



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

Every child, every day. I mean it. These words are no empty slogan for me. As a mom, an educator, and a district leader, my motivation is personal. I have the firm foundational belief that all kids, regardless of their zip code, deserve high-quality public school education. I am the product of public schools, and my kids go to Wisconsin public schools. I was fortunate to attend great public schools from K-12 through college, and they made me who I am today. Everyone deserves that opportunity. I grew up in a working-class union household where my parents valued public education, and they pushed me and my siblings to do well. I had great teachers who inspired me and who helped me find my passion in teaching as a profession. And I had great role models as parents who modeled hard work, ethics, caring for others, and community service. I grew up exposed to 4-H, music, literature, computer science, the fine arts, foreign languages, and an appreciation for diversity and other cultures, and that solid foundation has made me the well-rounded continuous learner that I am today. I want every child to be able to explore this world and have exposure to a diverse curriculum of topics and subjects so that they, too, can find their passion.

I am also motivated by the current state of affairs. I knew I wanted to run for State Superintendent in 2017, and I started preparing for my run the past two years. I worked hard up through the ranks of teacher to principal of both an elementary and a MS/HS, curriculum director, and then as District Administrator. I also worked at DPI in administration and in Title I and Licensing. I had the honor of working at UW Madison College of Letters and Science, where I worked closely with students who struggled academically to fit into the large university. Most of my students were graduates of Wisconsin's rural schools and from larger districts like Milwaukee and Green Bay. I'm involved in my profession, as someone who regularly testifies at legislative hearings on educational policy bills and stands up for public education and joint finance hearings on our state budget. I am a past member of the SAA Legislative Committee and a current member of the WASDA Executive Board. I am a frequent presenter and volunteer at WASBO and WIRSA conferences and fully engage in WPEN member meetings.

My vision for public education in Wisconsin is that I want the opportunity of a solid public education that inspires our future generations. I want Wisconsin to once again lead in public schooling, in education research, libraries, and technology, and in working conditions and labor for its teachers. I want families to be reassured that pandemic or not, their children are getting a world-class public education. My vision is that there is equity across school district lines, and that it doesn't matter

who you are born to or which neighborhood or town you are raised in, you are going to get the best public education because the state is invested in our children's success.

I have been leading a school district and I see firsthand the struggles kids and families have, and it is an uphill battle even before we had the life-threatening pandemic. I do not want to wait until I am at the end of my career; I want to act now. There is an urgency needed, and we need to change things for the better *now*. Having worked in all aspects of PK-16 public education and at the WI Department of Public Instruction, I know I am the person who can get this done. In fact, I have a track record and reputation for listening to different groups, bringing people together and working collaboratively, and ultimately getting great things done.

When State Superintendent Stanford Taylor released her state biennial budget proposal on 11/9, I was proud to see her alignment with my platform to invest in our children and their public schools. This budget focuses on equity and investing in children, particularly during a very tough time when our kids and their families need it. In fact, had I been in her seat now, I would have called for the main aid funding proposals. Every two years, the role of state superintendent is to point to the financial and other needs of our kids' public schools. I will do the same in two years' time. Of course, naturally there are some differing specific policy pieces and priorities that I would modify or add. There are areas that will still need more attention, such as special education funding, high poverty schools, and English Language Learners.

My vision for PK-12 public education in Wisconsin is rooted in equity. Rather than tweak things on the back end or create more work for school districts and teachers, I want to solve problems of inequity, and that starts at the beginning of a child's life and then at the start of their public schooling career.

- Fully funded **early childhood programming** that is full-day and every day, and is high-quality and assured to give all children the start they need to be successful.
- **Teacher recruitment and retention**, particularly in rural and urban areas, that brings the best and brightest into our schools and values them.
- **Mental health support and resources** for our students, particularly during the aftermath of a pandemic when there is so much trauma.
- The way forward is through a **revision of our school finance system**, and that will be my highest priority during my tenure. We need a school finance formula that works for all public schools in Wisconsin.

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?**

I pledge to be the champion for every public school child, their families, and educators across the great State of Wisconsin. As a district leader right now, in the middle of the greatest challenge faced by our generation, I know firsthand the struggles parents and educators experience financially and emotionally when deciding how best kids are served. I am a strong believer in

government institutions, and I believe they exist to make our lives better. I would leverage all the authority that DPI has in order to help students and districts across the state weather this pandemic and come out on the other side in the best shape possible.

I bring the unique perspective and eyes of a current district leader who was a principal and teacher and who worked at DPI and UW-Madison. I am a parent with my own two middle schoolers at home. I am a DPI consumer who knows how it can work effectively and change for the better. I know the statutes and I know the limitations, and I think that the state superintendent should take a larger role in shaping education policy in this state that will make the lives of children and ultimately our future better.

