Questions for State Superintendent Candidates

1. *What is your motivation to be Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction? What is your vision for PK-12 public education in Wisconsin?*

We need to ensure that every single public school in our state is supported and equipped so that they can meet the needs of every single student in their care. Student success should not be determined by zip code, race, income, ability status, or first language.

I decided to run for State Superintendent because I am committed to the work that still needs to be done. I am unapologetic about my equity focus and my urgency to shift the education system so that it works for ALL our kids.

2. *Under your leadership as state superintendent, how will you define and shape the role of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in its relationship with Wisconsin school districts? What will be your priorities for the Department in working with district leaders to meet the needs of students across the state?*

Our local schools and school districts are the backbone of our communities. I am a proud graduate of Wisconsin public schools and have dedicated my career to advancing public education in Wisconsin. Having served as an educator and leader in a local school district as well as a senior leader within the DPI, I am uniquely positioned to understand the needs of our districts as well as the policy levers within the DPI. As State Superintendent, I’ll prioritize partnering with Wisconsin school districts-- supporting your efforts to advance local innovations and local needs-- and will leverage the resources of the DPI to provide leadership, best practices, and targeted support for the students who need us the most. I will be a champion for you, for our public schools, and for each and every one of our kids.

Working together, I believe that this is a moment in education where we must take what is working, leave behind what is not, and move forward toward something better. Specifically, in partnership with district leaders, I would prioritize re-
evaluating Wisconsin’s approach in three key areas: the outcomes we value for our kids, the role of the teacher, and the structure of the school.

The outcomes we value:
Over the years, our focus on improving test scores (in Wisconsin and around the country) has had unintended consequences that are not always good for kids. Whether it was reducing or eliminating recess; removing play-based learning in kindergarten; limiting art, music, and physical education; or squeezing out science and social studies, the result of our overemphasis on testing has been that our kids are stressed out, our educators and leaders are leaving the profession, and our test scores -- the thing we committed to improve -- are declining. We need to change that. It is time we start organizing education around the things that educators and families care about most: improving the lives of our children. In my current position at DPI, I am leading several efforts that are increasing student engagement, teacher job satisfaction, and test scores, which are increasing the most among the kids farthest behind. This can be done-- and I know how to do it-- in strong partnership with district leaders around the state.

The role of the teacher:
As school administrators, I do not have to tell you that we are facing an absolute crisis point in our profession -- a crisis that is only exacerbated by the pandemic. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves, and our struggle to fill the pipeline with the next generation of teachers is only getting worse. Adjusting licensure requirements and other fixes we have tried together may help around the margins, but I believe that until we fix the working conditions in our classrooms, we will never solve this problem. Re-assessing the outcomes we want to focus on is an important start. We also need to empower our teachers with a sense of efficacy. We need to include teachers at decision-making tables, ensure their voices are heard and valued, and involve them in developing policies and practices that are good for kids.

The structure of the school:
At the state level, we need to ensure that we are encouraging and supporting innovation. It is not enough to simply try to remove barriers to the kind of innovation you want to implement at the local level -- the state should be doing more to incent, reward, and replicate innovative practices. Whether it’s thinking differently about instructional time, remote learning, or the most effective way to reach each and every child, we have a unique opportunity right now to rethink some of our long held beliefs and make changes for the better moving forward. As you work locally on innovations and lessons learned from this pandemic, it will
be my job as State Superintendent to be your partner -- to make sure the state isn’t making it harder -- but instead, to make sure that it is always easiest for you at the local level to do what is right for kids, especially the kids that need us most.

3. In your estimation, what are the current strengths and challenges within the DPI? How would you approach building upon those strengths and addressing any shortcomings?

Over the past decade at DPI, I have seen first-hand the high quality and caliber of DPI’s staff. Just like in any school district, our staff are our most important resource, and DPI is filled with hard-working, experienced, and caring staff driven by a shared mission and vision of supporting all kids.

Over the years, I have also been proud of the agency’s movement toward a culture of continuous improvement and support, and away from a more compliance-focused model. While DPI has many important compliance functions that it must continue to do well, DPI as a state agency can and should do as much as possible to support local improvement efforts. Through this shift, we are laying the groundwork at the state and local levels to address inequities that persist across our state and identifying tangible next steps that can be taken together to improve outcomes for all kids.

