

Stanford Taylor's testimony as prepared for delivery at Joint Committee on Finance hearing on the 2021-2023 Biennial Budget Proposal

Tuesday, April 6, 2021 – Madison, Wisconsin

By State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor

Thank you, Chairman Marklein, Chairman Born, and members of the committee for the opportunity to discuss with you today the requisite support for Wisconsin schools and libraries, which formed the basis for the 2021-23 budget recommendations I made to Governor Tony Evers last fall. Joining me from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) are Bob Soldner, Assistant State Superintendent for the Division of Finance and Management, and Erin Fath, Director of the Policy and Budget Team. They are subject matter experts available to provide additional detail when necessary.

Over the last 13 months, schools across the state, from Milwaukee to Washington Island, have continued to provide learning. In doing so, they have had to traverse in a single school year the needs of all learners through in-person, virtual, and hybrid settings influenced by day-to-day changes in what we knew about COVID-19, health recommendations, and quarantines of students and staff. This required significant outlays in personal protective equipment, staff development, hardware and software acquisition, nutrition services, internet access, building modifications, transportation, additional staff, and further resources to address learning disruptions. Yet, this work is just part of the picture. At the same time, schools are planning how to address the learning disruptions caused by COVID-19. Schools are focused on the continuing needs that existed before and will exist after this pandemic. Looking ahead, schools are reimagining their school calendars to provide additional learning time, reexamining summer school, and thinking about new ways to provide and support learning in afterschool programs.

Since submission of my recommendations, the federal government has appropriated \$2.4 billion to K-12 schools in Wisconsin through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds to be used through September 30, 2024. The receipt of these funds does not change the recommendations I made last fall to address the ongoing needs of schools. While these federal dollars will help our education system recover from the effects of the pandemic, they are one-time funds.

The 2021-23 state budget recommendations focus on meeting our students' continuing needs, providing students what they need to learn when they need it to achieve excellence for all. I kept this focus throughout the budget deliberations at the DPI, and I am pleased to say Governor Evers took action, recognizing the needs of students and libraries in every item we brought forward. I thank him for his leadership.

Moreover, to best meet the needs of all students we must restore two-thirds funding for education. Former Governor Tommy Thompson first made this commitment in an effort to

equalize the financial resources available to school districts by decreasing the reliance on property taxes. It is an important commitment by the state to return to this promise.

In my 40 years in education, I have seen incredible strides made and significant new opportunities created for our young people. At the same time, I am troubled by the persistent disparities in educational outcomes. I believe in the power of education to change lives and remain hopeful we can accomplish more working together.

Since taking office, my administration has worked hard to address opportunity gaps.

- I called on school districts to examine their reading programs to include a greater focus on phonics and have backed this up in our reading standards and related professional supports to include a focus on phonics while having a discussion with diverse stakeholders regarding dyslexia.
- The DPI worked in partnership with public libraries and the Public Service Commission to expand and strengthen internet and broadband access to enhance remote learning, provide the resources students need to complete their homework assignments, and serve as a community hub for accessing information to bridge the digital access gap.
- The DPI worked with the USDA to provide more than 130 million meals since March of 2020 to children 18-years old and younger helping meet the immediate nutrition needs of students.
- The DPI competed for and was one of only six states to receive a federal grant award to aid in expanding priority areas in student mental health including: assisting high-need school districts in recruiting and retaining pupil services staff, such as school counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists, to help reduce high student-to-pupil services ratios, as well as increase graduate training opportunities for those interested in pursuing a career as a school-based mental health professional.

Closing the largest achievement gap in the country between black and white students is not easy work. This gap starts early and can be seen throughout our data and continues into postsecondary education. In 2018-19, 13 percent of black students and 48 percent of white students scored proficient or advanced in English Language Arts on tests for grades three through eight. Similarly, in mathematics, 12 percent of black students and 52 percent of white students scored proficient or advanced. This gap is also reflected in postsecondary enrollment with 38 percent of black students and 62 percent of white students going on to enroll in postsecondary education in the fall following graduation. We see similar gaps regarding other student groups when disaggregating data.

There is no simple solution, but rather a number of strategies that must focus on supporting the whole child. We want all students, regardless of where they live and go to school, to graduate college and career ready.

This budget goes a long way towards supporting the whole child to provide what they need when they need it. We have 855,000 students in our public schools attending 2,190 schools in 421 school districts and 26 independent charter schools. Many of these students are coming to us with significant needs. I want to turn to just some of those initiatives.

