



## State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly's remarks as prepared for delivery for 2021 State of Education Address

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*By State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly*

I'm humbled by the trust Wisconsinites placed in me, and am honored to address you today as your state superintendent of Public Instruction.

Standing in our state capitol building today, I'm reminded that a commitment to public education is at the center of who we are in Wisconsin. It's enshrined in our state constitution and evident in our innovations like the country's first kindergarten, our university system, technical college system, and our public libraries. From early childhood through higher education, strong public schooling is an enduring legacy of our state. It's been nurtured - generation after generation - to the benefit of us all, and it is why I know public schools and libraries can unite us. Because they have for generations.

From rural school districts like mine in Pecatonica, to our largest urban areas, and every place in between, our schools and libraries are the bedrock of our communities. They are centers of learning, inquiry, and excellence. But they are so much more. They are the Friday night game, the school play, the band concert, the poetry slam. They are the community centers, holiday bazaars, and farmers' markets. They are the tapestry of Wisconsin life, the common thread that binds us together. Our schools and public libraries unite us.

Or, they can. And they should. Our public schools and libraries can and should unite us because they are where we grow and learn, where curiosity is sparked, and dreams are explored. They are literally the only places in our communities where everyone is accepted. But if they are the common thread to the quilt that is Wisconsin life, the unfortunate reality is that the fabric is fraying. As a parent, a district administrator, and now as your state superintendent, I've had the chance to witness up close - and at various vantage points - the powerful role that our public schools and libraries can play. They give me hope, a feeling of connection and certainty our communities crave during these challenging times. And in turn, we need to show our support and commitment to them. They represent this state's future and its greatest treasure - our children. They deserve more than vitriol and divisiveness. They deserve investment.

The past 18 months have tested us in ways we could never have imagined. We've seen how tirelessly our teachers worked to reinvent their practice, and the great lengths they will go to support our students and their well-being. I could not be prouder of how our educators and school staff have met this moment

The pandemic has reinforced a simple but powerful truth - one that our founders knew long ago: strong schools are essential to a strong society.

Our schools are the glue of our communities and our economy. They connect us, but most of all, they serve as the bond advancing our successful future.

As a former school district leader, I know firsthand that reaching universal consensus on any issue, in any community, is challenging. In most circumstances, it's impossible. But I urge us to keep our focus on what unites us, instead of getting caught up in division. Our kids are doing just that by focusing on their shared desire to be with friends and to learn and to protect each other. It's time for adults to step up, too.

We see a strong commitment to community in the public libraries across our state. Our libraries are one of the most important public spaces remaining. They are welcoming to all and provide unparalleled access to lifelong learning. As a child, I practically lived at my local library after school and during the summer months. And I never would have made it as a Ph.D. student without quiet Saturdays among the stacks. Our libraries are near and dear to my heart, and I know that's true for so many other residents of this state.

During a visit to the Chilton Public Library this summer, the staff impressed us with how they've adapted during the pandemic. From their summer programs, to their online "Cook the Book" cooking classes, and their "Library of Things" program, where local patrons can check out canning equipment, Instapots, sewing machines, and more - they've continued to innovate and find new ways to meet the needs of their patrons.

I also had the chance to visit the Kaukauna Public Library, a beautiful public space retrofitted from an old paper mill to preserve a building that represented an important piece of their local history. Not only is it a space of immense public pride, it's also a place for public discourse and community joining together...like their regular coffee klatch - we could use some more of that these days.

Over the past few weeks, I've also had the opportunity to join Governor Evers and many of our local elected officials and community leaders in visiting schools around the state as they opened their doors for a new school year. The excitement and exuberance of the kids, teachers, and staff was palpable. I even got a chance to demonstrate my foursquare skills! But most of all, I was overjoyed to see our students getting back into the classroom.

When I've visited schools over the past month, I've seen students who are so excited to be learning in-person with their peers and their teachers. I know masks are a contentious issue in so many of our communities. But the kids? They didn't seem bothered. They were willing to do what they needed to in order to keep each other safe and to keep their learning free of disruption. We could learn a lot from them.

