

# Dept. of Public Instruction: State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly's remarks as prepared for delivery for 2022 State of Education Address

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Good afternoon, and thank you for being here with us today to celebrate, support, and learn how and to further invest in the public schools and libraries of Wisconsin. It is my honor to be here as State Superintendent of Public Instruction to give my second State of Education address.

Public education serves our state because it serves our children, and our children are our most precious resource. The children are, of course, our future – but I think we take that for granted sometimes. They are our future and they must be nurtured, and they must be well prepared. They deserve no less, and neither do we. And the same goes for our democracy.

See, public education is a constitutional right. It says it right there in Article 5, section 3 of the Wisconsin constitution – “the legislature shall provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable; and such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of 4 and 20.” As a constitutional right, public education is rooted in democracy. It also forms the roots for our democracy to grow and be healthy. Which means, in turn, that our public education system must be strong to provide a solid foundation for a healthy democracy to grow from and build upon.

Schools can be – and must be – this foundation. I want my students – all Wisconsin students – to grow up to be active participants in the civic life of our state. To be future active participants in democracy, they need that strong foundation. They

need to know how to examine our past. They need to know how to think critically about our present. They need to make informed decisions about their future – our future.

And we, as current active participants in democracy, must do the same: look at our history, think critically, and make well-informed and productive decisions. The history of public schools in Wisconsin is one of innovation and meaningful and sustained investment. We do not see that investment today. We must think critically about how that is impacting our children and our state, and we must make a different decision.

And all of that means that the state of education in Wisconsin, and the future of our democracy, stands on the shoulders of students who must be safe and nurtured, and who engage in challenging curriculum. Because nurturing, challenging classrooms make it possible to learn and act on critical thinking.

The state of education in Wisconsin is rooted in the strength of our students' critical thinking. The health and future of our democracy require it. That is the function of a meaningful education, and why it is a constitutional right – and a moral imperative.

Public education must ensure every single student is able to succeed, which requires equity and inclusion. Again, this is both a legal issue and a moral imperative, and why these concepts are more than just concepts in public education – they are the driving force behind so many of our decisions as educators, even though they are words that have been co-opted (or people have tried to) in current times.

When we talk about equity in public education, we are talking about each student getting what they need in the way they need it. This is not equality, where every student gets the same resources and the same instruction. That would not be fair to our students because differentiating and individualizing instruction is how we make sure we reach every kid. If a student cannot see the board from the back of the room, we don't keep them there because every kid should have equal treatment in the eyes of the seating chart – no, we move the student to the front of the classroom, we help them see the board or the teacher better, or work through the school to reach their parents to get them glasses. The same goes for if a student cannot see themselves represented in the curriculum – but more on that later.

When we talk about inclusion, we are talking about the constitutional right to public

education because the fact is that students with disabilities and students without disabilities need to be taught together. Every student is an important member of the school community, and classrooms where everyone belongs are stronger, richer, and more effective in fostering learning and growth.

Equity is established in the Free Access to Public Education, and it also means much more than that at its core. Inclusion is defined as the least restrictive environment but also means more than that – it means classrooms that honor and even celebrate differences, and diversity creates meaningful learning environments. Equity is the foundation for the diversity we see in our workplaces, in our communities, and in our dialogue with each other. In our schools we recognize that individual students have unique needs to address, barriers to overcome, and strengths to build on – and that is challenging. It is also exciting! It is good teaching! And it is a good – and needed – investment.

This is why our budget proposal includes 750 million dollars of investment in special education. In the first year of the biennium, we will increase special education reimbursement to 45 percent, and in the second year, to 60 percent, all with our sights on 90 percent by the end of the subsequent biennium. Wisconsin's families and educators have been calling for reform to our special ed funding for decades, and it is past time to make this investment in our students and in our schools.

For every single student to succeed, it is our constitutional and community responsibility to eliminate the achievement gap. But we cannot call it that – we cannot call it an achievement gap, because a gap in outcomes is caused by a gap in inputs. And we can do something about the inputs, it's just that historically we have chosen not to, or at least, chosen not to do enough.

