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

MILWAUKEE – State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly gave the following remarks today, as prepared for delivery, at the 2024 Wisconsin State Education Convention.

“This week, we remembered one of our state’s strongest champions of public education - Senator Herb Kohl. In a video released at his memorial, Senator Kohl said, ‘Education is the very foundation of our society, of our civilization. We must have well-educated people if we’re going to preserve our democracy.’ I couldn’t agree with Senator Kohl more. And alongside his commitment of massive resources to support teachers and students, his words also remind us that our public education system should be about getting every kid what they need – in the way they need it – in order to achieve success. We can use test scores to measure success, but we can also measure success in so many other creative and meaningful ways. There are also broader measures of achievement and growth that make a school great, and make a student successful in life.

“Successful schools are where every kid is welcomed and affirmed... and where every student is ready to learn and achieve their own success. A classroom of joy and support – and even laughter – is a classroom full of engaged learners.

“Success, to me, means every kid gets the support they need to learn to read, so they can turn around and read to learn.

“Success also means breaking down barriers so that every kid can access meaningful learning that is relevant to their interests and goals in life. Then, we are building not only that child’s future, but we are building our state’s future – because our schools are the economic and democratic engines of innovation and citizen engagement.

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“I am proud to believe in our public schools, and to believe in the fact that they are for everyone. I believe that ensuring everyone – especially our most vulnerable kids – get what they need for success in our schools, is precisely how we make them great for all children.

“I want to be very, very clear: inclusion is what is best for kids.

“And, at this moment in time, when we have a massive budget surplus, we must come together and work for greater investment in our schools. I’m really proud of our Governor, who is also one of my predecessors, for his leadership over the last three budgets – we’ve turned the corner on the cuts we had under his predecessor. We have a friend in Governor Evers, but the truth is, I don’t think that the small increase the legislature allocated to us last year – a small increase that does not get us anywhere close to where we need to be – is what our schools and kids deserve.

“Right now, Wisconsin currently has over seven billion dollars available, some of which is assigned to a so-called “rainy day” fund. And yet, if you ask any educator, in any school classroom, and they will tell you that it is pouring rain.

“One place we should start, and where we can start now, without waiting for the next budget, is a renewed commitment to special education funding. It is a fiscally responsible choice – and a morally responsive one, too.

“And not just special education – Investing in mental health, making free, healthy meals accessible to all, increasing sparsity aid and bilingual/bicultural aid – these are all the right choices to make. I urge our legislature to step up and make the right choices, and to do it now. Again, it is what is best for kids, and it is what is best for Wisconsin.

“Asking what is best for kids is not a new concept to you as education leaders, and yet I also know that you, as school board members, as district and school administrators, as school business professionals... you are asked to make so many decisions and respond to so many competing interests, that question – what is best for kids – can sometimes get lost in the shuffle.

“This is our greatest responsibility – to always center the students. I’m not claiming it’s easy. I am asserting it is essential. And I know that, while public education leaders have always faced challenges, in our current environment, you are facing intensified attacks on your work. I know you know it, but it bears stating the obvious: attacks on educators, and politicizing our daily work in schools and libraries, is not what is best for kids.

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“Classrooms and libraries are not meant to be battlefields... and attacks – even verbal attacks, and especially legislative attacks– are unacceptable when, at root, **we are talking about kids**.

“These attacks are dangerous distractions. They cannot be allowed to continue. We cannot allow it. Standing up for our education system, and the freedom to let teachers teach, and parents parent, is what is best for kids.

“Politics in our schools is not just a recent phenomenon – but it does seem that in recent years, these attacks are increasing, in volume and in vitriol.

“What is also newly evident is the pattern of misinformation and outrage, specifically designed to sow distrust in our public schools, our teachers and education leaders, and our public institutions. Misinformation, outrage, and distrust are exactly the opposite of what is best for kids – and they undermine and destroy democracy.

“In my time as state superintendent, we saw attacks on basic COVID-19 safety protocols and policies about hybrid learning. These were difficult decisions made to try and keep our kids safe and healthy – decisions we each made, using the best available information, to do what was best for kids.