We know the vast majority of our students learn best and our educators are most effective when they are physically inside a school. But, as COVID-19 cases among children continue to climb and schools across the country and here in Wisconsin are already facing closures and disruptions, it's up to all of us to do our part to keep our schools open to in-person instruction for all kids.

This has been a challenging year and a half for all of us, and it's understandable to be frustrated. But we can't turn that frustration against our educators or place blame on our schools. We need to give school staff and school board members grace and the support they need as they work to keep kids safe and avoid disruptions in learning.

So much of the discourse and vitriol we're seeing in the public realm is harmful to our schools, our educators...but especially our children. Those kids are watching us, and they'll follow our lead. Let's make sure we're leading in a direction we can be proud of.

It doesn't matter what your political stripes are, or where you live in our state. We all need strong public schools and libraries. We all want the very best opportunities for our children. We all want to invest in their health, well-being and future success, and to leave them a brighter future. Our children's success is Wisconsin's success.

Many of us here today are the products of Wisconsin's public schools and universities. Our success is due to the foresight of those who led before us, who invested in our public systems so that the quality of our education was second to none. Today, I question if we are offering the same opportunity to our children and grandchildren, because I know that we are not providing the same investment.

Our kids and our educators deserve better than divisiveness.

Frankly, we all deserve better. Our public schools deserve our support, our belief in their potential, and they wholeheartedly deserve our investment. Our history of innovation and our commitment to education demand it. Not long ago, Wisconsin's budget invested in our public schools. We saw the impact of this in the kids who graduated from our schools before 2010. We see it in the individuals - many of whom are nearing retirement - who created their own companies, who were able to attend the UW System schools for a fraction of the tuition that they pay now. We see it in our public servants, those who lead our school boards, and those who teach in our schools. But you know what? Wisconsin is still struggling to make up for the cuts that were made to public education during the Great Recession, despite the fact that over half the U.S. has found a way to do so. As a consequence, in 2020, we graduated an entire generation of kids who have known nothing but austerity in our school funding. Who have known years of divestment in their future. This, folks, is the state of our education in Wisconsin.

These shared values - the investment in our future, our kids, our schools - should serve as our collective compass. Our kids and their future are our North Star. And my friends and colleagues, it's time for us to live our values. To build on our past innovation and strength so that we can again say our public schools unite us.

We do that - we create that unity again - through our investment and focus on what matters most. By investing in reliable, equitable funding. By investing in equitable opportunities for all students. By investing in trust for our teachers. All of these are interconnected investments which will help create opportunities and go a long way towards establishing greater trust with and for our educators. But they all require a commitment to making change and unifying support to move forward.

To truly move forward, we need a school finance system that works for all public schools.

Earlier this month, I visited the new Granite Ridge School in the Monona Grove School District and was blown away. It's a new, state-of-the-art building with temperature-controlled classrooms and flexible seating in every classroom so that students with and without disabilities can be comfortable and learn in the least restrictive environment and learn among each other. There are no resource rooms or special education classrooms because they have full integration for all students. It gave me hope and made me want to fight even harder so that every child can have these opportunities. Every school should be able to meet today's standards for personnel, facilities, technology, programming, and curriculum.

Friends, let's stop operating our schools like it's 1921 and instead, let's design our schools and hire both a diverse as well as sufficient staff to meet the needs of all children in 2021.

Families across the state continue to vote to increase their own taxes to fund investments like these that our kids need to succeed. But relying on local referenda only drives inequity and puts us further away from providing a quality public education to every child in every corner of the state. And, frankly, it lets the state leaders in this building off the hook from their constitutional obligations to our kids and our schools.

In the midst of perhaps the most urgent statewide crisis our schools have ever faced, Gov. Evers' budget proposal addressed many of our schools' most pressing needs, like investments in special education, increasing the state's share of local spending, technology costs, and more. The governor stood squarely behind our kids and their needs, but the legislature did not.

Despite an unprecedented budget surplus, the same unprecedented surplus that was foreshadowed a couple of years ago in the 2019 Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding, the legislature claimed one-time money provided by the federal government was sufficient and failed to address the needs of our schools and our students once again.

Make no mistake, the one-time federal money for COVID-19 relief is not enough. It comes with significant strings attached and comes nowhere close to meeting the ongoing needs of our students, educators, or communities. What's worse, when presented with an unprecedented windfall that could have meant game-changing, long-term, sustainable improvements to public education, the legislature's short-sightedness instead put our schools on a path to a fiscal cliff and more hurtful, harmful choices in the years ahead.

