

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Finance

April 3, 2019 – Hearing on the 2019-21 Biennial Budget Bill

By State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor

Thank you Chairwoman Darling, Chairman Nygren, and members of the Joint Committee on Finance for offering me the opportunity to testify today regarding the 2019-21 biennial budget. Joining me from the Department of Public Instruction today are Bob Soldner, assistant state superintendent for Finance and Management, Dee Pettack, our legislative liaison, and Tricia Collins, director of the department's School Management Services team. We're grateful for the opportunity to talk with you today, and answer any questions you might have.

First and foremost, I believe education is one of the areas that unites us as leaders, as citizens, and as a state. Governor Evers' budget makes critical investments in education funding and educational equity, including critical levels of support for students with disabilities, English learners, student mental health, and more. I had the opportunity to work with the governor in building parts of this budget throughout our tenure together at the DPI, and I applaud his leadership on behalf of the students of our state.

I've also been impressed with the legislature's bipartisan work around areas like school-based mental health, and the work of the legislature's Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding, which is considering many of the same ideas that the department proposed and the governor advanced in this budget. I look forward to working together with this committee, your colleagues in the legislature, and the governor throughout this process to find common ground around what's best for Wisconsin's children.

I'd like to take a moment to talk to you about why education is my passion, and how my own journey informs my perspective. I grew up in Marks, Mississippi, one of the poorest communities in the country. My father had a third-grade education, and my mother had a sixth-grade education. Despite the challenges they faced, my mother knew education was the key to opportunity, the pathway to a better life. She instilled these values in my siblings and me, and fought for us to be among the first black children to attend the all-white public school in my hometown.

As a child, I didn't fully realize the magnitude of what integrating the schools meant. What I saw was the opportunity to access things I didn't have, like getting to use the swimming pool they had at the other school. But I quickly learned an equal right to attend that school didn't mean I'd have equal opportunities. That message was driven home to me when the adults filled that swimming pool with cement to prevent the black children from using it, instead of allowing all of the children to swim together.

Yet, the promise of education fueled me then, as it continues to motivate me today. I left Marks and came to Wisconsin to attend UW-Madison, where I earned both my bachelor's in elementary education and master's in educational administration. I fell in love with Wisconsin, and chose to stay here to build my family, my community, and my career in education. I have dedicated my life to providing all children with the best education possible — as a teacher, principal, assistant state superintendent, and, now, as state superintendent of the Department of Public Instruction.

Wisconsin has a proud history of strong public schools, libraries, colleges, and universities. We have excellent schools, amazing educators and staff, and bright, thoughtful students filled with curiosity, wonder, and possibility. Overall, our students do well in many areas like graduation rates, ACT scores, and participation in Advanced Placement courses and exams. But we also know, when we dig a little deeper

into the data, wide achievement and opportunity gaps persist for too many Wisconsin children. Too many of our students of color, students with disabilities, English learners, and students from low income families continue to struggle to reach their full potential.

These gaps are among the worst in the nation, and deeply affect our children, families, and communities, as well as our state's workforce and economy. By failing to get it right on the front end when our children are young, we see the consequences play out on the back end with higher criminal justice and social welfare costs. It's imperative — for the future of our state and all of Wisconsin's children — that we work together to provide all students with the educational opportunities they deserve.

To that end, the focus of our budget — and my agenda as Wisconsin's state superintendent — is educational equity. Educational equity is providing each child the opportunities they need to achieve academic and personal success. It's about fairness. Some examples of fairness in education, include:

- Building on the important bipartisan work initiated last session, this budget increases our investment in **student mental health** by a much needed \$63 million. State support remains far short of demand, and this budget would significantly expand school-based services, pupil support staff, and mental health training in our schools. With one in five students facing a mental health issue, and over 80 percent of these students going untreated, the time is right to build on our successes from the last session and give every child the help they need and deserve.
- This budget invests in **early childhood education**, including funding equity for full-day 4K, and 3K grants for our state's five largest school districts. One of the most promising ways to eliminate the achievement gap is to address learning deficits early on, and to increase access to high quality, developmentally-appropriate, early learning environments.
- Our budget also establishes a \$20 million categorical aid to fund **after-school programming**, providing more children the opportunity to be in a high-quality environment extending the learning time after the school day is over.
- This budget creates an **Urban Excellence Initiative**, consisting of multiple strategies to tackle the achievement gap in our five largest urban school districts. These districts educate roughly 20 percent of all Wisconsin students and represent disproportionate shares of student groups experiencing our largest gaps. If we want to move the needle, these five districts are key partners in closing gaps.
- To address the **needs of our English learners**, the budget provides an extra support to help this population achieve academic success, including an increase of the state reimbursement rate from 8 percent up to 30 percent by 2021.
- Last, but certainly not least, this budget **ends the decade long freeze on primary special education aid** with a \$606 million investment that would increase the state's reimbursement rate from 25 percent to 60 percent by 2021.