Understanding the achievement gap instead as a representation gap, or an engagement gap, means that there are clear action steps we can take to address it. It's a powerful reframing, because it puts the ball back in our court; instead of blaming the student because of their learning challenges, or their family because their parents are working multiple jobs to get by, or their school district or teachers who are under-resourced – instead of placing blame about their achievement, we can make important choices about curriculum that can make a difference.

Representative curriculum means every student in our classrooms must see themselves included, acknowledged, and celebrated in our lessons. Every student can see themselves in the struggles of our country and in the progress we have

made and the challenges that persist. Our Black and Indigenous and students of color – they must see themselves reflected in our lessons, and not only in lessons about struggle and trauma in history, but also in lessons about growth and success. One of our 2023 Wisconsin Teachers of the Year, Lori Danz, is a high school biology teacher, and she shared a lesson with me that is an incredible example of representative curriculum. In her role as school forest coordinator, she worked with the middle school choir teacher to create an experiential lesson conveying the importance of taking on challenges as the choir prepared for their upcoming concert. Lori used the perseverance of Emily Ford as the jumping off point of the lesson. Emily Ford is the first African American, the first woman, and the first member of the LGBTQ+ community to hike the entire Ice Age Trail during winter – talk about taking on a challenge! Students learned about Ford's journey, and how she overcame challenges by hiking through the school forest themselves, all while singing. At the end of the lesson, students reflected on the challenges they had faced, and how they had persevered together as a class community. This is why representative curriculum is so important. Representation creates a future – and a present – of limitless possibilities – because we have removed the limits! If you can see it, you can learn from it. You can aspire to it. And you can become it – because you can believe in the journey that will get you from here to there.

Representative curriculum is engaging curriculum, and engaging curriculum teaches critical thinking by tackling difficult concepts – from gravitational pull to the structure of a cell to cubism to poetry analysis. And teaching difficult concepts can mean teaching about racism and sexism. To not do this would be a blatant disregard of the truth of our country's history, and an erasure of our students' lived experience. The only way to teach the complete story of the United States is to include the history of racism. After all, the founding of this country included both slavery and democracy, and denying the centrality of slavery and racism just because it's uncomfortable does nothing but endanger the continuation and strength of our democratic society. Grappling with difficult concepts, including discrimination, is essential, it is culturally relevant, and it is accurate teaching. Saying otherwise is problematic – and racist.

When we talk about the inputs, the conditions that create disparities, we must also address the belonging gap – and that means creating a safe learning environment. At its most basic, a classroom must be safe; students must be safe. And that means creating an affirming and welcoming community, because building such a community in classrooms and schools results in emotional safety; the bare

minimum requirement for the education of every single student in this state. Building a welcoming and safe community, one that fosters a sense of belonging and where every child feels safe, is challenging and meaningful work. And that work is made all the more difficult when we as adults in the community use rhetoric and try to pass policies that are fundamentally unwelcoming and unsafe. Such rhetoric and policies are harmful and dangerous to students' emotional safety and mental health, but affirming identities through our language and through our policies creates belonging. Put more simply, affirming identities is suicide prevention. It's proven self-care. It's strong mental health practice. Pronouns save lives. So let me say this to the LGBTQ+ students, families, and staff of Wisconsin: I believe in welcoming and affirming spaces, and as the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, I've got your back. When we have welcoming and affirming schools and classrooms, it creates belonging. Belonging creates community. Community creates young people who are engaged in the civic life of our state. And civic engagement creates a strong, healthy democracy. They can grow up and be the incredible leaders this state needs.

I look forward to their leadership, to the leadership of adults who grew up in safe and welcoming classrooms, and who learned to engage in challenging discussions respectfully and with curiosity - what a strong foundation they will have to lead from! What important lessons they can bring to the rest of us - lessons about belonging and community building... I think the adults in this room and across the state will learn a lot from them.

But we also don't have to wait to learn those lessons, or to put them into practice. We can choose to engage more respectfully, we can choose to think more critically and with openness, and we can make our entire state a safer learning environment for all of us. Considering the divisiveness of our current climate, maybe taking a cue from the nurturing classrooms in our state could be healing.

