

## State of Education Address

September 21, 2017 — State Capitol Rotunda

*By State Superintendent Tony Evers*

Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Mariana, and to all who help to make this event special. And Shanah Tova to those in celebration today.

I want to start by stating the obvious: we live in challenging times.

Recently, I visited with a group of young Latino students in Milwaukee, and we got to talking about the world we're living in today. They spoke openly about their fears with the world they are inheriting: racial inequities and tension, crushing student loan debt, job uncertainty, and immigration fears. Talk about challenging!

It doesn't take a person glued to the television news cycle to see it. These kids weren't watching MSNBC — they were just living their lives. It's not just the adults who deal with these issues. We **all** feel it, and it impacts our daily lives.

To pull myself away from CNN, I've personally been reflecting on leadership and the important ways it can impact our lives for the better. One of my favorite Americans, President Teddy Roosevelt, wrote about leading in challenging times. And you all have this passage in front of you. He said:

It is not the critic who counts not the [one] who points out how the strong man [or woman] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man [or woman] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; ...

Here, Teddy is calling us to **stand tall** in the face of adversity. To demonstrate leadership and confront problems, seek solutions, rather than simply critique.

Our 26th President would have loved the students I met at Purdy Elementary School in Fort Atkinson, where the school "Green Team" transformed a pond into a laboratory. Those youngsters led me around their outdoor classroom like it was the Taj Mahal! I'll never forget how proud they were when they convinced me to touch the slimy algae they harvested. It was like it was gold. What could have been a discarded swamp became a treasure for those kids. **They owned it.**

Frankly, the challenges we face in our schools, our state, and our nation have demanded that kind of grassroots, on-the-ground leadership from all of us — even our youngsters. To be "actually in the arena," as Teddy puts it.

But it's never easy to be the one in the arena. Several years ago, it took courage for over 200 superintendents from across Wisconsin to gather in a hostile hearing room and stand up for their students' academic success. **But they did it together, and they prevailed.**

But Teddy didn't stop there, and we shouldn't either. He challenged us to expect failure, not fear it, but to persist and persevere in the face of adversity. To him, a leader is:

"[One] who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again ... who at the best knows ... the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he [or she] fails, at least fails while daring greatly, ...

---

Powerful. Here, Teddy is calling on us to be the “Adult in the Room.” That ideal has become a north star for me, but I wasn’t always wired this way.

As you may know, I’m a cancer survivor.

I got through it with the support of my family and friends, but it altered the way I approach life. I lost some of the fear that held me back. It sharpened my leadership skills and gave a new urgency to living. It helped me learn to dare greatly.

In truth, I like to think it made me a little more like the kids I meet across this state who possess such joy for living.

Teddy’s words remind all of us to:

- face our problems head on, seeking solutions;
- live as the adults in the room; and
- find ways to dare greatly, together.

I believe we are always stronger when we work together.

I want to look at three examples today where I think Teddy’s advice can help us: school funding; healthy students; and connecting communities.

## School Funding

On school funding, we must face the reality that for too many budget cycles public school funding has not been the priority for those in control.

A decade ago, Wisconsin spent nearly 40 percent of its general tax dollars on public schools. Today, it has fallen to 32 percent. This is a question of priorities.

And for the first time in my memory, Wisconsin has fallen below the national average in how much we spend on our kids’ education. While other states have aggressively restored funding for public education after the Great Recession, we have remained stagnant. Wisconsin has a long way to go to catch up.

But something interesting has happened in the last few years. Groups of everyday people began meeting and giving up their free time to learn about school funding. They took that knowledge to their communities and local school boards. Their learning was contagious, and soon, they brought their friends and neighbors along as well. Groups like the Wisconsin Parent Education Network became the adults in the room.

And because of their advocacy, we have seen over 1.1 million residents from Eau Claire to Pecatonica rally behind public education and vote to raise their own taxes to support their schools. That is leadership.

This has transformed the conversation around how we fund our schools. Communities and voters are now convinced we need action. The Legislature wasn’t getting it done, so they had to act.

Your voices are echoing here in the State Capitol.

And now is the time for us to fix our broken school finance system and restore our investment in the next generation. We’ve got a Fair Funding plan that helps little and big districts alike to ensure every kid gets a fair shot at a great education. We must dare greatly.

---

## Healthy Students

On to healthy students where there is a growing recognition that educating kids is about more than academics. Last year I shared a story out of Superior, where lunch supervisors look for students faltering in the lunch line on Mondays because they haven't eaten. These folks know what we all know. Without access to basic health care or nutrition, toothaches, blurry vision, hunger, and trauma quickly become barriers to our students' success.

Today, over a third of our students in rural Wisconsin rely on Medicaid for physical and mental health care. Now you may wonder why I'm talking about Medicaid, but it is very clear. Proposals out of Washington to cut those dollars will hurt kids and directly impact schools.

Despite these challenges, we are making progress addressing mental health in schools and substance abuse among students. And sometimes, like in Hortonville, the kids are the true change agents, the adults in the room. When I visited Hortonville High School last year, one student shared her "ah-ha" moment when she realized the impact of her work: overhearing her fellow students talking about the stigma of mental health in the hallway. It was their understanding of what that word meant that hit it home for her. It moved beyond the classroom and into the hallways where real discussions happen.

