Questions for State Superintendent Candidates

By

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

I entered this race for the purpose of giving back. I am a fifth generation Wisconsinite and the product of an outstanding public school education offered by the great folks in Colfax. My wife, mother, and father-in-law all enjoyed successful careers as teachers in Wisconsin. Every opportunity afforded to me in my lifetime is somehow connected to public education. This includes my career as a teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent in the school districts of Melrose-Mindoro, Princeton, Gale-Ettrick-Trempealeau, and West Salem. Ensuring these opportunities are provided for generations to come regardless of factors like race, gender, ethnicity, family income, and zip code serve as my daily motivation. Finally, all elections are about timing. The voters choose the person most needed at the time. I believe my experience, passion, vision, servant leadership, and unbridled love for this entire state make this the time for someone like me.

In addition to continued success in facilitating the various statutory requirements connected to public education, I envision the DPI exerting a much larger role in the social constructs of race, culture, and economic viability of our state. For example, a discussion of how best to serve children who live in poverty should be accompanied by a question, “What are we as as state doing to reduce the number of children who live in poverty?” The DPI and our public schools will have an instrumental role in defining the future economic and social construct of Wisconsin. Now is the time for leadership.

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?

My vision for the relationship between the DPI and Wisconsin school districts is one of servant leadership. We simply ask the fundamental question, “Do our schools become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous while being served?” I recently visited more than 50 school districts across our state. From Superior to Milwaukee, school districts across our state clamor for leadership. The DPI must shape the discussion and
facilitate the development of a vision by building upon the recent Blue Ribbon Commission and by following the blueprint offered by *No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State*. Therefore, the first pillar of my campaign platform is entitled “Leaders Ready to Lead.” It calls for the creation of a vision for the future of public education in Wisconsin.

My priority for the department will be to facilitate a collaborative “we are in this together” approach. The school districts are thirsty for coordinated support and adherence to a vision of success for all. When traveling across Wisconsin, I use the back of my left hand to symbolize our state. We are team Wisconsin! We must collaborate to ensure the success of each of our school districts. I will rely upon the CESA agencies to manage a unified approach to success for all and to facilitate cooperation between districts through the creation and facilitation of statewide “similar district cohorts.” In recent visits to Sheboygan, Oshkosh, and Janesville we discussed the need for collaboration with similar districts in order to share effective practices and strategies. Districts such as this from different CESA agencies require intentionality and support in order to enjoy a meaningful connection. Each of these particular school districts also mentioned a desire to learn from the larger districts within our state. I discussed the concept of collaboration and sharing during my visit with the team at Milwaukee Public Schools. “We are all in this together” means everybody! If elected to state superintendent I will expect the team from MPS to collaborate and share ideas with the entire state. Statewide success requires each school district to understand and respect the work of others creating the collaboration and synergy necessary for improvement.

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?

I discussed this topic with superintendents at length during my many recent appearances at school districts across the state and with CESA administrators during my visits to each CESA agency. The school districts are very complimentary of the DPI. They greatly appreciate the expertise and service offered by the department. District leaders offered the need for improvement in regards to licensing, visible leadership speaking on the behalf of public education, and a stronger critique of those in power.

The CESA agencies work more closely with the DPI and offer a slightly different perspective. Much like the school districts, the CESA leaders are highly complimentary of the expertise offered by those working at the DPI. The CESA leaders see the need for a more visible leadership along with a more coordinated approach in alignment with a statewide vision for public education. Most CESA leaders believe the department could work more seamlessly with the CESA agencies and leverage agency relationships with local districts to advance statewide agendas. Optimally, the DPI would provide vision, leadership, facilitation, and support and empower the CESA agencies to offer services and support to individual school districts.

The document *No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State* indicates success requires the creation of a “shared statewide vision” along with aligned “benchmark policies.” One of my leadership strengths is the ability to help an organization envision success and to ensure future decisions align with the established
vision. I believe the DPI should lead our state with a collaborative approach to charting a course for the future of public education in Wisconsin.

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?