- I want DPI to be less compliance-focused and more focused on kids, their families, and educators. We can bring the best in technical assistance, guidance, and research to classrooms and schools. There are so many brilliant people working there—dedicated public servants—and they need to be working more with school boards and legislators to ensure that policies and practices align and are best for kids.
- I want to reduce burdens on school districts, particularly the smaller school districts that have smaller administrative staffs. Eliminating competitive grants and making them available as direct funding to all school districts through a CESA/DPI collaborative would be a first step. I would also like to reduce the burden of educator effectiveness on our schools, and I look forward to working with different stakeholders to work this out. Ultimately, I am interested in getting the maximum possible amount of fiscal and regulatory flexibility to our school districts, particularly during a pandemic.
- I would look at how we can locate technical assistance and research centers throughout the state, perhaps in cooperation with CESAs, to bring the experts out to the district rather than centering all that expertise in Madison. There is so much potential when we look at what we can accomplish by working together.
- I want DPI to work better with its stakeholders: groups such as WEAC, the School Boards (WASB), Administrators and Business Officials, rural schools alliance (WIRSA), parent advocacy and public school advocacy groups like WPEN, the UW System, private colleges, and more. We all want the same things: great public schools, a strong foundation for our kids, and a promising future for our entire state. As State Superintendent, I want to bring all these groups together at least monthly and work toward that common goal.
- I want DPI to take on the responsibility of helping public schools promote themselves and the causes as well as educate the citizens of this state about public schools and policies that impact public schools.

**School Finance System:** Every public school district and every public school in Wisconsin needs something different. We cannot make transformational change in equity, truly, until we have a new finance system that focuses on equity as its base.

While a school finance system is my priority, working parallel to that, I would do the following:

- I would collaborate with district administrators and superintendents to bring a 100% funded **full day 4K** to our districts and strengthen our early childhood programs. We have a responsibility to ensure that our kids' needs are met early with early intervention for speech

and language, behavior therapy, and occupational therapy, as well as good nutrition and health.

- **Teacher recruitment and retention:** I would then work with districts and institutions of higher education and schools of education to ensure that we have a well-trained, passionate, and diverse teaching force with licensing requirements that work not only for our schools but also for our future educators. Each school deserves basic staffing in high-need areas, including pupil services such as counseling, social workers, and nurses. We need a teaching force that looks like the students we serve. I would work with WEAC and institutions of higher education and excellent organizations like Educators Rising to recruit bright young people into the teaching profession and to retain family-supporting salaries for them to make sure they are valued for their expertise.
- Finally, I would work with our school administrators and our different professional organizations and private-public partners in **mental health** to bring more training to our staff, but also provide more on-site mental health services for our students and families. In a rural area especially, where there are shortages, the needs are critical. As our children and staff weather this pandemic, the need is greater than ever before.

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

**Strengths:** DPI has a healthy workforce of both caring and brilliant public servants who are passionate about children, continuous learning, and the future of this state. I worked at DPI about seven years ago, and from my recollections as well as my current interactions with them, I find the agency to be well organized and the individuals to be very knowledgeable and passionate about public education, libraries, policy, and children. Their strengths are in their institutional knowledge and their relationships with districts, CESAs, and various stakeholders like professional organizations and researchers within the UW System.

#### **Challenges:**

- Due to really no fault of their own, one of the challenges is customer service, particularly in educator licensing and educator effectiveness. Most districts consider educator licensing the “face” of DPI; it is often the only interaction the average teacher has with DPI.
- Another challenge I have encountered is a disconnect between the reality of what is happening in schools versus the speed through which DPI enacts new policies and guidelines.
- There is a heavier focus on compliance rather than district technical assistance in the current DPI.
- As a district leader, I experience a lack of coordination of communications from DPI and multiple overlapping timelines or notices from different departments.
- DPI promotes grants that districts can apply for rather than offering them to the districts that need them. Small districts and high-poverty districts lack the administrative capacity to apply for grants. Larger and well-resourced districts have grant writers and often receive those grants.

- It is the perception that DPI is reactive on legislative policies versus being proactive. I would like DPI to take a stronger stance on policy items going forward and advocate that those changes that were often placed in budget bills get their own hearing and revisited.

**How would I build upon the strengths and how would I address the shortcomings:**

- **Build coalitions and relationships:** I think our strengths are in our relationships, both within the agency and with our school districts, our advocacy groups and professional organizations, businesses, and our legislature. We all want strong public schools in this state, and I think it's the role of DPI to coordinate that response, whether it's through strategic public relations, professional development, technical assistance, or all of them.
- **Improve customer service:** I think that in areas like educator licensing and educator effectiveness and even in curriculum alignment, we can get the best minds on the problem and figure out solutions. We need to get some departments more resources so that they can be more effective. In the case of educator effectiveness and teacher evaluation, we need to maximize our relationships with professional organizations and groups like the Wisconsin Teachers of the Year in order to devise a strong system that everyone will support. Again, it comes down to relationships and getting those people with vested interests in the same room to work through things together.
- **Solid organization and proven human resources with some small changes:** I like how DPI is currently organized in its sections aimed at different components of the student experience. I would, however, reorganize the agency in small ways to address some of the more imminent challenges facing public school districts. Within the department I would add a research and development component that would work closely with the UW System and CESAs, and I would create a more robust communications team to foster improved public relations.

**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 zip code?**

I strongly believe that equity is the foundation point for all improvement in our public school system. Every child, every day is rooted in equity and speaks to my four goals for my first term as State Superintendent to improve academic achievement for all students.

