



6-24-2020, Jill Underly Testimony, Wisconsin Rural Schools Association

Good morning - Chairman Thiesfeldt, and Members of the Assembly Education Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you this morning. It's good to be back. Thank you for setting this up and giving everyone a chance to tell their story.

I'm Dr. Jill Underly, Superintendent of the Pecatonica School District in Southwest Wisconsin. I'm a mom of two children who attend my public schools, and I live in my school district on a small farm, leading a district in a pandemic the best that I can, working as an instructional leader for my school district, and a resource for my community and employees, and like most parents- working remotely and also supporting the education of my own children at home while schools buildings were closed.

I'm an education veteran of 21 years. I've been an administrator for about 11 years now. And as you can imagine, this is unlike anything we've ever encountered in public education. Everything we've ever known, best practices in instruction, how students learn, technology, how we clean our buildings, how we feed our kids, or how we support our kids' social emotional needs, has completely changed. Not only did it change, everything we know about opening a school for the school year has changed. We are rewriting our policies, our handbooks, our traditions, our schedules for the school year ahead, almost daily. Everything is different.

This morning I will begin by making two points:

1. Schools are the heart and souls of their communities, and even though we are in a crisis with COVID-19, we need to embrace this crisis as an opportunity to invest in our schools. We must envision what our future is like on the other side of the pandemic. We know we are going to get through this, so when I envision what public schools will be like, or what society will be like, 1 year or 2 years from now, I think about how we can come out of this crisis IMPROVED.
2. The second point: schools are in the middle of this struggle between wanting to do what is best for our kids and our communities versus what everyone else is either telling us to do or holding the purse strings on how to do it. Schools, especially teachers and food services, MacGyvered the last two months of school, pivoting on a dime, getting technology out to kids, revamping our curriculum to be delivered online, and meals out to kids. But it wasn't effective for all kids. It was rather inequitable in many parts of this state, especially in the poorer communities or the rural communities. No matter how you approach it, **it is going to take financial resources and an investment from the state and federal government to reopen our economy first by reopening our schools safely.**

This pandemic is extremely personal - in all communities perhaps, but especially the rural communities, as they struggle with job losses, a devastated dairy industry, and the fact that there is an economic recession. I am sensitive to the struggles both social and economic, the stresses on our health care system, and the greater political turmoil. I must balance these struggles with the pressure of reopening school buildings - where parents send their most precious possessions and **trust our school to do the right thing.**

If the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result, why are we treating this virus as something that is like other illnesses. Why wouldn't we expect to do things differently when reopening our buildings, and re-engaging our students in face-to-face learning?

---

**District Office:** 704 Cross Street, Blanchardville, WI 53516 • p: 608.523.4248 • f: 608.523.4286

**Middle and High Schools:** 704 Cross Street, Blanchardville, WI 53516 • p: 608.523.4285/967.2123

**Elementary School:** 701 School Road, Hollandale, WI 53544 • p: 608.967.2372/523.4283 • f: 608.967.1172

[www.pecatonica.k12.wi.us](http://www.pecatonica.k12.wi.us)

What I know is this ----- no matter how we do schooling in the fall of 2020, it's going to be very different from how we did school in the fall for the past 100 years. So, we cannot expect to go into September like we have the past 100 Septembers.

With that in mind, why not approach the pandemic as an opportunity to reinvest in public education? Let's do this right. Let's do right for all our children in public schools. Let's take every necessary precaution. Because when I envision what it looks like on the other side --- our economy can reopen, parents are able to work, and that's because kids are able to return to school safely without any threat of spread.

In other crises over the past 100 years - the Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, Sputnik, and even the last recession of 2008 --- we needed significant buy-in from the state and investment from both the state and federal governments.

I ask the Assembly Committee to recall those visionary leaders of our past and how a crisis can make way for progress or prosperity. This is our moment to do the right thing, as leaders before us have done. I think about the Great Depression and our federal leadership invested in rural telephone and electricity. They knew that on the other side of that crisis, when they made it through the Great Depression and economic prosperity returned, they wanted rural America to catch up with the other modern parts of the country, because that was good for every American.

I am a former high school history teacher, and one of the themes I recall hitting really hard with my students was the Sputnik Moment and the influence it had on American culture, education, and our spirit in 1957, which was also at the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. Little Rock High School was integrated in September, and Sputnik was in October 1957. Sputnik galvanized the United States to enact reforms in science and engineering education so that the nation could regain technological ground it appeared to have lost to its Soviet rival. As a result, we got critical thinking and problem solving, foreign languages and STEM curriculum in our schools. If Sputnik never happened, I wonder how long it would have taken for us to respond to the need for those skills in our workforce.

So, this is my question: Is COVID-19 and our response our next Sputnik Moment?

We know this pandemic will continue. We're not out of the woods. We must think strategically like FDR or Ike - we need to be visionary. So, I ask, "how will schools be able to do this?" We have an opportunity currently, and in this place, to change our course and the outcome of this crisis to one that is beneficial to all of our students and all of our communities.

- Could we seize this moment and make our society and our schools more equitable and better for ALL kids?
- Could this pandemic be an opportunity to reinvest in schools so that they are fully staffed, so that schools can reopen safely, and therefore we can reopen our businesses and our economy can recover?
- Could we invest in schools so that they have the technology needed to deliver online schooling as needed because that's the safest thing to do in order to continue education in a pandemic?

My answer to each of these questions is, "I certainly hope so," and "how can we?"

We need to eradicate the disease of COVID, but we need to eradicate the pervasive inequity that has spread through our society too. This pandemic has exaggerated the differences between communities, schools, and our children. To do any of these things that we need to do to fight the pandemic on our front lines, in schools, will take more financial resources. It will take more staff, not less. It will take visionary leaders who are brave enough to do the right thing.

As I lead my school district, I think about those Sputnik moments in American history: the call to action, the collective response, and our vision for the future. In each of these crises there is a common theme: the investment in public education. The renewed investment in our American Spirit. The investment in our future.

Nobody should ever say that defunding schools is the answer. To get through to the other side, this is going to take a significant investment in all of our public schools, and all of our children. This is the only way: so that our children can be safe, our employees can be safe, and so that our parents can go back to work.

In the meantime, I have 61 days to figure this out. We know that this pandemic won't last forever, but the side-effects, the consequences, and the emotional scarring of it very well could. We cannot lose another generation to austerity cuts. This pandemic is not anyone's fault. We could not control it happening to us, perhaps. But we can control how we make lives better and we can control our response and our recovery.

Please embrace this moment. This is our moment. This is our call to action. This is our opportunity to show our fellow Wisconsinites that we can work together - our state and federal governments, and our schools and our communities, to rebuild a society that can be even better than what we were before the pandemic. This is our wake-up call. We need focus and we need to get to work. Because when I think ahead, and imagine what our world will be like on the other side of this pandemic - my vision is one of hope, one of peace, one where we can say we took care of each other, one where we can say we continued investing in our children, their future - and our future. ----- FORWARD.

Jill Underly, Ph.D.  
Superintendent, Pecatonica Area School District  
Blanchardville, Wisconsin  
[junderly@pecatonica.k12.wi.us](mailto:junderly@pecatonica.k12.wi.us)