After a decade of fiscal austerity - of widening gaps between districts who can pass referendums and those who cannot, of growing gaps between kids who have opportunities and resources, and those who don't - we're now failing a generation of kids, and we're failing our state by putting Wisconsin's economic future at risk. That needs to change. Now. Because our children deserve better.

Folks, things won't change unless we pressure our legislators to make it change. I'm tired of our schools and our children crying for a banquet and when there is the opportunity to have it, being served empty plates by the legislature. It's time for us to confront head-on the inequities plaguing our public schools.

It's a misnomer to say we have "achievement gaps." That language puts the blame on kids. What we have are "opportunity gaps." Some children in our state have more opportunities, and they will achieve more as a result. Meanwhile, the children with the greatest needs carry the heaviest burdens, and they need the most support.

The COVID-19 crisis has intensified inequities and magnified the opportunity gaps that persist among children of color, children experiencing poverty, students with disabilities, and English learners. We need game-changing solutions that level the playing field and provide all kids with opportunities that will set them up for a lifetime of success. We need to ensure all kids and families have access to high-quality early childhood education and wrap around services.

Every family in Wisconsin should have the chance to send their child to full-day, full-week, and fully funded four-year-old kindergarten, and we should support 3K options in communities that want to offer them.

The pandemic brought to the forefront how important access to high-quality, affordable, childcare is to family health and well-being. Our schools are a part of that system, but they do not stand alone. We need to find ways to reinvigorate and reinvest in early childhood. Study after study after study shows us how critical this period is for our youth. But ask any parent or guardian about what it's like to find after-school care, arrange for pick-up during early release, or simply pay for the costs associated with time out-of-school - you'll hear a similar story. The status quo isn't working for families and it's negatively impacting their lives and our economy. This dynamic existed before the pandemic, but like many things, we cannot turn our back on what we learned during that time. And to that end, all of our kids need access to mental health support, school counseling, and robust nursing services in all of our schools.

Children's mental health needs were at crisis levels before the trauma and isolation of the pandemic. Schools lack the resources to support those needs. In rural areas, the needs are especially critical.

And finally, our kids need access to the best and most passionate teachers. But faced with declining enrollments in our schools of education, teachers who are leaving the profession in droves, and a workforce that is too often undervalued or under attack, the future of our schools - and the future of our state - is at risk. We need to invest in teacher recruitment and retention to bring the best and brightest into our schools and keep them there.

If you want a stronger civics curriculum, you'll find no resistance from me. Maybe it would end up resulting in a future legislature that understands the complex legal and societal issues our families and communities face, or the roles and responsibilities of state and local government our framers enshrined in the Wisconsin Constitution. Maybe it will teach the legislature the ironies of all ironies: that if you want open and clean government, you don't post your notice for a hearing on a short deadline so that the stakeholders either don't know about it, or cannot get to the capitol in time to testify. Most of all, maybe it will encourage us to be better citizens and to hold our legislators accountable and set a strong example for our kids of what it means to be civically engaged, but to also civilly engage.

I stand behind our Wisconsin Association of School Boards Executive Director John Ashley who had penned an op-ed asking for civility at a time when we need to be united around what matters most. Our kids matter most. Our public schools matter. They are the thread that binds our communities together, and we should be supporting each other instead of tearing down those who dare to provide leadership during a crisis.

Here's the commitment I want to make to you all today. Let's use the collective knowledge of DPI and other leaders to strengthen not only civics, but social studies in general. Instead of acting unilaterally, in the most un-civil way - let's bring stakeholders together. After all, the original meaning of the word civility meant training in the humanities. Let's confer with teachers, parents, and employers. Let's look at the riches that Wisconsin has to offer in both local and state history, historical sites, and movements. Let's utilize our assets that exist with the Wisconsin Historical Society, Educational Communications Board, and the University System to craft resources and materials to support this learning available to educators and students at no cost. As the leader of the state public education system, this process is what I know would be best for our state, and this process is how I will lead.