Going forward, I want to improve DPI’s level of coherence and focus so that the agency is focusing on those things that are most important and impactful to our collective efforts to improve outcomes. In my experience, I think DPI tends to take on too many things. As a result, the agency’s limited resources can be spread too thin, and it can be unclear to the field what the priorities are. As State Superintendent, I will ensure the agency’s priorities and focus are clear and direct, and the field understands the resources, support, and technical assistance available to advance those priorities. Frankly, DPI cannot take on everything, and I want to be sure that those efforts the agency does prioritize can be done exceptionally well.

I also think it is important for the Department to be proactive in addressing policy changes that are aligned to a coherent and bold agenda. While I believe it is DPI’s role to stand up and fight to stop damaging laws and policy, I also believe we find ourselves in this situation way too often. I believe that we need to have a bold and clear vision, and that we need to be proactive in messaging to our legislators. We need to evaluate every law and policy on the books to make sure that they are helping us achieve the outcomes we want for kids. Where that is not the case, we
need to work together to adjust, replace or eliminate those laws and policies. I am ready to take on that fight.

4. As state superintendent, what policies or strategies would you advance to improve academic achievement for all students and close achievement gaps in Wisconsin? How would your policies/strategies ensure equal opportunity for all students, no matter their educational needs or their zip code?

All my priorities are rooted in equity. For Wisconsin to truly enact an equity agenda, we are going to have to think about how we approach our work differently. It is going to take bold leadership, and a lot of difficult work. But if we really want to make schools work for all kids, I know we can do this together. It will require changes to our assessment and our accountability systems; to the way we are teaching reading; to our educator preparation, diversity, and pipeline efforts; and to the way we fund our schools; to name just a few. All these priorities are about creating more equitable outcomes.

I have committed my professional career to this work--at the classroom, school, district, and, for the past decade, at the state level. I am ready to lead on this issue on day one and be a champion for each and every one of our kids.

5. Numerous studies have shown that improving early learning opportunities can help reduce achievement gaps for children. In Wisconsin, the good news is families now have access to quality 4K programming in over 98 percent of our school districts. We simply need greater access to high quality birth-to-three programming for those children who have a high probability of not being ready for school. As state superintendent, what policies or strategies would you advance to improve early learning opportunities in Wisconsin?

As a former 4K and 5K teacher, the person that led the effort to bring 4K to the Madison Metropolitan School District, and now as Assistant State Superintendent overseeing early childhood within DPI, this is a high priority for me. The evidence is clear: high quality early learning opportunities are crucial for developing brains and investing in early childhood is one of the best investments we can make for our children, our communities, and our economy.

In my current position, I have taken a lead role in the Governor’s Early Childhood Advisory Council for the last decade. I have built strong partnerships with both the Department of Health Services and the Department of Children and Families to
ensure we are focusing on our youngest learners across Wisconsin. I’ve also
served on the Governor’s Council on Workforce Investment, where we’ve
partnered together with the business community to support the crucial role of early
learning not only to individual children and families, but to the state and its
economic success as a whole. Because of these partnerships, we were successful
in bringing a $32 million Race to the Top Early Childhood Challenge into
Wisconsin, and a $10 million Preschool Development Grant. In the last two
biennial budget requests, DPI has proposed funding to pay for full day 4K, an
effort that could make access to high quality early learning opportunities more
accessible and more affordable to many more Wisconsin families.

As State Superintendent, I will be positioned to build on these already-strong
partnerships and support developmentally appropriate early learning policies
within DPI, across state government, and across our communities.

6. In Wisconsin, too many children have unmet mental health needs which, in turn, result
in negative consequences for those children, their families, our schools and our
communities. While school leaders greatly appreciate the school mental health
investments made in the 2017-19 and 2019-21 state budgets, most believe a stronger,
long-term commitment from the state is required to meet this challenge. As state
superintendent, what next steps would you take to address this problem?

Kids need access to mental health supports to ensure they are healthy and ready to
learn. The number of students dealing with anxiety, depression, and other mental
health issues has been skyrocketing. Nearly 60% of our high school students
reported a significant mental health need in 2019, with the long-term trends of
anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts trending in the wrong direction even
before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Together with partners like SAA, I will fight for the support we need to address
our growing student mental health crisis. We need to continue making significant
investments - including counselors, social workers, nurses and psychologists - to
ensure student needs are being met. I will work to ensure we have access to
teletherapy in our schools where they do not have access, and work to ensure all
students have access to social and emotional learning supports they need. This
cannot be with small grant programs -- it is going to need to be more stable
funding sources, in the form of reimbursement of costs.
Finally, our schools cannot be the only means to addressing the concerns of student and family mental health challenges. As State Superintendent, I will work with partner agencies like the Department of Health Services and the Office of Children’s Mental Health to advocate for broad solutions to support the growing, unmet mental health needs of our communities. This issue is bigger than the schools and will require everyone working together.

