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## Authentic engagement in education is essential

*State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly invites civil discourse and meaningful community engagement*

This September, I delivered [my State of Education address](#) in the Wisconsin State Capitol. I talked about the incredible teaching happening in our classrooms to prepare the future leaders of this state, and I shared some of the inspiring insights I have learned from our students. I focused on the critical moment in which we find ourselves: a moment when we can choose hope, or we can choose destruction in the way we support our children, their schools, and our communities. I choose hope. And I want you to be part of creating and continuing that hope, together, as a part of our community engagement and strategic planning.

That's why I'm inviting you – the people of our great state – to a conversation about the future of public education in Wisconsin. [When we announced the launch of our strategic planning process](#) in August, we showed our belief in the importance of parental engagement, in community input, and in civil discourse, just as we did with [our release of the Department of Public Instruction's nonpartisan civics scope and sequence](#). Civil discourse is what I believe in, what is being taught in classrooms, and what parents in all corners of Wisconsin are teaching their children. Meaningful parental and community engagement is what we at the DPI are encouraging through [our strategic planning survey, and in-person and virtual engagement sessions](#). Authentic engagement in education is the best way to serve our kids – not legislative mandates.

As a parent and an educator, I know our voices are needed right now. There are some who are intent on tearing public education - and our trust in public service - down. These de-facto extremist groups and their allies in the legislature perpetuate false accusations, make vitriolic attacks, and engage in intimidation. The fact is, when we see this kind of behavior from students in our schools, we call it for what it is – bullying – and we do something about it. We intervene. We redirect. We take the opportunity to pause, listen, learn from each other, and grow.

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We currently see legislation being debated that is not designed to support students, meet their needs, improve academic outcomes, and strengthen the future of our state. Instead, this legislation is aimed at [destroying trust between families and schools](#), threatening the freedom to read [in school](#) and [in public libraries](#), and raising the specter of [punishment for discussing ostensibly controversial](#), but actually very relevant, topics. Through it all, these extremist groups and their allies claim they're protecting children. They claim they stand for liberty. There is nothing liberating about a war against democracy in which our kids are the collateral damage. Neither these bills nor these groups actually amplify parental voice; for that, we need authentic parental and community engagement like our strategic planning sessions, in addition to the communication and collaboration I know educators and parents are engaged in across our state as they work together to serve the needs of the kids we all care so deeply about.

Here is my message to Wisconsin: do not look away. Do not get distracted by hyperbolic claims or willful misinformation. Do not feed into fear or stoop to their level. Civil discourse is essential to our democracy and our democratic institutions, and it poses an existential threat to extremist groups. Democracy will prevail. Yet, damage will be done in the meantime. Because it's one thing for fringe groups to attack public education; it's another thing entirely when extremist ideology takes root in proposed legislation designed to chip away at access to high-quality education and intellectual freedom, integral tenets of a pluralistic society, inclusive and welcoming communities, and a strong democracy with engaged citizens.

You know where you can find authentic community engagement? In our inclusive, welcoming classrooms and libraries where kids can be themselves, explore great books and big ideas, and learn about the beautiful, diverse, and hopeful world around them. And that engagement, that joy, is what we, the parents who extremist groups do not represent, must speak out to defend. I should know; I'm a mom, and that's what I'm doing today.

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**NOTE:** A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly [is available on the Wisconsin DPI's website](#). This guest editorial [is available online on the DPI's news release webpage](#).