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State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly delivers 2024 State of Education Address

MADISON – State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly today delivered the 2024 State of Education Address at the Wisconsin State Capitol. During her remarks, Dr. Underly renewed her call for increased investment and opportunity in public education and emphasized the importance of student belonging.

An official photo of Dr. [can be found on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's website.](#)

Below are Dr. Underly's full remarks, as prepared for delivery:

I'm honored to be here as your elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction, delivering my fourth State of Education address.

I'm going to talk a lot today about belonging. Almost every single budget initiative or policy issue comes down to, at its most basic, who we are, and what are our values. The value of belonging is a powerful litmus test. If policies and initiatives create and foster belonging, they're more likely to be successful. If they create isolation, if they silence participation, they are more likely to alienate and be ineffective.

So, it's not lip service when I say that we must make sure that every Wisconsin child feels like they belong and has the support they need to thrive in our public schools. Belonging is the bedrock of our schools, our communities, our workplaces, and our democracy. We are at our best when everyone feels like they belong, and that our collective future belongs to us. All of you sitting here today in this spectacular rotunda, public education belongs to you. It belongs to the people who are watching online. Public education belongs to every community and every citizen– from our most rural to our most urban.

Since last year, the Department of Public Instruction has carried out a strategic planning process, getting feedback from people across Wisconsin about our mission, goals, and methods. Much of what you'll hear today is a reflection of the priorities Wisconsinites gave us during that process. And very clearly, Wisconsinites have told us that we need to make sure that public education is for everyone.

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Public education belongs to every Wisconsin child. Let's talk about the phrase: Every Wisconsin child. No matter a child's zip code, their family origin, whether they're Black or white or a member of one of our tribal nations. Public education belongs to every child. No matter their special education needs, their physical, or their mental health needs. Public education belongs to every child. No matter their housing status or their migrant history – public education belongs to every child.

No matter their gender or their orientation or the configuration of their family, say it with me: Public education belongs to every child. Every child means every child. Every child deserves access and opportunity. When we provide access, we create opportunity. So many things bind us together as Wisconsinites. We are stronger and better when we invite more people to the table. In Wisconsin, we belong to each other.

Folks who are constantly trying to pit us against each other? They're bullies. So, I'd like to say unequivocally, if someone isn't helping to create a welcoming environment for all kids, if they're targeting public schools, teachers, librarians, and administrators, they're not trying to be a part of what we co-create. They want control. That's not what I am here for, or what we're here for.

For the majority of my life, I've stood up to bullies. By high school, I learned that bullies back down when we stand up. So, I started standing up. And I haven't stopped. And I want every child in Wisconsin to know: we will stand up to bullies, and I will stand up for you. Every single day.

It's my life's work to make sure every child, every teacher, every family feels and knows they belong. We've come a long way, and we will not go backwards. Every community in this state deserves to have the resources you need so your kids can grow strong. I live in a rural area, but I know that kids who live in denser areas may need different things from what my kids do. I want to clearly state: Our kids aren't better off when other children suffer. When we fail any students, that has an impact on every one of us.

We can and must close the opportunity gap between students with ample opportunities, and those without. Because helping all kids thrive means all kids thrive. Isn't that what we're doing here?

So, when we hear that students are struggling, we need to pay attention. Things don't get better when we look away, or when we blame kids for their own struggles. We are the adults, and it's our job to make things better.

Right now, our youth are experiencing an alarming and profound mental health crisis, and we must unite to take immediate action. In the DPI's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 59 percent of Wisconsin high school students – almost six out of every 10 Wisconsin high schoolers – are telling us they

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feel anxious, depressed, or suicidal. Each day, these kids carry an incredible burden. They're worried about their parents, about their friends, and their teachers, and they worry about school violence.

The data is difficult to look at. But we cannot look away. Our kids are in immediate need of our collective help. And the rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts are off the charts for our LGBTQ youth. 79 percent report anxiety. 63 percent experience depression. 40 percent say they have considered suicide. This is a crisis.

Every child feeling like they belong in our public schools means every child. No exceptions. No human being, less a child, should feel isolated and alone with these feelings and thoughts.