And healing is so needed for our children right now. When we think about creating leaders, about making it possible for our students to succeed now and in the future, our children must do more than survive - they must thrive. To ensure they belong and thrive, they need mental health supports and high-quality, integrated social emotional learning layered on top of these safe learning environments. Mental health supports and social emotional learning - none of this is free, which means for our students to thrive, we need more investment in public education. Schools are being asked to do more and more - like take care of the mental health needs of our kids - but with less and less support. Schools cannot solve everything - and we

shouldn't expect them to, especially when we're not given increased financial support from this legislature. We need your help to ensure investment and to ensure our children thrive – so think this through... what are you doing to ensure that our kids thrive? If you're worried about food insecurity and our kids going to school hungry – are you advocating for universal free meals? If you're worried about our kids' mental health and the need for work that supports suicide prevention – are you supporting inclusive policies that allow for Pride flags and using pronouns? If you're worried about every kid having access to opportunities like world languages and performing arts – are you advocating for increased and equitable funding for public education? The responsibility to advocate for our public schools and Wisconsin's school children should not be solely on the school district or that teacher whose program might get cut, or the parent with the children on the Autism spectrum, or the school board that continually has to sell a referendum to their community. It's on all of us. We all have a role to play.

My grandmother, who was a Chicago Public Schools food service employee her entire career, would often tell me and my siblings that “You are who you run with.” She would say this in reference to who we hung out with at school, or on the summer playground, or in our high school activities... she even used it to talk about the careers we aspired to have one day! And she's right — we are influenced by those in our inner circle. So when I say we “all have a role to play,” I want you to think about who it is that you “run” with – listen to the language they use and take a look at the actions they take – and then think about what impact they could have on the future of our public schools. We each have influence with the people we run with – and if they are disrespecting our teachers, or calling to defund public schools, or weaponizing our kids' identities... then it is up to us to speak up and stop them. That is a role we all have to play.

And of course, DPI has a role to play in all of this. And a huge part of that is our budget proposal and its priorities, one of which is funding mental health supports in addition to meaningful increases in ongoing funding across the board. My job, or more specifically, DPI's job, is to advocate and promote these important proposals for public education and for Wisconsin's kids at the statewide level. Critics will say we spend too much on education, or that DPI is always asking for more money. But let me put that into perspective for you. The past 12 years, our public schools have been historically defunded. The funding received hasn't kept up with inflation. And in 2023, the experimental 5 year pilot on freezing revenue limits will turn 30 years old! For 30 years now, our school districts have not received their constitutional and

promised investment from the State, and instead the responsibility to increase spending so our schools can buy those computers, or hire that tech-ed teacher, or update their bus fleet has fallen on the shoulders of local taxpayers. And more recently, in lieu of putting our state tax dollars into our schools, the taxes we've paid as responsible citizens sits in the state reserves and grows to over \$6 billion dollars.

So 30 years into this experiment, we must institute increases in our spending in a stable, predictable way. In the first year of the next biennium, we plan to increase per pupil aid by 350 dollars, with a 600 dollar increase in the subsequent year, while also preventing an impact on property taxes.

I also want to talk about more specific funding increases targeted at improving access to mental health resources in schools for our children with a historic request for funding for evidence-based mental health services at a higher level.

We also know that every student needs high quality and integrated social emotional learning. I think there's a pretty significant misunderstanding – willful or otherwise – of what social emotional learning really means, so let me give you a window into what it can look like in our schools.

In May, we announced five Wisconsin Teachers of the Year for 2023, one of whom – Sarah Kopplin – you just heard from, and I already told you a story from the Superior School Forest. They are all impressive and accomplished educators, and one of the ways they are impressive is their commitment to integrating social emotional learning into their classrooms and beyond.

Peg Billing, the library media specialist at Lakeland Union, fosters community, creativity, and personal growth in her makerspace. Her students were really were excited to share were their experiences in the makerspace she had created in the library. It was a place where every student had the opportunity to shine in a different, and maybe unexpected, way.

Dustin Anderson, an elementary art teacher in Wisconsin Rapids Public School District, focuses on creating interdisciplinary art projects for his students, including one in which students built dolls to help them portray their feelings. Mr. Anderson says this makes them “more empathetic and creative citizens.” I love that.