And because we are always stronger together, we've leveraged our successes in school districts like Hortonville to work with advocates, health care providers, and legislators from both parties to propose and successfully champion school mental health in this budget. In this example, there are folks all across the state, across sectors, across political parties, who became adults in the room.

For the first time, the state is providing funds for mental health training, new social workers, and grants for school and community programs. This is a big deal.

But there is another easy solution that goes farther; one I am reluctant to call daring greatly, but is sorely needed. We need to stop leaving money on the table and take the federal dollars associated with Medicaid. Every additional Medicaid dollar ensures more Wisconsin kids have the health care they need.

Rejecting our fair share of support from Washington means Wisconsin taxpayers are forced to pick up the cost. It is that simple, and it is hurting our schools when scarce state resources are increasingly directed to health care. This is a leadership decision completely within our control; one that would benefit from a little bit of daring.

## Connecting Communities

And in connecting our communities, schools, and public libraries, it is very simple: our growing school districts are attached to the major transportation grid, close to cities and near major employers. But remember that most Wisconsin school districts are small and rural. So, everywhere else, from Cassville in the southwest to Mercer in the north, enrollment is declining and transportation costs are growing.

This raises two key questions. If schools are the center of our communities, what happens when roads and bridges connecting those places begin to crumble?

Moreover, as legislators continue to advocate for collapsing school districts and closing schools, how long is too long for our kids to spend on the bus? It's hard to imagine that some of our youngsters spend two hours or more on the school bus each day. Every minute on a bus means less time for learning, play, or family. And I've been on enough field trips in my day to know that those long bus rides can feel even longer when the roads are riddled with potholes.

Now, there have been some bipartisan successes increasing transportation aid, particularly for high costs, but deep structural problems remain.

---

But when it comes down to it, every dollar we shift from the state coffers to pay for roads, and increasingly, to simply pay for debt, is a dollar we move out of the classroom of a child. I'm sick of the politics, the false choices, and the endless debates on this issue. We can walk and chew gum at the same time. Without question, we can fix our roads and fund our schools at the same time.

There are more than enough solutions. The Department of Transportation, advocates, and countless legislators have proposed dozens of options that would improve the quality of our roads and free up resources for our schools. Instead, we are left to borrow more and saddle our kids with the debt. We have to push past the politics and dare greatly. We need some adults in the room.

## Moving Forward

But even in these difficult times, we continue to strengthen new partnerships and succeed together, because we believe we are stronger when we are together.

- We've brought public, charter, and choice school leaders together with the community to greatly increase fun summer learning opportunities for Milwaukee's kids.
- We're developing a strong workforce by investing in kids and building career pathways with business leaders like Ed Paradowski from Apache Stainless in Beaver Dam. He and other business leaders have been invaluable voices for the Pathways Wisconsin project.
- We're working with Eloise Anderson at DCF on early childhood programming, Ray Allen at DWD on Business Friends of Education, Morna Foy at WTCS around dual enrollment, and Ron Martin from WEAC on teacher leadership. We have shown time and time again that a shared commitment to kids helps us to find the solutions that change lives. We are stronger together.

So for me, Teddy's words are still relevant today, and their message is quite simple. In fact, it's what I hear time and again from our best educators, like our Teachers of the Year. When I ask them their keys to success, they tell me:

- know your students as people,
- value what they bring to the table, and
- build those relationships.

I heard it and I felt it in a crowded auditorium a few weeks ago in La Crosse, where Superintendent Randy Nelson was leading a staff convocation. Randy stood in front of his staff and found his inner Teddy Roosevelt. Here is what he said:

Next Tuesday, 7,000 students will be filling our classrooms and now, our students — no matter what their circumstances, no matter their differences — they need to come to school knowing that there are adults who care about them. This is more important today than it has been in the last 50 years. Be the difference maker. Be the change.

He told them that there is nothing more important than our kids. In fact, he said to the teachers: if there is something they were told to do which was getting in the way of building that relationship, they should stop doing it. He put the best interests of our kids first. Adult problems can be solved with the right leadership. But there is nothing more important than the work we do for our kids.

When Randy finished speaking, I got up to cheer right alongside of those 1,300 educators. This is the difference leadership makes.

---

So yes. We live in challenging times. But the examples of leadership in our classrooms, public libraries, schools, and communities absolutely inspire me.

Today I'm sending you home with Teddy's vision of leadership and with a challenge:

- Let's never stop talking about the good work of the teachers in our communities, and the ways they lead day in and day out;
- Let's help people understand how we fund our schools, how investing in our kids is the best job creation strategy on the books;
- Let's remember that when times get tough, that we are always stronger together;
- Let's keep sacred the places where we can agree and build upon them; and
- Let's never stop discovering the places where we can get it done — for kids.

Thank you.

###

---

*Tony Evers is Wisconsin's elected state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at [http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2017\\_79.pdf](http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2017_79.pdf).*