I want to talk to you about special education and why this funding boost is so important. Prior to becoming Wisconsin's state superintendent, I spent 17 years overseeing the DPI's Division for Learning Support, which includes special education, and 21 years as a teacher and a building principal. Providing the best opportunities to our children with special needs is a topic near and dear to my heart.

Around the time I began my career in the early 1980s, the state reimbursed about two-thirds of special education costs. Today, the state's reimbursement rate has fallen below 25 percent, and districts' unfunded special education costs are now over \$1 billion. That's a **\$1 billion funding gap** that school districts must make up somewhere else in their budgets. Especially in a system further constrained by revenue limits, that's a billion dollar diversion that affects all kids.

From large districts like Madison, whose population of students with disabilities is just above the state average of 14 percent, to smaller, rural districts like Butternut and Adams-Friendship, where nearly one in four students have a disability, districts all across the state are grappling with the challenges presented by

a decade of frozen special education funding and a growing gap between costs and reimbursements. Indeed, many of Wisconsin's northern and rural districts have some of the highest percentages of children with disabilities and are disproportionately affected by stagnant state funding. That's why expanding our state's investment is so critical, and will help all districts across the state achieve their vision of high expectations and outcomes for all kids.

I've heard a lot of reasons why the state shouldn't invest more in special education. Some have said this will cause districts to over-identify students, even though they'd still have to spend one dollar to get back 60 cents. The math just doesn't make sense. I've heard the argument that we should just invest in per pupil aid and distribute money equally, but all kids don't have equal needs.

Some have argued the federal maintenance of effort (MOE) requirements that come with the state's acceptance of funds under the Individuals with Disabilities Act create too many problems for us to invest significantly in this area. For local education agencies, I believe MOE is not an issue. Generally speaking, districts meet MOE as long as their combined state and local spending remains the same year over year. If the state's reimbursement goes up, the local contribution can go down and be redirected to other priorities, as long as total special education spending does not decrease.

For state-level MOE, I suppose it's a question of priorities. To me, the idea that some future legislature might want to cut state special education funding is not a compelling reason to deny today's children the funding support they need. The consequences of a \$1 billion funding gap are far more compelling. Districts are required by law to fund special education services, regardless of the cost. And right now, we're putting our schools in a position where they can only meet their legal obligations to children with special needs by pulling over \$1 billion in funding away from something or somebody else, a position that's not good for anyone.

In keeping with our agency's commitment to educational equity, the budget also includes a number of different ways to level the playing field for school districts that face different challenges. Rural districts, districts with declining enrollment, and high-poverty districts face systemic challenges that affect their ability to offer equitable opportunities for our kids. It's critical we do what we can to support these schools as well.

That's why our budget includes significant resources for programs like sparsity aid, high-cost transportation funding, full funding of school breakfast programs, and more. It's why the governor's Fair Funding for Our Future school finance reform package includes — for the first time — a measure of income as well as property wealth in how state general aid is calculated and disbursed. And it's why we continue to call for investment in our state's libraries, which provide access to information, resources, and services free of charge to everyone in our state.

Budgets are about priorities and are a reflection of our values. I know we all value strong public education, and I'm excited about the opportunity we have in this moment to prioritize investment in our students. While we at the state level can't do everything that's needed to level the playing field for our children, we can ensure our system of school finance does as much as possible to give our students — all of our students — what they need to be successful.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to speak with you today, and I welcome any questions you have.

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Carolyn Stanford Taylor is Wisconsin's state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2019-24.pdf>.