Fourteen percent of Wisconsin students, 120,000, are identified as needing special education. These students are located across the state in every school district. Public schools, under state and federal law, are required to provide each of these students with the interventions, supports,

and accommodations necessary to meet their individualized educational goals and be successful in school. These services are required to be provided no matter what the budget looks like for a school. This often translates into budget cuts elsewhere for other aspects of school operations and educational opportunities and why it is so necessary for us to provide a greater reimbursement to schools for their costs.

We are currently reimbursing only 28 cents of every dollar spent on special education with state aid. Even with federal aid, schools still absorb 63 percent of the costs for special education with local dollars. In the 2019-20 school year, when schools spent a total of \$1.8 billion serving our students identified in need of special education services, they had to find \$1.2 billion in their general operations budgets to cover these costs. This should not be the case. We can fix this, which is why I asked the governor in my budget transmittal letter to put any additional resources the state may later have towards special education. I am pleased he did. The governor's budget increases funding for special education to reimburse costs at 45 percent in fiscal year 22 and 50 percent the following year and, importantly, makes these sum sufficient appropriations. This increase in special education state aid would mean schools would not have to divert \$710 million over the next biennium from other areas in their budgets to meet the needs of special education students.

Another priority area, we must consider, is mental and behavioral health and the unmet needs of Wisconsin students. According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which the DPI administers for the Centers for Disease Control, the majority of Wisconsin high school students, 59 percent, which is over 500,000 students, have experienced depression, anxiety, self-harm, or suicidal ideation in the past 12 months. This was data from before COVID-19, which studies are showing has negatively impacted student mental health.

Schools and community providers, together, can better serve the needs of students and families. The DPI is requesting \$7 million over the biennium for collaborative grants to assist schools in connecting students to needed mental health services in collaboration with community partners and mental health agencies.

We have 424 students for every counselor, 934 students for every psychologist, 1,418 students for every social worker, and 1,850 students for every nurse. This is why I am asking for \$28.5 million in the first year of the budget and \$30 million in the second year to expand state support for services beyond school social workers to include school psychologists, school counselors, and school nurses. In addition, other school professionals need to be trained to help address student mental health needs, which is why the DPI is also asking for \$1 million over the biennium to expand training available to schools on bullying prevention, school violence prevention, and trauma-sensitive schools.

A basic priority that needs to be addressed is making sure our children are fed. Hunger affects learning. Too many students come to school hungry, and no student should feel embarrassment or shame for not being able to pay for a meal. My budget calls for \$2.5 million to fully fund the 15 cent per meal reimbursement rate in statute and expand the availability of breakfast. I am also seeking \$2.4 million annually to eliminate family meal charges for reduced-price eligible students.

Out-of-school time programming is another key strategy to closing the opportunity gap. 42 percent, close to 362,000 students, are economically disadvantaged. Out-of-school programs improve student academic performance, reduce risky behaviors, and provide a safe

environment. The department is requesting \$20 million beginning in the second year of the budget to expand this programming beyond the current 121,000 students being served.

Navigating the transition from K-12 to college or career begins in 6th grade with academic and career plans. I am requesting just over \$1 million over the biennium to continue to provide the software for students to build their plans, explore career interests and options, and connect directly with employers. I believe this program helps all students and helps close the opportunity gaps for first-generation students, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds.

As I stated earlier, the needs of the whole child are affected by family and community. Wisconsin libraries are the cornerstone of our communities and oftentimes a child's first classroom. Increased funding for the state's public library systems will help local libraries innovate and increase their ability to respond to emerging community needs, which include supporting students, providing early literacy opportunities, workforce development support, lifelong learning, information technology, and access to electronic content and services, including internet access. The DPI is requesting \$6.5 million over the biennium to support library services.

All of us value a strong educational system and strong libraries to support our students and communities. We need to level the playing field, and I believe this budget goes a long way towards meeting the needs of students regardless of where they live. As I close, I would like to use this opportunity to thank our teachers, school professionals, and public librarians for being there for our students and their families. I want to recognize the parents, guardians, and communities for their additional support. As a state, this pandemic required much from all of us, and I am proud of the way we have met the challenge together.

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. This testimony is available on the DPI website at <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2021/stanford-taylor-testimony-joint-committee-finance>.