

Guest Editorial

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Wisconsin students deserve the best

A guest editorial by State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor on 41 years in education

As I reflect on my 41 years in education, I am reminded of how crucial it is for all young people to have the supports and resources they need to be successful in school and life.

Growing up in Mississippi during the Civil Rights era, I was one of 14 children in our family. We lived in poverty, surrounded by a racially segregated environment. By today's standards, I would have been considered at-risk. Although our family did not have much financially, we had nurturing parents who, even with limited educational attainment, realized the value of education and saw it as our passport to a better future.

Despite certain adults in our school having disdain for us because of the color of our skin, my brothers, sisters, and I went home to encouraging parents who told us we could be anything we wanted. Fueled by the inequities and injustices I saw and experienced as a child, I desired to be an educator. I wanted to make a positive change and impact the lives of others. I wanted to make sure those who looked like me did not succumb to the feelings of inadequacy that others tried to impose on me.

My upbringing and lived experiences shaped me and sparked a passion early on in my life, which has never wavered. As a teacher for a decade and then a principal for 11 years in the Madison Metropolitan School District, the principles of equity and advocacy became my North Star. I brought those same goals to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction in 2001, where I served as an assistant state superintendent. In 2019, I was presented with the opportunity of a lifetime when Gov. Tony Evers appointed me to be Wisconsin's first Black state superintendent. I am proud of the department's efforts during my time in office to apply the principles of equity and advocacy so all Wisconsin students might experience success.

Early on as state superintendent, I recall an occasion, which touched me deeply and re-emphasized my mission. A small group of young women approached me with tears in their eyes telling me the impact seeing

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a Black woman in a statewide leadership position had on them. This moment served as an important reminder why a young girl from Mississippi chose to devote her life to education and helping others.

Serving as the chief advocate for Wisconsin schools has allowed me to use my voice to support all youth, especially the underserved; those who have not had the same opportunities or access as others. At the same time, being the state superintendent has put me in a unique position to see our young people finding their own voices, becoming leaders and critical thinkers, and pushing for change in their communities.

I am proud of the strides we have made, but our state still has miles to go. Wisconsin cannot continue to have the widest achievement gap in the nation. As a state, we must do more to support our most underserved students - children of color, those living in poverty, those with different abilities, our LGBTQ students, English language learners, our gifted students, and so many more. I know Wisconsin can be better.

Reducing and removing barriers to our students' success should be our common goal. Activist Marian Wright Edelman once said, "Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it." No one should have to be convinced that supporting our children and their education is the right thing to do. We all have a vested interest in the outcomes of our young people.

I want to express my gratitude to all of those who have helped me throughout my career and have worked to put our students first. I thank each of our educators for taking on the incredible responsibility of instilling a lifelong love of learning in our students and remaining committed to each of them. I applaud our parents and families for providing our children with love and encouragement, like my parents did for our family.

As I retire from my formal role in the coming weeks, I remain dedicated to our children and will stay engaged in ensuring they have what they need when they need it. Our state can only achieve this vision when our leaders and our communities put differences aside and work in unity to make a change in the name of our children. All of Wisconsin's students deserve us showing up as the best versions of ourselves.

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NOTE: A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Carolyn Stanford Taylor is available at <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/statesupt/jpg/carolyn-stanford-taylor.jpg>. This guest editorial is available electronically at <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2021/wisconsin-students-deserve-best>.