Speaking of learning to cope with strong feelings, Kaelee Heideman, a school

counselor in Oshkosh Area School District, uses drumming and rhythm to help students process how to respond to emotional situations and develop strategies to deal with daily stress, empowering them to take control of their emotions.

Let me say that I think we are honoring some pretty incredible teachers this year. And I will also say that we can find incredible examples of social emotional learning and community building integrated in our classrooms all across Wisconsin. And that is wonderful and absolutely strengthens the emotional health of our students. We also need to support our students even more with access to mental health services. That need – for community and for mental health services – has always been there, and it has become even more apparent (and important) as we move through the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's unfortunate that critics will latch onto test scores when so many other things should have taken precedence in a once in a lifetime, or once in a century, pandemic. The past few years were incredibly difficult conditions to learn, but also to live, and thrive. And the test scores showed us exactly what we knew they would: that kids, families, adults, really everyone was impacted differently, and our most vulnerable students and families were impacted the most. COVID-19 has asked a lot of our kids, and it has asked a lot of our educators, and I believe in the resilience of our students and of our schools. I also wish they didn't have to be so resilient. In fact, we talk a lot about resilience, but I'm not sure it's the right word to use. Resilience is about bouncing back, and I don't think schools should bounce back to the way they were before.

The reality is that our world has changed. We have so many challenges that require change. These challenges include COVID-19, but they also include many others, some of which were manufactured (like one-time federal dollars being used as an excuse to not increase ongoing state funding), and others that are organic to the world we live in (like ever-changing technology and the need to continually keep up with it). In the face of challenges, we need our schools to continue to change in response to them. Which is why they need robust, ongoing, reliable state funding.

Here we are, at the start of another school year, and so much has changed in our world while nothing has changed in our state funding. And when we talk about funding our schools and libraries, we are talking about our collective future. In fact, let me make this even more urgent – we are talking about our immediate present, our current reality – we are talking about today. Because today, our schools are making do, because that is what they have become accustomed to doing. And

because they have no other choice. But that's not good enough for our state, and it's definitely not good enough for our kids.

We need robust, ongoing, reliable funding for our public schools and libraries across Wisconsin. Without increased funding, schools and libraries cannot meet the needs of kids - or of all of us.

Investing like this in our schools isn't new. The reason our schools are as strong and, yes, resilient as they are today is thanks to meaningful investment decades ago - investment that continues to have an impact today. And today, we need to make meaningful investment again so that, decades down the line, some future State Superintendent can say the same - that the state of public education in Wisconsin is strong then because we had the foresight and willpower to make impactful investments today.

Investing in schools like this isn't partisan, either; or, at least, it didn't used to be. In 2019 - just three short years ago - the bipartisan Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding recommended investments just like this. It's right there on page three, the very first recommendation: "The Commission recommends that the legislature increases the resources for school districts through increases in the per pupil adjustment under revenue limits." I agree.

We need more (and better) school and library funding here in our state. To be clear, the legislature has the financial means to help our public schools. They are simply choosing not to. It is a choice, and while they are able to make that harmful choice, but we shouldn't let them. This legislature is sitting on a surplus - money that we paid as taxpayers, believing that it would be put to good, public use. Instead, it just sits there, helping no one, all while our schools face choices between school safety upgrades or teacher pay raises (that are unsustainable on one-time federal funding) or going to local referendum yet again.

But if this legislature spent the surplus - no, wait, let me make it even easier for them to make the right choice and vote "yes" - if this legislature spent one-sixth of the current taxpayer funded budget surplus on schools, it could make such a difference. We could pay teachers and bus drivers, not to mention support staff and custodians and all school personnel, enough money to show them how much we value them. We could provide universal free meals to kids. We could do so much.

Public education is about providing access to knowledge and opportunities for

growth. But the fact is, looking at a budget surplus, this legislature would rather starve kids of those opportunities than provide funding to schools. Because instead of offering solutions, they are attempting to undermine public education – through their funding decisions, and also by specifically targeting the relationship and trust between schools and families – all for political gain.

Who stands to lose? Our children. Our state. All of us, really. And who stands to gain? Politicians. But only if we let them.