My recent tours of our state included stops at school districts of all sizes in nearly every corner of our state. My tours also included visits to all 12 CESA facilities and personal meetings with each agency director. In my conversations across the state I symbolized Wisconsin with the back of my left hand and emphasized we are all in this together. I believe we must support student achievement everywhere. Success for all has to matter as much in Prescott as it does in Racine. Each one of us must truly understand and care about our collective success. The folks in Milwaukee must care about the folks in Gilman and vice versa.

Working with the CESA agencies to ensure our programming and instruction are in alignment with our state vision and consistent enough to allow for uniform statewide training and support will lead to better instruction and increased achievement. From an execution standpoint, I am a firm believer in collaboration between school districts. If we are to raise our statewide achievement levels, we must absolutely expand upon our learning from each other. In West Salem we created a “like district cohort” with similar school districts from across the state. The cohort regularly shares all forms of information including a summer collaboration session. As state superintendent I would charge the CESA agencies with facilitating and supporting this approach on a statewide basis.

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?

The second pillar of my campaign platform is “Students Ready to Learn” which includes expanded programming for children aged three, four, and five. I envision a system that allows for all day 4K and instructional services for all children following their third birthday. I also propose the creation of a framework allowing school districts to facilitate and serve as a resource for daycare providers within each community. This is very doable. For example, the La Crosse Area Boys’ and Girls’ Club has clubs in several schools in the La Crosse area. I toured a similar club located in Kewaskum Elementary School and discussed a wide variety of surround care options for families in Sheboygan. The very
first element for success referenced in No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State is the need for children to arrive at school ready to learn. Funding and support for primary aged school children is the very best use of tax payer dollars in our society. Expanding our support for the youngest learners and for their families is an absolute imperative. The families with school-aged children in Wisconsin are in crisis. One striking consequence of our inability to solve the issue of affordable daycare is a 50-year low in birthrate. We may soon lose an entire generation. We can fix this.

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?

I recently toured the mental health clinic located inside of Ashland High School. They are making a difference for students, families, county government, and mental health providers by facilitating mental health programming within the school building. Our schools are in the unique position of having access to, and relationships with, students, families, and providers. The folks at Ashland High School and Ashland County agree that this program is making a difference. I also spoke with CESA #4 administrator Kehl Arnson. Kehl and his team at CESA #4 recently received a substantial grant from the DPI to facilitate mental health services across the state. Kehl expressed great hope in the ability to make mental health services more readily available to students across the state. As state superintendent I will support replication of the collaborative programming between county government, school districts, and mental health providers on display in Ashland and continued CESA agency leadership to facilitate expanded access to mental health services across our state.

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?

The third pillar of my campaign agenda is entitled “Teachers Ready to Teach.” The focus of the pillar is promoting teaching as a professional career. We must continue to support and advance programs that will attract the next generation of teachers into this wonderful profession and offer the necessary support and training to ensure professional growth and personal satisfaction. As state superintendent I will advocate for programs focused on a “grow your own” initiative urging school districts to begin developing the next generation of teachers. This includes both encouraging high school students to explore the teaching career and facilitating the licensing and training process for adults in search of a new or different career.
In response to the immediate licensing issues relayed to me by school districts across our state, I support a coordinated approach involving the use of CESA agencies, institutions of higher education, and school districts to advance “on the job” training for teachers seeking additional certifications and to attract non-licensed adults to begin the process of certification. In the long term, teaching must continue to maintain its status as a true profession. We must fully recognize that a highly skilled professional educator is the best predictor of student success. As stewards of our profession we are responsible for the next generation of educators. My mother often reminds me that when she began her teaching career in the early 1960s the occupation of teacher was similar to that of a Peace Corps commitment. By the time she retired it had become a profession. We cannot afford to go back.

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 the taxpayer-funded private school voucher system. In fact I believe taxpayer-funded private school vouchers are an example of extraordinarily poor public policy. The policy is based upon the flawed assertion that public education is a market driven commodity rather than a public responsibility. The recent expansion of taxpayer-funded private school vouchers in Wisconsin has devalued our collective commitment to public education and weakened the effectiveness of public education by reducing its revenues. From the standpoint of academic achievement, there is no sufficient evidence to indicate the implementation of a taxpayer-funded voucher system has in anyway improved upon the performance of our children.