- My first goal is strengthening early childhood education, including all-day 4K (every day), and 3K programs that would be fully funded. These can be done both through community approaches of public schools and private child learning centers. I strongly believe what research tells us: that investing in our children and families in the first years will pay dividends for later learning and life. Inequity begins early, from the time families have to choose a preschool program or daycare program for their child. Many families do not have access to high-quality early childhood programming. Research has proven over and over the massive benefits for kids who are given a strong start, and parents who are provided education and information about the formative early years of their child's life. Kids grow

up healthier, become productive adults, have better jobs because they graduated from school, and have higher achievement throughout their school years. A full-day, fully funded 4K program tackles the roots of inequity and lifts children out of generational poverty by disrupting that system. We need to begin investing in our children on the front end and reap the dividends later as they grow into productive, engaged teens and adults.

- Second, I promise tirelessly to review, revise, and improve our teacher education and licensing system in Wisconsin. We will work with stakeholders such as the school leadership organization members of SAA, WEAC, WASB, Wisconsin's Teachers of the Year, the University of Wisconsin System, and private colleges; completely examine the issue of teacher shortages; and make systemic improvements. We will take any actions that require law or rule changes to the legislature. We must make becoming a fully qualified and certified teacher more rewarding and relevant without just making it "easier." There are many skills that we don't teach our teachers in college, and that needs to change. I believe, and our experience during this pandemic proves, that there are skills that all teachers need to know, such as working well in a virtual learning environment, and vital skills to close achievement gaps like effectively teaching reading, differentiating instruction, and personalizing learning for each child.

We need to ensure that our teaching force is as diverse as the students they teach, and I would act to launch local affiliates of Educators Rising in all of our schools, or at least regionally through our CESAs so that we can grow our future teacher workforce. Additionally, in a state that ranks in the lower half in starting teacher pay and has fallen to below the national average for teacher salaries, we must meaningfully address teacher compensation and devise ways to professionalize the educator profession. Working with administrators, WEAC, IHEs, School Boards, and CESAs, let's ensure that we have a healthy supply of teachers stretching from veterans to novices. We must support our current and future school and district leaders to prepare them for the changes that are happening, ensure fair compensation for their work, and work to end inequity among gender lines.

- We must provide mental health resources and deploy trauma-sensitive approaches to our instruction in our schools. There is a critical shortage of mental health support in our schools, and ensuring our children's mental health needs are addressed so they may learn is a high priority.
- Again, none of this is possible unless we look at our school finance system. I was an invited speaker for the Blue Ribbon Commission in 2018, and I shared how the current school finance system has created more inequity between our public schools since 1993. Rural schools and urban schools need relief. Needed as well as mandated expenses for educating English Language Learners and students with special education needs must be reimbursed at higher rates as proposed. Staffing needs to be reexamined as many schools do not really have school nurses, reading specialists, gifted and talented coordinators, or school psychologists because they cannot afford them. Many schools are facing crumbling infrastructure. Meanwhile, schools in areas with higher property values and growing

populations are building *cathedrals to learning* with beautiful athletic “complexes” and industrial arts centers. All kids deserve all of these things, but our current system of school finance certainly creates a system of winners and losers, and it’s simply not right. Public schools are supposed to be the great equalizers.

**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?**

Yes, the good news is that families now have access to quality 4K programming for at least part of the day, but it is not equitable and more needs to be done to make it so. 4K is still not reimbursed at a full rate, even though some districts have determined that it is important that kids receive the quality programming every day for a full day. We must make Wisconsin a national leader in early childhood education again. Not that long ago, as a young mom, I searched for preschool programming for my two children who were 19 months apart at a rate that I could afford. What a near-impossible quest. Because I could not afford it, either I had to choose which child got to go to a high-quality program, I had to settle for something subpar so they both could attend, or I had to keep them home and educate them myself until they were eligible for full-day programs. This is not something that parents should have to choose because they live far away from a good program, or because they cannot afford a high-quality program.

And as we’ve learned in this pandemic, it’s often the mom who leaves the workforce to care for young children or to stay home and educate them, therefore exiting the workforce and having long-term consequences for their family’s economic future. It’s not just about mothers, though, as it is *proven* that high-quality early childhood education is critical to lifelong successes. Every school district must have high-quality programming and they need to offer it every day, because otherwise it becomes uneven. Parents need to feel confident that if they want to send their child to a program, they can also return to the workforce if they so desire. We have so much research on what works, yet we will not do any of it because of the upfront cost. Instead, we put that responsibility on parents, and what you find is that those who can afford it or have access to it take advantage of it, setting up their children for lifetime success. However, for those who cannot afford or access it, their children head down a road of greater inequity—a loss for all of us. Every parent wants the best for their child. Parents should not have to choose between paying a mortgage and putting their child in day care or private preschool. If all kids had access to early intervention services and strong early childhood programs, can you imagine what their elementary experience would be like? Can you imagine a world where all children received a strong start complete with early interventions for speech, language, reading, and other learning needs? Can you imagine the possibilities for our economic future when we set all kids on the path to graduating from high school career- and college-ready? If they had a strong early childhood program that set

them up for a lifetime of success? I am a firm believer that we need to invest in our kids in the beginning of their lives rather than pay for social services or corrections when they are adults.