7. The recruitment, preparation, development and retention of effective educators is vitally important for our children’s future. Increasingly, many Wisconsin school districts face difficulties in filling key instructional positions with highly qualified educators. As state superintendent, what policies would you advance to address this important issue?

Our educators are the most important asset we have. As a state, I believe we need to re-envision the role of the teacher by improving working conditions in the classroom; incenting what is truly best for kids; providing quality materials to support teachers; and investing in a positive school climate with supportive feedback focused on continuous improvement and growth.

All this work starts with strong leadership. As Assistant State Superintendent, I led the development of Wisconsin’s equity plan to assist districts in their efforts to ensure students have equitable access to high quality educators. As it stands today, children of color and children experiencing poverty have a disproportionate chance of getting a new or out-of-field teacher --factors we know can impact student success, especially year-over-year. Our kids facing the toughest challenges need access to the best educators, and I am committed to advancing that work.

Another area I have led that is getting results is educator effectiveness. We built a system that is learner-centered and designed around continuous improvement. Wisconsin is the only state that made this choice in the beginning and is the only state that is getting such positive results. Our 2018 evaluation demonstrated that how you implement the system locally matters for student achievement and teacher retention--if you are implementing in a supportive, learner centered way, that focuses on helping teachers improve--student achievement goes up and teachers want to stay. If you focus on compliance or merely on accountability (e.g. rating, ranking, rewarding or removing), not only do you not get those student gains, but teachers also want to leave their school and the profession. Our 2020 evaluation data showed that the student achievement growth from this work occurs among our students of color, therefore closing racial achievement gaps. I plan to make sure that every school has the support they need to organize in this manner--so that we
can finally close the persistent racial achievement gaps plaguing Wisconsin. This is not the only work, or easy or quick work (in fact, I believe it is some of the hardest work we do) --but it is essential.

8. Do you support the expansion of taxpayer-funded private school vouchers in Wisconsin? Why or why not? What is your position on requiring greater accountability for schools participating in the voucher programs?

I do not support any expansion of taxpayer-funded private school vouchers. At the same time, I am happy that there are private schools for families that wish to choose that option. That is and always will be a critical part of our education landscape. But for the past decade, because of legislatively created funding schemes that funnel dollars to private vouchers from public school coffers, the state has struggled to meet its obligation to the public-school system. That system is the one that is enshrined in the Wisconsin Constitution, designed to provide every student with a free, uniform education. Until we can meet that guarantee, we have no business investing in other education systems.

That being said, it is highly unlikely the voucher programs are going away any time soon. What we can do is demand that if they take taxpayer dollars, they meet similar accountability measures. Many large voucher schools educate mostly voucher students -- meaning most of their funding comes from the state, like a public school. Ensuring schools in these programs meet financial and academic requirements akin to their public-school counterparts is a good place to start.

At the end of the day, my job as State Superintendent will be to fight for the needs of all of our Wisconsin school children, whether they attend a public school, a private school, a charter school, or are homeschooled. I believe the best way of doing so is by ensuring the public-school system is strong, funded, and working.

9. A recent report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum discovered that between 2002 and 2018 Wisconsin’s per-pupil spending declined from 12th highest in the nation (11% above the national average) to 24th highest in the nation (2.6% below the national average). Compounding Wisconsin’s lagging per-pupil spending has been the recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the inequities in our school finance system, making it increasingly difficult for districts to ensure equitable opportunities for all children – no matter their educational needs or their zip code. As state superintendent, how would you address the current inadequacy and inequity of our school finance system?
I think several things stick out. First, Wisconsin’s per pupil spending ranks 24th in the nation (and second to last in the Midwest). Second, our slight increase in per-pupil spending between 2011 and 2018 ranked us 49th in the nation for that percentage increase. As many states have returned to their pre-recession spending habits, Wisconsin has not. The report mentions this may be impacting teacher retention—I argue that it most certainly has. I think the other significant factor is the overreliance on referenda that masks the impact this funding problem creates. 387 ballot measures in a 10-year period is a stunning indicator that Wisconsin is not meeting its statutory obligation to fund our schools. Kids in Racine and MPS have gone decades without increases -- not to mention the extraordinary time and resources that go into planning for and educating for a ballot measure. Voters continue to support these measures across the state with an over 80% success rate in this fall election, which is quite stunning during this very unsettling economic time. But relying on referenda is an inefficient, and ultimately, inequitable way to fund our schools. What about the kids where the voters said no?

