

Jill Underly: Wisconsin needs to invest in its schools

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Two years ago, our state commissioned a group to study how to fix the school funding formula. Hours and hours of citizen comments, expert research and testimony, and debate told us what we already knew: Wisconsin needs to invest in its schools. The bipartisan Blue Ribbon Commission Report on Wisconsin School Funding told policy-makers the only way we can really fix our broken school funding system was with an influx of new money. And in the last election cycle, candidates for office ran on these promises. Many won.

Some of those candidates are now members of the Joint Finance Committee (JFC). They are professional accountants, business owners, former teachers, and school board members. Despite their professional training, they are grappling with a math problem that doesn't add up. We have \$5.5 billion in new revenue. We have another \$2.2 billion in federal aid specifically for public schools. That second figure is dependent upon an important if-then equation – it's called maintenance of effort or MOE. If the state meets its obligation, they get \$2.2 billion. Kids win. Public schools win. Our communities win.

Funding our schools and supporting other critical needs of the state can happen concurrently. If schools get \$1.6 billion of the available state money – about one-fifth of the state surplus – we could achieve the goals the Blue Ribbon Commission outlined. With the \$2.2 billion from the federal government added into that equation, the 2021-2023 budget could be a once-in-a-generation game changer for our public schools. This is what our Governor has advocated for. Using our public school system to stabilize the most devastating trial of our lifetime. Restarting our economy by reinvesting in the most promising resource in our state: our children and their future.

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The ask is simple: keep your promise. It's the same promise our elected officials made when they were asking for your support. They promised to invest in our public schools, our rural communities, and our urban centers. They made a promise to our children who have suffered throughout this pandemic, whose mental health is exceeding crisis levels, and whose teachers are leaving in droves. I urge you to contact members of the JFC and your local legislators to demand that they invest in the future of this state. Invest in our public schools, our tech colleges, and the University of Wisconsin System. Invest in our kids. Invest in their mental health. Invest in our communities. We have an opportunity of a lifetime. Your voice, advocacy, and support is needed to make that opportunity a reality.

- Underly is state schools superintendent-elect.