We know: the best way to create positive mental health is to talk about it and to do something about it. So, to every child out there who is struggling and feels isolated, I want you to know: You belong in Wisconsin public schools. Not despite who you are, but because of who you are. Because we are much stronger together. Because you matter. Every. Single. One of you.

We know what we need to do to address this mental health crisis—we must increase mental health services and resources in our schools. The status quo is not sustainable. I want to thank Governor Evers for his investment in student mental health. We must make sure that all our students get the help they need, when they need it. No student should have to wait to get help.

The DPI's next biennial budget request will again ask that we fully fund mental health aid for our students. We know what works, so let's fund it. Help us build momentum by letting your legislators know this is a top priority for you.

When we talk about supporting our students, we can all agree that every kid deserves to have adults who care for them, believe in them, who see them, and who listen. Now, that may be a parent or a caregiver. But for many kids, it may only be a trusted adult at school. I'm sure many of us don't have to think too long to remember a teacher or staff member who recognized us as a child, and made us feel welcome.

Educators, staff, aides, principals... they create the web of care and support for our kids. So, when we talk about belonging, we must also talk about valuing our educators so that they, too, feel like they belong. If we want to keep our teachers— the ones who make such a huge impact on the lives of our kids— we need to pay them for the important work they do. Pay them. This is a no-brainer.

You know that old saying, "you can't pour from an empty glass"? Well, that's what we've been asking our teachers and our schools to do. Teachers are one of Wisconsin's most important resources. We shouldn't take their work, their service, and professionalism for granted. We cannot continue on this path

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and still expect quality educational outcomes for our kids. As they say, the math isn't mathing. In addition to pay, we also need to look at the reasons so many educators are leaving the classroom, especially our young teachers.

Educators tell us the increased workloads and bureaucracy are big reasons why they leave or plan to leave teaching. So, you may ask, how bad could this be? Well, almost 40 percent of our young, qualified teachers in this state exit the profession after just six years. That's almost half of our new teachers, gone. This figure is a wake-up call.

Data shows that special education is an area where we have some of the greatest need in our education workforce. So, at the DPI we've developed a program called the Special Educator Induction Program. We worked with special education teachers and leaned on their experience to develop this program with the Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services. We are helping develop new special educators' skills and give them the support they need to keep them in the profession.

Teaching needs to be a sustainable career path. We want and need Wisconsin teachers to know they belong and can succeed in our public schools.

While we're talking about special education and supporting teachers, we also know that in order support our educators and students, we must increase special education funding. This isn't a want. It's a need.

So right now, our districts receive reimbursement from the state for only about one-third of the cost of special education services. This is not nearly enough. And it means many districts continue to struggle to afford to provide services and retain staff. As a state, we need help districts afford the cost of special education services. These services are legally mandated. It's the right thing to do, and all our students benefit when special education needs are met. The time is now to build a bipartisan majority. The state must fund special education at least to 60 percent. Investments to support our teachers, special ed, mental health, these are interconnected and will help us stem the tide of teacher attrition.

Let's talk for a moment again about belonging. Remember how I said in the beginning that Wisconsin public schools belong to you? That means not just you, as an individual, but the collective you. In order for us to do better for our kids, we must talk with our neighbors. Not just the ones we agree with. Everyone has a stake in what happens in our public schools.

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Your political party, your religion or your zip code doesn't determine whether you are right or wrong. What I do affects my neighbor, affects their neighbor and so on. We all belong in Wisconsin. It's not some Pollyanna dream to think we can work together. We have done it!

In fact, just in the past year, we've worked with legislators across the political spectrum to develop innovations in literacy and civics instruction. We passed Act 20, our bipartisan landmark literacy legislation. It was difficult— especially in such a charged political environment. At one point, negotiations got tough, but I didn't back down — I would not let this bill require us to hold kids back in third grade. The point is to help kids catch up with their peers, not hold them back. And in the end, we were able to agree on a way forward.

You see, ultimately, we are unified in the value of literacy. It's a gateway to understanding the world. When you learn how to read, you learn how to think. We need to teach our kids to read because they will read to learn. And that value unified us to get the bill passed.

Now the new DPI Office of Literacy has hit the ground running – giving curriculum suggestions and supporting our educators in improving educational outcomes. We've heard from early adopters that this method has been a phenomenal help and a great leap forward for all students, no matter where they are in their literacy journey.