How we fund our schools and prioritize public education dollars is causing stark inequality in the educational experiences of our children. And the demographic make-up of our schools and communities has left key programs underfunded and ineffective. We now provide 30 cents for every dollar spent on special education, and around 8 cents for every dollar spent on an English language learner. A growing number of districts get no funding from the state’s largest aid program, designed to equalize their ability to provide an appropriate education. As the needs of our kids get more complex, we cannot ask our schools to continue to do more with less.

When I speak with Wisconsinites, I regularly hear their dismay that all students do not have the same opportunities and access to quality education across the state. The bottom line is that all of Wisconsin’s kids should have access to a high quality, public school education and districts should not have to continuously go to referendum to fund basic operating expenses. We need a leader who understands these issues and can effectively use the department to drive change.

As education leaders, we know an overhaul of our school funding system is long overdue. Among other things, we need to address the mismatch in the formula between property value and family wealth, and we need base funding for all districts so that every school district in the state receives a minimum amount of state general aid. We need more resources to support children with special needs, English learners, children experiencing poverty, mental health, and other growing
needs. Further, we need to ensure Wisconsin’s school funding is keeping pace with the changing cost of living and is keeping up with the rest of the nation.

While DPI’s agency biennial budget requests can be an important springboard for funding reform, we know we must do much more to achieve success. It requires coalition building. It requires collective work and relationship building all year long with legislators. It requires demonstrating success. Perhaps most importantly, it requires clear explanations about how funding changes and investments will translate into success for our kids. This will be some of our most important work together.

10. In Vincent v. Voight (2000), the State Supreme Court found the Wisconsin school finance system constitutional, so long as the legislature provided sufficient resources to ensure that all students are offered an equal opportunity for a sound, basic education. The court specifically enumerated three classes of students to which the state has a special obligation for ensuring equitable opportunities: economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and English language learners. Since 2000, the rising costs to meet the growing needs of students in these enumerated classes have far outstripped the limited school funding directed to each of these student classes; thereby challenging the abilities of local school districts to meet the Court’s standard. As state superintendent, how would you address this problem?

In addition to the school finance investments described above, I will fight for a budget that reimburses a minimum of 60% of districts’ special education costs, with a plan to increase that percentage over time. The gap between what our schools spend and what the state reimburses is now over $1 billion -- and, as you know -- this is a funding gap that affects all kids, including those experiencing poverty. We need to make sure our legislators understand this. But I want to go farther than that. I will prioritize funding to support all students learning English. Right now, support for state-required bilingual-bicultural programs is embarrassingly low - around 8 cents on the dollar - and Wisconsin provides no direct state funding to support English learners who do not qualify for these programs. I will also fight for the support we need to address our growing student mental health crisis, as I detailed earlier.

We can and must do better. If we do not, I believe we are headed toward legal challenges.
11. Increasingly, Wisconsin school leaders are growing dissatisfied with the lack of improvement in Wisconsin reading scores and seek innovative leadership and new investment in literacy instruction for Wisconsin students. As state superintendent, what policies/initiatives would you advance to address this problem?

Over the last 4 years, we have been working with schools and districts to ensure their literacy (and mathematics) materials are high quality and aligned to our standards. This was a substantial change for DPI, as the state had previously focused on what is taught (i.e. the standards), and not how those standards are taught. However, the state has an important role to play in leveraging its capacity and sharing evidence-based best practices with the field.

To that end, DPI has come out with two bold statements with respect to reading:

(1) Every kid deserves to be taught to decode through explicit and systematic phonics instruction. We need to stop debating this.
(2) To teach comprehension, we need to ensure that we are not doing only skill based comprehension work; instead, we need to be building background knowledge and vocabulary with complex, high quality, grade-level texts that are worthy of our kids.

