond (sure sounds like governing to me).

That is why I do not believe we are at a crossroads. This is bigger than that. Rather, I believe we're on a mountaintop with a real opportunity to take flight.

We are at a critical moment in history where we can choose hope and soar, or we can choose destruction.

We can choose to try and tear each other down. Or we can choose to build and grow. When we teach, learn, and grow – we do it through acts of hope, humility, and yes, probably a little mess. In teaching our kids what they need to know, in the ways they need to learn it, we create a future for us all. The crux of

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the matter is this: I believe in hope, and that means I believe in our public schools and in our collective future.

Public education is non-partisan for a reason. There is reasoning behind why our school board elections are in the spring, with other races outside of political parties. Public education was placed in our constitution so that it can “provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable; and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children.” Public education, the Common School Fund, the normal school fund, the University of Wisconsin system and tech colleges – these were all written into our founding documents because past and current leaders of this great state knew the future of Wisconsin rests in the hands of our children. What a hopeful action – to ensure our children have the right to a great education, not only the opportunity for one.

Hope powers our public schools. Public schools power our communities. Showing up every day to teach and to learn are acts of hope and exercises in humility. Because teaching is an act of hope, and learning is an exercise in humility.

Teachers teach lessons in the present in order to make the future possible. This is hopeful. Which means the audacious question is... how are they building that future? How are they teaching that future-focused hope?

Students are learning lessons in the present in order to create that possibility of a future. That is hopeful humility. And so the humble, yet necessary question is, again... how are they building that future? What are the valuable lessons they are learning?

Let's ask them, these creators of our collective future – what are the most valuable lessons you've learned? We did – posed the question to some middle schoolers as their school year drew to a close – and they had some pretty impactful answers. Some you might expect, others might come as a surprise, but all of them really need to be lessons we learn as well.

When reading their responses, I was struck as much by their insight as by the lack of strictly academic answers – it seemed everything they held as valuable lessons were a fascinating (dare I say messy) mix of what we think of as traditional school content combined with skills based in social emotional learning or community building. These are the lessons they see as future-focused.

Students told us they valued lessons in how to be succinct and express themselves clearly, from simplifying functions to learning more about the revision and peer editing process, to, as one student said,

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“learning how to express myself through writing was an emotional outlet that kept me from hurting myself.” Just sit with that statement for a minute. I know I’m glad that was a lesson learned.

Some of the kids talked about trust – trusting themselves to stick to their own truth and resist peer pressure and trusting their peers to value each other’s opinions. Part of that trust was also about learning to work together – lessons in cooperation, collaboration, resolving differences. One of my favorite comments was this one: “everyone’s opinions are valuable, and I learned to accept people for who they really are because people are awesome.”

In fact, this comment is why I am so excited about the civics work we’re doing! Because being able to understand – and value! – our different worldviews is the bedrock to an understanding of civics, and that civics learning is how we unlock a strong, civil society where challenging discourse is not only allowed for, but also valued highly, and used as a way to learn from each other and grow together. Sounds like our kids are doing the work, and with our soon-to-be announced civics scope and sequence and the network of civics fellows across Wisconsin, I know that work will only deepen and grow even more valuable.

Speaking of work, developing a strong work ethic was another general theme in the student answers, including an emphasis on self-control and the need to put in effort beyond what you may have initially planned. Part of that recognition was also grounded in lessons learned concerning self-awareness: “it’s ok to say no, it’s ok to ask for help, it’s ok to make mistakes.” I love that.

Think of it this way: a future that we can’t imagine yet is guaranteed to be full of challenge and uncertainty. It might even be a little messy. And the mess is why we need to believe in growth, and especially growth from mistakes, as being both possible and good. Believing in growth is hopeful, and it is humble. Our students, who are closer to that future because in some ways they are already living it, can be a source of that hope. And the beautiful mess inherent in change is why we need to teach our kids these valuable lessons they will need in a future they will create.

In reality, their future is a place they are currently living and creating by being the diverse learners they are, and by teaching and learning the inclusive lessons they find such value in.

The truth is, the society we need to prepare them for already exists in some ways, and that fact is just one more reason we need to prepare kids for their future and not for our past. Because their current reality is already different from ours.