Early childhood programming is a proven program that lifts all children up and benefits our entire state—and economy—for a lifetime. In Pecatonica, I started after-school programs, a full-day summer program, and a full-day, every day 4K program for this explicit purpose. We needed to ensure our kids were receiving early intervention, and we did so, even if it meant a small loss in revenue that was not reimbursed by the state. Our school board shared my belief that it was best for kids.

**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?**

Across our state, there is a shortage of mental health providers, and there are limitations in Wisconsin as to which providers can work in schools. I would work with the legislature to change the rules to allow individuals who are trained professionals to leave private practice and work in the public schools. In addition, I would advocate with educator licensing programs in the UW System throughout the state such as Platteville, La Crosse, Superior, and Eau Claire to revisit their social work programs to allow for a school setting without a master's degree.

Next, we need to provide the allocated school mental health funding directly to schools in the form of personnel instead of making funds available as competitive grants. Again, my agenda focuses on equity, disrupting those factors that create generational poverty, and disrupting the cycle of poverty that inequity in our society exacerbates. Due to unmet mental health needs, children in middle and high school are introduced at a young age to the criminal justice system, and unmet mental health needs factor into Wisconsin's very active school-to-prison pipeline.

We need to review how we staff our schools in general, and this would be a great place to start. For example, can we agree that every school building needs to have a school nurse, a social worker, and a mental health professional? Then let us move forward from there. Again, this would come back to the revision of the school finance formula to ensure we make these positions a reality. In this COVID-19 pandemic, we see that these professionals are needed more than ever. The commitment from the state would come in the form of funding but also in reviewing and revising our educator licensing for school pupil services personnel. DPI would need to make minimum staffing recommendations and perhaps allocate more resources to our school districts with the lowest local financial resources specifically for mental health needs.

**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?**

I have experienced this issue firsthand as a rural school superintendent who has recruited and hired dozens of teachers. We have a crisis that needs someone who knows the local struggle. And I can lean into my experience of working in educator licensing at the Department of Public Instruction and with quality students at UW-Madison who wanted to become teachers but could not get into the School of Education.

There are several issues here. The first is supply and demand. No one ever went into teaching to get rich. It is a calling, a vocation. Since 2011, Wisconsin public teachers have been disrespected and demonized by too many, including some of our state leaders. This in turn has deterred young adults from pursuing the teaching profession. Cuts in salary and benefits have made a once-attractive job that could support a family now unattractive. Wisconsin has moved to the lower half of US States in starting teacher pay and below the average in teacher salary. This puts potential teachers behind what many others who have college degrees would earn in the workforce. We now are losing the Midwest regional competition for new teachers. It's time to stop that.

Second, our schools of education—while I applaud them for their selectivity—had become so exclusive that they were attracting a type of student who had an educational experience completely different from what our public school students experienced in reality. Personally, I think the best teachers are those who did not have an easy time in school. They did not have the best grades all the time, and learning did not always come easy to them. Often, the best special education teachers are the ones who struggled with standardized tests. And our new teachers look nothing like many of the kids they will teach in our schools. We need a diverse workforce not only in race, ethnicity, and language skills, but also in upbringing—those who perhaps did not grow up in an upper middle-class household but struggled in school. There are some great programs like Educators Rising that recruit high school students into teaching majors in college. UW-Platteville has a program that recruits engineering majors into STEM teaching careers. I would like to use the Wisconsin Teachers of the Year Council in an advisory capacity to inform school boards and colleges what needs our new teachers must be educated in before graduating. We all want the same thing and we all should work together on this: schools and colleges, school boards, SAA, WEAC, and DPI.

Lastly, we need to reprofessionalize the teaching force. I want unions and school boards to work together to figure this out. If we are going to get the best and the brightest in our classrooms, we must pay them what they are worth. We must value the elementary school teacher the same as we would value a high school technology or physics teacher. Each teacher has a role to play in the educational development of our children. I want the best in our classroom, and to do that, we need to rethink how we compensate teachers and we need to rethink their career ladder. Teachers need to see a future in a school district. And they need to know that those who choose to teach in a rural area are as valued for their labor as a teacher in a wealthier suburb. I think we can learn a lot from what other states and other countries have done for educator compensation and apply that learning to our situation in Wisconsin.

We need to revisit how teachers are licensed. I think that we have too many expensive tests for teachers too, and they must take a semester of an unpaid internship to boot. We need to value people for their labor and their contributions if we want people to go into the profession, and we need to get the people who are teachers and educators to control the licensing and make decisions about tenure. I would also like to work with WEAC, the school boards, AWSA, WASBO, WASDA, and the colleges and schools of education to develop a true career ladder with sectoral bargaining and compensation packages so that teachers can establish roots and see a future in their school districts rather than have to move around so much in order to get a pay raise. I have also given thought to a “baseline” personnel expectation in all schools. Is it reasonable to expect that each building has a principal? What about a reading specialist or a gifted and talented coordinator or a curriculum coordinator? Many schools have cut different positions, which has created a widening inequity in educator positions in our schools. So when I look at licensure, I look at the economically stressed districts, and I wonder how we can aid them so that they can hire people to fill roles that have gone unfilled because of shortages or because they are cost-prohibitive.