Unfortunately, our colleagues in the legislature have not released 98 percent of the dollars that were promised to help our districts implement Act 20. That leaves our already cash-strapped public schools to foot the entire bill.

Just earlier this morning in this very building, the Joint Committee on Finance yet again failed to act. Our educators are doing their part in the classrooms, yet the Joint Committee on Finance once again left this critical funding off its agenda. Our kids deserve better. I want to state firmly, and with no malice, on behalf of the state's children and educators: State legislators: Release the funding. Release the funding so our schools (your schools, your constituents' schools) can do the work they need to do.

You say you care about literacy when the spotlight is on you, but you continue to obstruct the release of this critical funding. People across the state see that inconsistency. Let's get that funding released so that we can fulfill the promises we all made to help our kids read.

Now while we're on the topic of reading, let's talk for just a moment about our school libraries. Our libraries provide diverse books and materials to drive students' love of reading and learning. Librarians work closely with teachers and students, supporting literacy and learning. Our schools and school libraries belong to everyone and it's time to stop playing games that hurt our students. No one wins when folks get whipped

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up in a frenzy. No one wants school libraries to promote indoctrination or bullying. But that's what a small group of disgruntled individuals are actually doing. That's projection. So, let's give our school librarians, our public librarians and our library media specialists a big round of applause. They deserve our support. That applause gives me hope.

Our public schools, our public libraries - they are the gems in our communities. And we, the citizens of this great state - we stand up to defend our public schools, our libraries, our educators, and our kids. We need to strengthen our public schools, not attack them. Because, you see, public schools, public libraries... they're public goods. They belong to everyone. Supporting public schools supports our democracy.

Another way we've supported our schools and our democracy in our state is to create and release the first ever K-12 Civics scope and sequence. Part of belonging is feeling you have a voice in your community, and Wisconsin has a long and proud tradition of civic engagement. Our kids need to know how we treat each other in the civic realm - it matters. They need to know how the government works. They should know that their voices matter, and how to make them heard.

Democracy shouldn't be about who shouts the loudest. We've seen that in recent years, and honestly... like the rest of you, I'm way over that. Democracy is about who we bring along with us on the journey. Democracy is about giving a fair shake, and including everyone, because everyone has value and belongs. I'm also proud of our bipartisan work to help our kids learn financial literacy and requiring that we teach about the contributions and history of Hmong Americans and Asian Americans. Together, we're making sure our students are better prepared for the future, while understanding our past.

Along with what we have already accomplished, we still have much more work to do to make sure that Wisconsin schools are truly places where our kids can belong. And like our students will be learning in personal financial literacy classes: To build, we need to invest. Let me be clear: We have more than enough money in this state to fully fund our public schools, and it's time we used it.

The state has a massive budget surplus. And school districts are telling us they need more resources. Most public school districts have gone... are going... or will be forced to go to referendum just to make ends meet. Rebuilding Wisconsin's strong, high-quality public education system requires that we adequately and equitably fund our public schools. So today, I am calling on the state legislature to increase revenue limits and sustainably fund our public schools. They can do this while still keeping property taxes flat.

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It's about priorities. Our kids. Our schools. Our libraries. They are our priority. So, let's talk about how we can invest in our future. Let's talk about how we can make sure our kids are their best selves when they are at school and have what they need to learn.

We need to invest in nutrition programs by providing free breakfast and lunch for all students, as Rachel reminded us all here this afternoon. We can and should expand our farm-to-school programs, allowing our local farmers to help feed their local kids. We can and should expand Career and Technical Education options so our kids can gain valuable skills in a variety of careers prior to graduating. The list of what we want to do and what we can do is long, and we need your help to make these priorities a reality.

But I know we can do this if we do it together. Because I've seen what we've done in the past. I see what we are doing today. And I know that when we have the resources and the support, we can move mountains.

We need to continue to focus on progress, not perfection. Our hopes and dreams for public education are achievable! When you believe in our public schools, in all the folks who make them work. When you believe in our students – our wonderful, bright, challenging, and sometimes, struggling students. When you understand that we are uniquely positioned to help our kids and communities succeed...you don't quit. You won't quit. We won't quit. Thank you for your support, and for being our partners in growth and learning. God bless us all, and together, let us move Wisconsin forward!

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