Instead of letting them, let us examine our history of previous investment, let us think critically about the recent bipartisan support of further investment, and let us make informed decisions about who our leaders are, and where they plan to take this state.

The austerity this (and previous) legislatures have insisted on for our schools is starving our public education system. Our schools and children deserve investment. We deserve investment. Because investing in public schools is an investment in us, too.

Public schools can be – and should be – creators of opportunity. When we think about our gap in outcomes, and how we need to change the inputs, we have to look at the opportunity gaps that exist in our state. And the need for enrichment and innovation in every district of our state. Innovation can take so many forms, and one of the exciting forms it takes in Wisconsin is innovation through sustainability and environmental stewardship, like our Wisconsin schools that have received national recognition as Green Schools for their commitment to learning that is good for our students because it is good for our planet. Milwaukee Public Schools, the School District of Cambridge, and the Washington Island School District all have Green Schools this year. I am so impressed by these districts, and how they represent the diversity of Wisconsin's schools that are taking on challenges and succeeding. I am excited to see where their innovation takes them – and our state – next.

Public schools can – and should be – a celebration of teaching and learning. And they are – despite all the challenges, educators have persevered because you've had to, and because you know that your work matters in the lives of your students, our children. You are shaping Wisconsin's future, and we owe you a debt of gratitude. In fact, we owe you more than that. We owe you investment.

Teaching is the most important job in the world. Teaching is an art; it is a science; it is a calling; and most of all, teaching is a skill. And teachers must be paid as the skilled professionals they are. Because they are even more than that – they are heroes. They see the incredible potential in our students, and then they grow that potential through a safe and challenging learning environment until our children are equipped to be successful and active citizens of this state. That is a tall order, and our teachers are up for the job; at the same time, they need respect and support, and just because they are in a profession that is also a calling, they shouldn't be taken advantage of.

I still remember the first teacher I ever had who really saw me for who I was, and for the learner I could become. I bet – I hope – all of us can remember a teacher like that. Mine was Mr. Holmberg, and his choir class made such a difference in my life – he gave me so many rich opportunities to grow and I could try new things in his class because I felt safe and supported in the classroom community he created.

Schools and libraries are the cornerstones of our communities precisely because they create community.

At your public library, all are welcome. Think about it – being at your local library doesn't cost a penny. How many places are there in America where no one expects you to spend money while you're there? But at libraries, you're always welcome.

At your public library, all are represented. The collections include diverse representations of characters and stories and histories and concepts – and they create connection and empathy – they reflect our own experiences and they also stretch our perspectives.

At your public library, all are respected. Libraries stand firmly on intellectual freedom – that you can go there and engage with ideas that affirm your own beliefs as well as those that challenge them. What a gift the freedom to read is – to be allowed such space for curiosity and lack of judgment!

When we talk about the need for investment in our students, all because the future success of our state relies on our children, it's often framed in economic terms. And honestly, it's in our own self-interest. However, when I talk about the need for investment in our children for the sake of the future of our state, I'm talking about it in civic terms. I'm talking about the future stability and success of the state of our democracy and the strength of our leadership and government. The future of our

state – civic and economic – will rest on their shoulders someday soon. Which means today, it rests on ours to prepare them well.

Investment is how we do that. We've done it before, and it created a strong foundation that our public schools still stand on today. But think about it this way – if our schools were cars, then the last time we filled the gas tank all the way was decades ago. Our schools are running out of gas; we are running on fumes as we spend down the principle of that decades-old investment. We need to keep it strong, to fill up that gas tank and shore up that foundation – for our current generation of students and the generations to come.

Public libraries and public schools are the foundation, the bedrock of democracy; they make a difference. I shudder to think of Wisconsin – what it would mean for our democracy, for our communities, for our families – if public schools were no longer funded. We are at a critical juncture. We must make the decision to invest in public schools and libraries.

Education is, and libraries are, all about changing the world. And thank goodness, because the world is always changing. Thank goodness we have our public schools and libraries, where we teach students how to make sense of that change, how to harness it, and how to use these lessons to make their lives – and our world – a better place.

These kids are gonna change the world one day. We must nurture them. We must prepare them well. And that is exactly what we are going to do to ensure the strength of our democracy and the future of this great state.

Thank you.