I have other ideas for teacher retention, including the following:

- School-based professional development
- Revisiting the multitude of gatekeeping tests that teachers must pass to become licensed
- Reorganization of roles and responsibilities that are rooted in evidence-based practices such as collective efficacy among staff
- Student loan forgiveness for teachers and administrators
- A complete overhaul of the educator “effectiveness” system

The point is, becoming a licensed educator in Wisconsin is a series of expensive and frustrating hoops to jump through. It should not be this difficult for intelligent, strong, and passionate educators to work with our kids. There must always be criteria, but the criteria should not be so impossible and time-consuming (and expensive) that they deter people from the profession. If we can make education a sought-after profession, we will attract the best and the brightest. If we can promote the profession and respect the individuals already employed by our schools, we will keep them in our schools doing what they do best: educating and inspiring our kids.

**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 program?**

The short answer is “NO.” I am strongly against the expansion of taxpayer-funded private school vouchers. I strongly believe that the public should be investing their public dollars to make public schools better and meet the needs of all public school kids, versus placing public dollars in private schools. I think that most people in Wisconsin have no idea how much voucher expansion has cost them as taxpayers, and how much of the funding for vouchers has come from the aid that is general school aid that used to go to public schools. I have nothing against private schools, and they serve a purpose, of course, but I do not believe that they should be funded with tax dollars.

As state superintendent, I would implement the law as it is written; however, I advocate that public money go to improve public schools and their programs that improve equity and student achievement instead of expanding private school vouchers.

I think that private schools that accept public dollars should be in the same accountability system as public schools. They should take the Forward Exam, their teachers and administrators should have the same licensing requirements, and they should have the same accountability report cards as public schools and districts. Release them to the public and post them on their webpages and the DPI website. I would take it a step further: those private schools that accept federal dollars like Title I and Title II should also be a part of the federal accountability program and identification process. In addition, I would like to see an item on our tax bills that shows the amount that is provided for the local public school tax levy, and then the amount that is removed from the levy that goes to both voucher schools and independent charter schools. Taxpayers deserve transparency in where their money goes, particularly when they are approving referendums for their public schools, while private vouchers and 2R charters never have to go to referendum and take their funding off the top of the equalized aid distribution.

**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?**

As the state superintendent, it would be one of my highest priorities to replace our school finance system with something that is first of all more transparent and more equitable to all school districts while holding districts harmless in the change. I would look forward to working with Joint Finance Committee Co-Chair Howard Marklein, who is also a senator representing my school district and all rural school districts in Southwest Wisconsin. Right now, there are clear losers in our school finance formula: primarily low-revenue ceiling districts, declining enrollment districts, high-poverty districts, and even fast-growing districts. When you look at how many school districts fit one or more of those criteria, it's safe to say that our current system isn't working for the vast majority of our school districts and, by extension, the vast majority of our 860,000 public school children. Further, every time school district operational referenda are passed, it makes our system more inequitable. In this scenario, local taxpayers are voting to raise their own local taxes to meet the obligations of operating their school where the state has failed to step in with equalized aid and two-thirds funding. Hence, sadly Wisconsin per-pupil spending has declined from 12th to 24th in the nation and negatively impacted learning opportunities and support for our students.

My goal as a school district leader is to advocate for programs that help the most kids be successful. As state superintendent, I would advocate for a school finance system that helps the most kids in the most districts meet their educational goals. What has happened since 2009, and

the last recession, is that the party that controls the legislature and the former governor made more changes to the school finance system as part of the biennial budget bills rather than allowing these changes to have their own policy hearings. Therefore, school districts supposedly got the “tools” to balance their budgets but did so on the backs of their employees. And in the end, districts still pass operational referenda because the state made a cut of \$600 per pupil in 2011. Even though that cut has slowly built back over the past 10 years, we’ve had a generation of children who have grown up in public schools with austerity cuts that have never been completely restored. We need leadership at DPI to educate the public about this broken school finance system, this decline, and the negative consequences for learning.

I applaud the budget proposed by Superintendent Stanford Taylor, particularly the adjustments made to English Learner funding and special education reimbursement. I am grateful that a categorical aid for poverty was added, therefore finally adding Wisconsin to the leagues of modern US states that have this type of aid in their funding system. I would advocate for a new funding formula that would keep these categorical aids, and I would also advocate for the recommendations made by the bipartisan Blue Ribbon Commission in 2019. The bottom line is that Wisconsin needs to invest more in its public schools. Part of my role would be to educate the citizens of this state about how public schools are an economic driver, and to spotlight how other states have continued to invest in their public schools despite recessions and pandemics. It is more important than ever that we address this spending decline and have an honest conversation about our priorities for the future of this state.

**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?**

If I were State Superintendent, I would take the 2019 recommendations from the bipartisan commission on education, the Blue Ribbon Commission, and fully advocate for those recommendations to become policy. I say this expecting that this is how one would proceed under normal times. But we are not in normal times. We have, for example, a report that was written by a bipartisan committee on a nonpartisan issue: public education funding. It is a plan for what needs to be done grounded in research and based on expert testimony. However, I don’t expect any of it to get done with this current legislature, and again, that’s why I feel that it is very important for the rest of the state, the voters, to understand that we know what we need to do and how we can accomplish it. It is simply that there is a lack of will by those who can make it so. On the November 3, 2020 ballot, 90% of recurring operational referenda passed. This continues a strong

trend of Wisconsin referenda passing in recent years. As long as local voters are willing to pass referenda, it appears that the legislature does not feel any urgency in addressing school funding inequity.