Today, I'm going to begin that work by bringing together a group of leaders from across the state to help advise districts on how to make our state a leader in civics education. By my next State of Education Address, I will have a roadmap and resources in place to help our schools and educators. And yes, of course, I want to work with our legislature to change our laws to require credits in civics for all students to graduate from a Wisconsin high school.

I'm ready to do the job I was elected to do. I'm passionate about social studies and civics education, and I am excited about curriculum and instruction in that area. After all, civics is how we get more children involved in the public sphere - as teachers, as politicians, as community leaders and public servants.

While we're on the subject of issues we need to tackle, I feel the same way about literacy and initiatives in that area. Yes. Literacy is a concern and an opportunity. When I ran for this office, I detailed that we need a statewide literacy plan that is not heavy in instruction of one method or another - but one that is well-balanced, is interesting to kids, and gets them wanting to read all subjects in fiction and in non-fiction.

We all want the same things: parents, teachers, schools, employers, but once again, we're debating this action in legislation that is being rammed through at the 11th hour.

Today, I'm starting the work of establishing a Literacy Task Force, consisting of leaders from different viewpoints, to help restore Wisconsin as a national leader on literacy. People of differing backgrounds and political stripes must come together to solve this challenge. We cannot afford to swing the pendulum of the reading wars back and forth any longer. It's not good for our kids, and it's not good for the state of education in Wisconsin. By taking this action in the present, we will shore up our state's future.

The future of our state - our children - are being taught in the classroom by dedicated, passionate teachers who are persevering, even in the face of all the challenges I have laid out today. They put the needs of our children first every single day. They deserve our thanks. And our trust.

We need to trust in their training and expertise, and we need to treat teachers as the professionals they are. Our teachers work to bring out the best in our kids and help them navigate rigorous, difficult subject matters and social situations. They challenge our children to think critically about what they see, hear, and read in ways that are honest and real. They help our children grow as individuals, as scholars, and as citizens. They work hard to make school a safe, supportive place for every child - from every background - to be successful.

Our teachers are the heart of our schools, and our schools are the heart of our communities. Yet, right now and in too many places across our state, we are losing heart.

It's on us - the adults who benefited from public schools that were once the envy of every other state - to secure that legacy for future generations. It's on us to live our values and ensure the opportunities that public education affords are truly available to all children.

We cannot afford to let this moment pass. We must invest. In our school funding. In our children's opportunities. In the trust we show our teachers.

In a time where things are most uncivil, we need to remember and celebrate the things that unite us. Just like the high school basketball team going to State, or the Blue Ribbon elementary school that is the pride of our community - we need to reflect in the pride and the unity that our public schools bring to our families, our communities, and ourselves. It is our public schools that are the backbone of our democracy. And for democracy and civility to thrive, we need our public schools. Our economy needs our public schools, our families and communities need our public schools. But most of all, our future, our children, need our public schools. Public schools are the tie that binds everything that we love about our country - our democracy - together. And we need to support them, invest in them, and ensure that they continue to thrive.

President Lincoln, who led our country through the most turbulent and divisive of times, once said: "Be sure you put your feet in the right place. Then stand firm."

As leaders in our communities, our school districts, and here in our state capitol, keep standing firm behind what unites us - our kids and their future. Let's stand firm to keep them safe, healthy, and in school. Stand up to those who want to use our schools as a vehicle to distract and divide our communities. Stand and fight for the resources all of our kids need to be successful. Stand firm and meet our responsibilities to the next generation, as our parents and grandparents did for us.

The next chapter of Wisconsin's history is still being written. And the chapters that follow this one will be written by our children. As we gather in this historic building - on the shoulders of those who came before us - let's harness Wisconsin's forward-thinking spirit and seize the urgency of this moment. Working together, we can finally live up to our highest ideals and create a stronger, more equitable public education system that meets the needs of every child in every zip code - from preschool all the way through higher education. Let's find the courage and the political will to make the bold, transformative changes and investments our children, our schools, and our state need for a successful future.

To all of you here today and those of you watching from home, thank you for your passion for public education and libraries and your commitment to public service. Together, we'll stay focused on what unites us, and build a stronger future for every child, every day.

Thank you, and let's invest in our public schools and libraries. It is what our children deserve, and it is how we all can move Wisconsin forward!