“Then, attacks came for “CRT”... or rather, against any difficult but needed lessons about the true, complicated history of the United States, and difficult but needed conversations about the lived experiences of our learners and educators of color. Teaching these lessons and having these conversations are what is best for kids – every kid.

“Then attacks have come for trans kids, attacks dressed up in false assertions of virtue that let transphobic legislation hide behind accusations of sexism, while in reality, these attacks weaponize something as innocuous as wanting to belong, often simply by playing sports on a team, or being comfortable going to the bathroom. These attacks are literally an attempt to weaponize the joy and comfort of children. Inclusive policies that protect trans kids – their joy and their health – are what is best for every kid.

“Now, the attacks are coming for our libraries – the books they hold, the people they employ, and the intellectual freedom that is their foundation. Ensuring the freedom to read and access to diverse materials that foster curiosity and diversity of thought – that is what is best for kids.

“What, or who, is next? Because make no mistake, there will be a “next” in this pattern of attacks on public education and democracy.

“Let me harken back again to Senator Herb Kohl’s words. He was very blunt. He said, ‘It is paramount, if we do a good job of educating our people, then our democracy can be successful. But if we

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don't, there's great peril. I think we see much of that in today's world. Education is a never-ending job, particularly in a democracy.'

"To prepare for what is next, we need to ask ourselves two more questions (in addition to "what is best for kids?"):

1. Who are we?
2. How do we respond?

"We is the operative word here.

"You may have noticed that, while I've been talking about these attacks, I have not identified the attackers. I am doing that very deliberately. Who we are is more important than who they purport to be.

"So, who are we? We are educators who always ask the question "what is best for kids?" And what do we do next? How do we respond?

"That one is a little trickier, because the easy answer would be to fight back. But this isn't about doing what is easy, it is about doing what is right. And this can't be about fighting back... because this shouldn't be a fight in the first place. This is about making our voices heard. Sharing our perspective. Speaking our truth about what is best for kids and how we can best support their success.

"We respond by making our case, by standing up for what we believe in – strong schools, with engaged parents, and teaching kids to think critically. We respond by leading. And by leading, we strengthen public education and democracy.

"So, please, remember, for every discussion you have as a school board – every proposal you make, every vote you take; for every decision you make as an administrator or school business professional; for every lesson you teach or choice you make to reach each and every kid... ask this question of yourself and each other: "how can we do what is best for all kids?" You play such a critical role in moving our state forward by asking that question.

"I want to conclude with a quote from Bobby Kennedy because I think it really drives home two of the things I've talked about today – leadership in raising our voices and of thinking about meaningful measurements of success.

"The day after announcing his candidacy for president in 1968, Bobby Kennedy came to the Midwest for rallies at colleges, and part of his speech at the University of Kansas really speaks to how we

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can measure success if we think creatively. He wasn't talking about standardized assessments, but rather a different set of numbers – the Gross National Product. We could easily substitute standardized assessments for the GNP.

“Mostly, he identified what the gross national product did not measure, and in doing so, reminded his audience – young voters – of the need for hope in leadership. He reminded us of other measures of success: ‘... the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.’

“I often think of this. It makes me proud to be an educator and a leader, in addition to being a proud American.

“Not because tests do not measure something, but because I know they do not measure everything. I am an educator who knows that the health of our children, the quality of their education, and even the joy of their play are essential to any measurement of Wisconsin's success. I want to be a leader who strongly advocates for the intelligence of our public debate, and an American who believes strongly in the integrity of our public institutions.

“I do all of this – I try to do all of this – by asking “what is best for kids” at every turn. It is the question that opens doors and encourages imagination and collaboration. “What is best for kids?” is the question that forms the foundation of our collective future and strengthens our democracy.

“I invite you to join me in always asking what is best for kids. As educators, one way we must answer is by showing leadership in the face of attacks, and raising our voices in loud and proud defense of public education.

“You are in a powerful position. Your discussions, your proposals, your votes, your decisions – they all really matter. They have the power to change the future because they impact our children. And our future is what our children will make of it. So, let's make sure we're doing what is best for all our kids. So, they can do what is best for their future. That is how we can measure success. Thank you.”

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