To support teachers in this work, we need to make sure they have access to aligned quality materials. But we cannot stop there. We also need to support teachers in an ongoing way, with professional learning rooted in the use of these materials. Where schools have made this switch, we are hearing that students are more engaged, they are learning rapidly, and those that are improving the most are those that are farthest behind. Teachers are reporting increased joy for their craft. As State Superintendent, I will continue to lead this important statewide work until every kid has access to the best teaching and that every teacher has access to the highest quality materials and professional learning.

12. Small, rural schools continue to face many challenges that limit educational opportunities for the children they serve. These include: declining enrollment, a lack of economies of scale, difficulties in recruiting/retaining qualified staff contributing to reduced programming options, and distance from post-secondary education institutions. As state superintendent, what policies/initiatives would you advance to reduce the disparities in educational opportunities for children in rural Wisconsin?
I’m committed to advancing an agenda of equity for all kids, so no matter where they live or where they go to school, they have the educational opportunities they need to succeed -- that absolutely includes our rural communities. In many rural areas of Wisconsin, the school is the center of the community. Its success is directly linked to all citizens, businesses, and the economy. As State Superintendent, I’ll advocate for stable funding policies and sources that recognize the unique needs of our rural schools, including sparsity aid, transportation funding, and additional funding for English learners and students with special needs, to name just a few. Further, I will champion access to broadband and personal computers to address the digital divide that this pandemic has laid bare and will work to expand online course options for all kids in all corners of the state. I will continue to work with schools, districts, and institutions of higher education that are investing in innovative teacher pipeline solutions and explore more funding options to address teacher shortages with the legislature. Most importantly, I will partner with our rural school leaders to learn directly what individual rural districts and communities need, and how DPI can support your efforts.

13. In your estimation, what is your individual role as state superintendent in advocating for evidence-based educational policy that will lead to effective educational outcomes in Wisconsin?

This is an area about which I am passionate. As a lifelong educator, I understand and respect the academic process, and the use of evidence to support policy solutions that present the best chance of improving student success. As State Superintendent, I am committed to building a clear, coherent agenda that is grounded in equity and based on evidence. As Wisconsin’s state education agency, DPI can leverage research, knowledge, and best practices across K-12 education policy, and share that evidence with other platforms. As a state, we can align those evidence-based practices with things like professional learning, technical assistance, and funding. As I noted above, DPI’s role should be to make the best choices - those backed by evidence - the easiest things for districts to do.

14. The COVID-19 pandemic has and will continue to have a significant impact on student learning, especially for our most challenged learners. As schools increasingly move toward in-person instruction for students and anticipate the eventual full return to daily in-school activities, what do you see as the greatest recovery needs to be addressed for effective and meaningful student learning growth? As state superintendent, how would you propose meeting those needs on a statewide basis?
To me, the most important, immediate thing we can do is to make sure that the actions we take do not make matters worse.

Across the state, our students will need acceleration, not mediation. That means our teachers must be equipped to provide high quality instruction at grade level, with scaffolds to ensure all students can access the instruction. We will need appropriate assessments to know what scaffolds and supports will need to be put in place for students to access grade-level instruction. Standards-aligned instructional materials will support this work and will be more important than ever. Statewide, we need to ensure that we have strong core instruction in place in literacy and mathematics, and we need to make sure that we are continuing to provide a well-rounded education with strong science, social studies, art, music, world languages, CTE and personal financial literacy, to name a few.

Beyond that, it is incumbent upon us as education leaders to truly evaluate the lessons learned from this pandemic and determine what positive changes we can make going forward. Do all 16 and 17 year olds need to be in person full time 5 days a week, or can we re-imagine what a school day could look like for these learners? Are some children -- including some of those with the most challenges-- better served in a remote or hybrid setting, and if so, what can we change to better meet their individual needs? Regardless of what moving forward looks like in each individual district and for each individual child, we must take this opportunity to learn the lessons of this pandemic and make dramatic improvements to our schools--as they weren’t working for all kids before the onset of COVID-19.

Finally, as State Superintendent, I will serve as your partner and Advocate-in-Chief with the Governor and Legislature to support the funding, policy changes, and resources our students, families, schools, and communities need to recover and build back stronger than ever before. Throughout the pandemic, our schools have risen to the occasion and have continued to provide crucial, ongoing support to children and families. Now, more than ever, schools need the resources to address students’ academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.