We know what to do. The Blue Ribbon Commission outlined a road map for our State for education funding. I would hope that the legislature would take their own recommendations and return to two-thirds funding for public schools, a 60% reimbursement for special education, increases for English learners programs, and a poverty multiplier to get the much-needed funds to these high-needs schools. This would go toward fulfilling the promise of *Vincent v. Voight*. As I testified to the Blue Ribbon Commission in 2018, there is a separation among our schools—not just by race, but by socioeconomics now as well. We see it every time we have an election and school districts must request an operational referendum to simply make financial ends meet and provide basic opportunities for their students. Further, just drive around and look at the facilities of school districts in high-poverty areas versus those in the affluent suburbs, and it is obvious. Yes, our rural schools and urban schools provide a solid education with as many opportunities as possible, but funding in our state is lagging and the opportunity gaps between those “have” and “have not” schools keeps widening.

**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?**

In my experience as a school district administrator, a parent, and a public consumer of Wisconsin school report cards who looks at and compares how my school does compared to its neighbors, I can say that all children need reading instruction, including explicit and systematic phonics instruction. Wisconsin’s 2020 standards for English Language Arts (ELA) “focus on ensuring that every student has the ability to comprehend and create text,” because that is the way we share information and ideas. Students need instruction in “comprehension, writing, speaking, listening, and reading foundational skills.”

Wisconsin’s model is missing a cohesive curriculum framework because our state advocates for district local control. Therefore, the implementation of standards is left up to individual school districts to decide. We know that phonics, coherence, and being responsive to students is important. Students need the opportunity to read and write about the topics that interest them. But what school districts use for curriculum varies widely. If we want improvement in reading scores, there needs to be direction and cohesiveness in how literacy is taught. For example, the curriculum in use in Wisconsin districts often does not address student interest. It is equally important that students engage in texts that are diverse, that show them a world that is larger than they are, with other kids who look like them but who may also think differently and look differently than they do. And when you get down to it, there is a real lack of diversity in the curriculum used in Wisconsin schools, just as there is real lack of diversity in our teaching force.

When I worked at DPI, I was on the ground floor implementing the Title I Network with fellow DPI consultants. In that model, we used Title I funds to create a network of professional development experts and a delivery model of Title I services directly to districts through our CESAs. If we want to improve our reading scores, teachers need ongoing support and professional learning to implement instructional materials and learn how to make the materials more diverse, and they need financial resources to do this well. Therefore, I would support an initiative to create a Literacy Network with each CESA and DPI. Each CESA could work directly with their districts to create a literacy instruction analysis and needs assessment, which would then chart a path forward for implementation of the literacy standards. In this analysis, districts would analyze their own system and structures related to reading much in the same way that DPI currently works with CESAs (who then work with districts) to analyze their structures and systems related to Title I and special education. This CESA-run "Literacy Network" and public schools can develop the tools and craft a local curriculum and implementation plan that meets the standards and the research-based frameworks but is place-based and diverse too.

Currently in 2020, as it stands in so many Wisconsin schools, there are insufficient resources to ensure that literacy instruction is done well. It's not the fault of the local districts or DPI, mind you; it's really a fault of how the system is set up. Some potential funding sources to provide more staff and training could be through Title I funds, Title II funds, and a state budget request. Each school is going to need, if they do not already have, a literacy coach or instructional coach who can focus on reading and be the point of contact for teachers who are teaching reading in grades PK-6. Schools will also need interventionists who can implement individual learning plans or personalized learning plans, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, when we know that thousands of Wisconsin schoolchildren will not be at grade level in reading and English language arts. We're going to need to set up after-school programs and summer school programs that will focus specifically on literacy. We know we have a lot of catching up to do, and I'm confident that with the correct systems and structures in place, we can do it.

Wisconsin doesn't need to reinvent the wheel. We have solid standards, we have the licensing requirements, and we have state statutes. We simply need a framework that can implement the standards. To get there, it would be essential to develop a statewide delivery mode similar to the Title I Network that can train our PK-6 teachers, instructional coaches, reading teachers, and reading specialists on that framework while giving them the freedom to allow for student individualization. I think it's worth noting that the pandemic is only going to make matters worse. The gap in literacy acquisition will only increase.