Our children’s society is more diverse than ours is. Visit any classroom – they are the most diverse communities in our state. It’s a function of their age group and our inclusive public education system, and

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thanks to this diversity in their present, they will grow up to value it in their future. They already do – one student put it this way: “as diverse as we are, when we come together and share, we can learn so much and accomplish a lot.”

Our children’s communities – their classrooms – are also some of the most inclusive and equitable places in our state. This is thanks, again, to their diversity and the fact that public schools are for everyone, and is also despite the push from some leaders to try and homogenize learning in a way that is just not reflective of historical or current reality, nor of a child’s lived experience. It is also thanks to intentional community-building and social emotional learning in our classrooms that creates a deep understanding of educational equity among our students. It was a young person who I first heard make this comparison, and I think it’s an apt one. She said: “equity is a lot like firefighting. When the Amazon is burning, we don’t insist on dumping water on every forest on earth just out of some sense of fairness. No, we send firefighters to the rainforest because that is what the rainforest needs. Which also turns out to make the air more breathable for the entire planet.” From the mouths of babes, eh?

While we’re talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and about how meeting the needs of our most vulnerable kids is actually helpful to all... let me share a couple reminders. First of all, this is a good moment to remember that curriculum which reflects the diversity of the human struggle and progress is, in fact, reflective of the history of this country, and that affirming that the lives of our Black, Indigenous, and students of color matter is not political. It is a statement of fact. Also, it bears remembering that safety is a requisite for every kid, and creating safety for LGBTQ+ kids is not controversial. It is the bare minimum. Because every kid in this state is “our kid” and we need to make sure all kids are accepted and safe.

Because all of this – diversity, equity, and inclusion in our schools – all of it makes it possible for our kids to thrive academically and personally. To thrive as unique learners and as unique children.

All the “problems” and accusations we lob at each other – they are adult problems. Not kid problems. We, as adults and as leaders, are so busy fighting about issues that our children have moved so far beyond – honestly, our kids are the ones who are forward-thinking and future-focused. And so, when we ask them the question of what lessons they value, of course their answers show us how well they know that learning is about academics as well as emotional maturity and the ability to work effectively together! Because they know they are becoming global citizens and that the future will be here – and will be theirs – faster than we can imagine. Yet, right now, some leaders seem intent on preparing them based on our past as opposed to their future. But that’s not what they need. And they know it.

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As leaders, we have so much to learn from our children. We need to prepare them for a future we can't see yet... but that they will create. How can we all create a present that builds towards that future?

Again, it seems most appropriate to ask them directly.

We have a State Superintendent's Youth Council, and considering Wisconsin's need to be future-focused, they struck us as the right people to consult on the question of the future of Wisconsin's schools. The question posed was: "if you could change one thing in your school, what would it be?" Let me tell you... again, they have some really impactful answers that we could all stand to learn from. Here are a few that really stood out to me.

Our young people know the way we fund our schools in Wisconsin, and they see the need for change. They know it is inequitable. They visit other schools, compete against them in sports, they know which of their friends from church or 4H have programs or classes in their schools that they themselves don't have. And they wonder why they must go another year without a chemistry teacher, or new football helmets, or air conditioning.

Our young people are deeply concerned about the way success is measured in schools, and they issued a pretty resounding indictment of rote learning and the testing that emphasizes it. They eloquently identified concerns I share with an over-emphasis on test scores because they do not focus on the deep critical thinking skills that are so valuable for our students' futures but rather information that can fit into a multiple choice box. This comment really gave me pause: "we need to teach students not to determine their self-worth based on grades and test scores." I would contend that we need to teach adults to do the same concerning our schools.

Our young people are calling out for the skills and room to engage with difficult – and needed – conversations. They want their schools to be places where they can study complicated histories, have meaningful discussions, and learn how to be involved citizens in a world that grows more diverse by the day. That means our schools must be safe for exploration and engagement, for innovation, and school climate and culture are really established by district, school, and board leadership. It matters what decisions we make, and our children want safety, they want to see leaders address discrimination, they want us to incorporate innovative teaching practices and technology, and they really want adults to stop banning books. As one young person put it, "shutting down reading a book shuts down our chance to learn."

