

Underly declares victory in state superintendent's race

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Pecatonica School District Superintendent Jill Underly declared victory in the state superintendent's race over former Brown Deer School District Superintendent Deb Kerr.

With over 96 percent of voting precincts reporting, Underly led Kerr by over 15 points at roughly 57.7 percent to Kerr's 42.3 percent.

During a virtual event, Underly said she wants to make sure all schools reopen for in-person learning by the fall semester and pledged to improve math and literacy achievement gaps across the state.

"Wisconsin's kids and public schools face significant challenges as we work to return to normal, get every student caught up and support their mental health and wellbeing in the aftermath of this pandemic and the enormous trauma and disruption that it's caused for all of us," she said.

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But she said schools should still work to implement additional safety measures such as more social distancing and disinfecting surfaces like desks and doorknobs in schools.

Underly also said she wants to put together a team of bipartisan DPI employees who represent the wide breadth of perspectives on how schools should work from around the state.

Kerr conceded the race shortly before Underly declared victory. She told listeners during a virtual press conference she is thankful to her campaign workers and family members for helping her work toward the end of the race.

Kerr added she congratulated Underly over the phone shortly before conceding.

She also said she plans to continue to work to help improve education quality for kids despite losing the race because she wants to continue “opening up children’s minds to our incredible world.”

“That’s been on pause for so many kids for so long, and I’m going to continue to fight and be an advocate for all the Wisconsinites,” Kerr said.

Underly won the backing of teachers’ unions and the state Dem Party and opposes expanding the state’s private school voucher program.

She also enjoyed a significant financial advantage going into the election.

Since the Feb. 16 primary, pro-Underly groups had reported to the state Ethics Commission spending nearly \$716,000 on independent expenditures. Meanwhile, the groups backing Kerr through independent expenditures had reported \$209,000 since the primary.

On top of that, Underly had reported nearly \$1.5 million in contributions through Monday, compared to just \$169,059 for Kerr.

Kerr finished a narrow second to Underly in the seven-way Feb. 16 primary. But her campaign stumbled right out of the gate with a racially insensitive tweet she sent and then quickly deleted. Kerr’s original campaign manager, who had exclusively worked with Dem candidates and groups, also quit, saying he couldn’t provide the kind of direction she needed to have a shot at winning.

Kerr won the backing of conservatives even though she proclaimed herself a Dem who had voted for Joe Biden in November. She also regularly called for students to return to in-person instruction five days a week and signaled support for banning transgender students from competing against biologically female students in school sports.