**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 postsecondary education institutions. As state superintendent, what policies/initiatives would you advance to reduce the disparities in educational opportunities for children in rural Wisconsin?**

I live on a small farm and work in rural Wisconsin. I love it. I'm a practicing rural school district superintendent, so this question and its solutions are foremost in my mind. I would be the primary champion for rural schools and their communities. I know that in order to accomplish anything related to school funding equity in this state, I would have to work with the legislature. My strategic communications and public advocacy for rural schools would be aimed at raising the voices of the constituents of rural state legislators calling for passage of my plans. I pledge to work to win over enough of those legislators to accomplish overcoming these educational challenges. As I shared with my CESA 3 and Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance colleagues at the Blue Ribbon Commission testimony in 2018, the funding system as it is implemented now places rural schools at an inherent disadvantage. Declining enrollment schools, even if it's just a handful of children a year, triggers declining enrollment exemptions that remove equalized aid from the base of each year's budget. Coupled with demographic and population shifts to where most people who are not farming need to live near a highway or city for jobs, rural schools have a perfect storm of a funding crisis that prevents them from attracting and retaining teachers and from maintaining their facilities, as well as having to cut opportunities for kids. As a rural Wisconsin resident and leader, I have a bigger question for lawmakers: Do our rural communities mean anything to them anymore, and how important is it to keep rural Wisconsin alive and thriving? If schools go, if rural internet never improves, and if there are no jobs to keep families in these communities, it will only be a matter of years before they will completely disappear.

As I've shared, I live in rural Wisconsin and I do so by choice. I love my neighbors, my town, and my county, and I want to see it not only survive but also thrive. That is why I am a proponent of revising the school funding formula to ensure rural public school survival in Wisconsin.

- **Urban and rural** are not that different: declining enrollment, poverty, staffing shortages, and outdated facilities.
- **Staffing:** In order to attract high-quality teachers and retain them, rural schools need to offer comparable pay and benefits to what suburban schools offer. This can be accomplished long-term by a change in our school funding system, or it can be a categorical aid allotment either for adding the difference to starting salaries, offering student loan forgiveness to rural teachers, or other incentives for staying in their communities with successful years of teaching experience.
- **Facilities:** A solution similar to what Governor Thompson did in 1990 would be to establish a separate funding stream to update buildings and grounds to 21st century standards for HVAC, athletics facilities, science labs, career, technology, and arts/music classrooms, and common spaces. Most rural school districts lack air conditioning in its buildings, which is a health and safety hazard for students and staff. Many rural school districts lack facilities for the fine arts or performance arts, and those could double as community spaces too.

Our rural schools are the heart of their rural communities. They are not "just schools"—they are community centers, farmers markets, makers fairs, and holiday bazaars. They are the Friday night game, the band concert, and the staging ground for the Homecoming parade. We need to

celebrate our rural schools for the contributions they make to the values and the social fabric of rural Wisconsin, and we need to continue to invest in them.

How can we reduce disparities? The reason I pose this next statement is because if I am honest, kids in rural public schools in Wisconsin have many benefits and strengths, but there are also certain drawbacks. Many times, school boards have debated how they can bring more opportunities to their students. We've formed cooperatives for athletics, and we've shared administrators. More recently with population shifts, school districts have talked about property swaps, acquisitions, or sometimes total dissolution. I never want to see a community lose its school. These conversations start from a good place: How can we bring more opportunities to our kids?

I have studied other ideas, and I would look forward to having honest conversations about the possibilities with different stakeholder groups, including WIRSA, WASB, and WPEN for starters.

- I would propose that we rethink school staffing. We have essential staff, but how can we attract more counselors, school psychologists, high-quality administrators, reading specialists, and curriculum coordinators?
- Each school needs a technology or computer specialist, or a network administrator. I understand if, due to sizes, these individuals would be shared among more than one school, but nonetheless, each school needs them because the kids need them. We need to advocate for better broadband and wireless internet access and the staff who can help maintain these systems and provide learning to our teachers on how to effectively teach virtually.
- We also need to ensure that there is equity in salary for teachers and administrators in rural schools. Otherwise, after a few years of experience are gained in rural schools, younger teachers leave for the suburbs, where there is often a pay increase, and this often happens in areas that are lacking teachers like STEM, special education, and technical education.
- With better internet access, we can establish better partnerships with the technical college system and the UW System to bring more learning into our rural schools so that high school students can gain access to college classes and teachers can gain access to professional development. The current program is very costly for rural school districts, and while it is worthwhile, I think that the rural schools and the tech college and UW System need to negotiate a better deal with the state.

The bottom line is we need to reinvest in our rural communities if we want these communities to continue to exist and to educate the hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren who live there and will someday work there. There is a symbiotic relationship between strong schools and strong communities, and as your state superintendent, I would look for ways to strengthen that relationship. It is a group effort that will require collaboration between the legislature and local and county government if we are to have long-term improvements. As state superintendent, and as a rural resident and educational policy researcher, I would be sure to be prepared to do my part and work hard to solve this issue.

**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?**

I do this now as superintendent of my schools, which are my kids' schools. As your state superintendent, I will take this job to a statewide level and leverage the power of DPI in advocating for evidence-based educational policy that leads to effective education outcomes. Currently in my school district, this is the focus of my recommendations to our school board and in deciding which professional development and practices we are implementing with our teachers and curriculum. I am someone who believes in research and would highlight the work of Dr. John Hattie, detailed in "Visible Learning" (2009), a culmination of 15 years of research and synthesis of educational research studies about what works best in schools.