I am grateful for the voices of our Youth Council – I am grateful because I know that imagining a new way forward is an act of hope, and voicing it is about creating that movement forward. Working to bring

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about change is messy in the present, and also necessary for our collective future. The mess gives me hope, too.

We need to start preparing kids for their future, and stop preparing them for our past.

Honestly, I know this is going to sound a little odd, but acknowledging the mess has recently proven to be a powerful step in our own decision-making process. For much of this calendar year, staff at DPI have been working with legislators and key partners on a bill to improve the quality of reading instruction here in Wisconsin. And that work has included acknowledging the mess we were in, in an attempt to learn from each other and move forward with a clear understanding of the current situation and a mutual goal of helping kids. And we got there. Was it messy? Sure. Would I have preferred for it to have been less so? Of course. But did we get a reading bill that will make a difference for kids? 100 percent, yes. And I'm proud of that work and the work we are now undertaking to get our schools access to important support and quality resources – a few pieces of a much larger, challenging, exciting puzzle. This is an example of how we can work together to advance good policy and good research to help kids, and to help the future be brighter for all kids, and in turn, all of us.

At this moment in the state of education in Wisconsin, we're standing on a mountaintop... dare I say a precipice... because we are facing challenges, we are facing uncertainty, and more than a little mess. But the mess is where the hope lives.

Teaching is an act of hope, grounded in a belief in the possibility inherent in teachable moments.

Learning is an exercise in humility because it means acknowledging we don't know everything yet, and because it exhibits a willingness to grow.

Teaching and learning taken together is an act of trust in the mess – in the belief that, in the face of uncertainty, growth is possible and also good for us.

There is a lot of fear in uncertainty and mess. Yet, every day, our educators and our learners choose hope. Despite the challenges – the educator shortage, the financial crunches, the crumbling infrastructure – we can choose hope. Even at the bottom of Pandora's box, that was what was left: hope. We take that hope with us into the future. Hope is good; it provides a foundation and also the materials to build more. It keeps us going and working toward a better world, despite all the mess that tries to derail us.

The question before us all is a question focused on the horizon, on the phase after the soup, on the shape the caterpillar will take after the mess – what lessons can we take into the future? What lessons can we learn together as we prepare our children for a future beyond what we have ever known?

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Maybe the caterpillar – its hunger and its mess – can help us with an answer. Eric Carle wrote about uncertainty, about the unknown and the fear it brings. And he explained that his books were designed to counteract that fear, to show children that learning is both fascinating and fun.

Learning these lessons and collectively moving into a future where we will hand the reins over to our children as they grow into adults – it will not be linear or obvious or easy. It will be messy. We will make mistakes. But remember, our middle schoolers told us it was ok to make mistakes. We will need to learn the lessons they are learning. We will need to be self-aware as we work hard on our collaboration and interpersonal relations. But we'll get there.

We'll get there because we believe in our future. And that means we believe in growing.

After all, creating a future based on lessons we learn together... what could possibly be more hopeful (or more challenging) (or more necessary) than that? The people doing the teaching and learning in this state are hopeful. They are growing themselves and building a future for all of us. We, as elected officials, can give them hope by learning from them and doing the same.

Maybe one of the middle schoolers had it right when she shared her lesson – the one she knew would be valuable going forward into her future: “the most important lesson I learned this year was that you never stop learning lessons.” Our kids need to learn the skills today that they will need to teach themselves the new lessons that tomorrow will require, all in a future that is beyond the wildest imagination of anyone in this room. Yet I'm willing to bet the young people sitting in Wisconsin's classrooms can imagine it, can see it in their mind's eye far better than we can. Good thing they're sharing their valuable lessons and keen insight with us.

Let's listen and learn. If we learn what our students are teaching us, we can return the favor and govern in a way that honors the challenge that lays before us. Because maybe, just maybe, if teaching is about hope and learning is about humility, the future we are collectively building can be a hopeful, humble place. Let's be both the hungry caterpillars and the messy ones, engaged middle school learners instead of jaded adults, young people who build instead of those intent on destruction, students ready to learn together and not warriors intent on tearing each other apart.

Because if we do all that, if we're willing to take on the messy challenge of doing the real, transformative work, then our kids can really take flight. Our future can soar. Hope can power our schools, schools can power our communities, and we can all focus on preparing the next generation for their future, and not our past. That is how we build a collective future together.

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