Hattie points to the most "effective" practices that educational research has proven work in schools and to the least effective practices still being used in our schools. For example, the educational policy that has the most effective outcome for student learning is collective teacher efficacy, which is the joint belief among school staff that they have a positive impact on student achievement and that they work together as a team for their students. So why is it that in many schools, we promote this belief that teaching should be done in isolation, that it should be compartmentalized? In many places we teach and operate schools like it's 1920 and not 2020. In many other countries, teachers work together in a model that is popular in the medical field, with a lead teacher, support teachers, and small group leaders (think doctor, consultations with other doctors, diagnosticians, and nurses and CNAs). We adhere to how things are in our schools because they have always been that way, and I firmly believe that how we teach and organize our staff needs to change in order to improve student outcomes. It's so difficult to do because we are mired in tradition, and change is tough. Most of it has to do with how we were taught and what we experience, and it works well to a certain extent. However, evidence-based educational policy helps guide the way to the methods and practices that do work. I will bring my leadership experience improving student learning through evidenced-based change to my role as state superintendent. I will not only advocate for these adjustments in our practices but also advocate for the resources to make them a reality.

The state superintendent needs strong relationships with the state legislature in order to make sure that any laws that impact educational policy are completely vetted. I think I've said it before in my answers to other questions: we know what works. It really takes the dedication and the fortitude to make the tough decisions and advocate against bad policies in order for the good ones to prevail. I look at it this way: this is the only time a child will be in first grade, or the only shot a kid has at 11th grade, or an AP class, or learning how to read or play an instrument in a band. We have to use the methods and the models that are proven to work. We also need to eliminate the practices and the policies that don't work, or the practices that are a detriment to student achievement (like holding students back a grade). Otherwise, we will continue to waste time and resources and, as stated before, waste the opportunity for kids who are getting their only chance at first grade, or waste the promise of the new, energetic teacher by not providing relevant professional learning and support for growing and staying in our classrooms.

**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?**

Bluntly, we need a stimulus. It is unfair to put the responsibility of making all of this better on our public schools. Schools didn't cause COVID, but due to the lack of leadership from the Wisconsin legislature and many in Washington, DC, schools sure are having to make all the decisions and clean up all the messes and, honestly, take all the blame and assume all the expenses.

Greatest recovery needs for student learning growth are the following:

- For online learning and online teaching, students and their teachers need access to the internet. We also need to get more training to address engagement concerns, particularly for those kids who are most at risk for chronic absenteeism and risk of dropping out and disengaging entirely.
- We need to provide supports for student, family, and community mental and physical health, including nutrition.
- Educational staff will need to develop personalized learning plans for students, prioritizing current grade level learning while filling in learning gaps, following diagnostic assessments to assess learning loss and whether they are on track to meet standards and goals. Further, we must plan and implement summer enrichment and extended learning opportunities (likely after school) once the pandemic is over.

Public schools are supposed to be the greatest equalizer. You go into a school, and it should not matter how wealthy your family is as all kids have the same access to the best teachers and the best technology, libraries, and textbooks. They get fed. They are supposed to feel safe. Yet in a pandemic, when kids are learning at home, all of this becomes uneven. Access to schooling is uneven. You hope access to food and safety is stable, but the reality for tens of thousands of kids in Wisconsin is that it's not. So I list the top three greatest recovery needs above as academic concerns because this pandemic is only going to exacerbate the well-documented opportunity gap that exists in Wisconsin between its wealthiest and poorest schools, and its schools that already have the highest needs for poverty, English learners, and students of color.

Schools cannot address all these learning needs without an infusion of funds. We need personnel to support kids in mental health or personalized instruction, or to support the kids who are disengaged and considering dropping out. We need staff who can work one-on-one with the younger students struggling to read. And if we must continue virtual schooling, we need high-quality broadband or wireless internet regardless of where a student or teacher lives.

Public schools are supposed to be the great equalizer, but the hard truth is that some of the schools will weather the storm better because their boat was built better. Give schools the

resources they need so that our students can make a full recovery and move on the path to return to normal after the pandemic is over. Provide that extra investment in our students through personalized learning plans, summer enrichment opportunities, and after-school programs to mentor and tutor students and get them back on track for meeting the state standards or graduation requirements. Finally, let's redesign this system so that we can come out on the other side of this pandemic better.

When I come out on the other side of the pandemic, as a school leader, I don't want to be fighting for the same stuff we were fighting for before the pandemic. Schools need funding. Families need reassurance that their children are being educated and that the state is providing an investment in all public school kids. The state needs to make a statewide investment in high-speed internet infrastructure. We need to revisit how to staff our schools and include more student support for mental health and physical health, and emotional health for our staff. Truthfully, we need to be prepared if another pandemic or disaster happens. Regardless, after the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to rebuild our public schools so they can deliver a great education for every child, every day.

To the SAA and to the membership, thank you for the opportunity to answer these thoughtful questions. I hope my answers provide more insight into my platform as well as my perspective and stances on these major policy issues. I am excited for the months ahead, and I am looking forward to working hard on behalf of Wisconsin's public school employees and its 860,000 public school children. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me if you have any questions about any of my answers above. Thank you for reading! – JILL

*For additional information about Dr. Jill Underly, please visit: [www.underlyforwi.com](http://www.underlyforwi.com) and sign up for her newsletter, or visit her Facebook page @underlyforwi to view upcoming events. You may also reach Jill at [underlyforwisconsin@gmail.com](mailto:underlyforwisconsin@gmail.com).*