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 a professor of school finance at Viterbo University, I see first hand the disparities of funding and in property tax levels for schools across our state. I believe it is time to begin adjusting our state funding formula to account for differences in student population. For example, I agree with the recent DPI budget request which includes a $150 per student increase connected to students in poverty and an increase to the Special Education reimbursement rate. More fundamentally, I believe disparities in the revenue limit system created by spending levels from the 1990s must be addressed to ensure more equity in services offered to children and property taxes paid by citizens.
As state superintendent I will ensure that funding reforms are included in our statewide vision for public education and advocate that each successive adjustment to the funding system is aligned with the vision.

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?

Vincent v. Voight is a landmark decision in regards to Wisconsin school finance. The rising costs associated with serving the special populations of students identified in this lawsuit along with demographic shifts concentrating a disparate percentage of needy children in each school district has exacerbated the financial strain connected to serving these children and further disadvantaged their educational opportunities.

When discussing this issue at Viterbo University where I teach school finance to future school superintendents, I create two sample districts for comparison. In District A, approximately 10% of the students receive special education services and 25% of the students qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program. In District B, approximately 20% of the students receive special education services and 50% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Assuming both districts generate the same amount of revenue per student under the revenue limit formula, District B will be compelled to apply a greater share of its resources to serving its needier children leaving fewer resources for other things. They will be unable to offer comparable programming to what is offered by District A unless they are able to generate more revenue. While Districts A and B are fictional places created for purposes of discussion, this type of disparity is very common amongst similar sized school districts across our state. The issue is real.

As state superintendent I would advocate for predictable, scheduled increases to the special education reimbursement rate. This is the fastest and most effective way to add balance to the system. I would also advocate for adjusting the state funding formula to account for other differences within student populations including those living in poverty and English language learners as identified in Vincent. If we are to live up to our state constitution’s call “for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable” we must commit to adjusting our funding to better serve our children.

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?

First, this topic offers another example of the need for more overt leadership from the department. As noted earlier, we are all in this together. Successfully addressing statewide performance issues in any area requires leadership, purpose, and cooperation. In doing so, I would engage our experts to review statewide data, identify goals, develop a strategy for statewide implementation, and finally, challenge our school leaders to make statewide improvement a priority. The department will coordinate with CESA agencies and professional organizations to ensure a seamless statewide approach is deployed.

In regards to literacy instruction, I believe that effective literacy instruction includes an explicit phonetic component combined with a rich diet of varied literature. This results in a measured approach that includes writing, reading, and phonics. Our talented teachers have the ability to calibrate the various strategies in order to meet the needs of each student.

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?

During my recent visits to Gilman, Cameron, Pepin, Melrose-Mindoro, Thorp, Mineral Point, and to my hometown of Colfax, I heard firsthand the struggles facing many of our smaller rural school districts. First, as your state superintendent I will offer a much more positive viewpoint. The school districts of rural Wisconsin are the focal point of each community and offer a palpable sense of pride, ownership, and commitment. When given the chance, the folks in our small rural schools will make good things happen for kids. I believe the rapid expansion of “work from home” created by COVID-19 will be a rebirth for rural Wisconsin. As state superintendent I will keep focus and pressure on federal, state, and local officials to expand high-speed internet connections in all of our communities. I will promote the remarkable model of inter-district and private industry collaboration now in place in the rural communities of Arcadia, Blair-Taylor, Independence, and Whitehall. These four school districts worked directly with a local industry, Ashley Furniture, to create a collaborative “four school - high school” whereby Ashley funds a variety of technical programming in each high school and the school districts allow their students to select coursework from each of the other three high schools. This creates expansive “cutting edge” technical programming for all students through district collaboration and sharing. I will also promote the “Students Ready to Learn” part of my platform where I outline my support for additional funding for 4k, offering programming for all three year old students, and supporting changes to allow school districts to lead, facilitate, and partner with other organizations and agencies to provide additional high quality, affordable daycare. I will support and promote an expanded role for public
schools in providing a more supportive social structure for families and children. The remarkable public school districts in the rural communities across our state are in the unique position to both lead and support a renaissance in rural Wisconsin. They are in fact, the key to the economic future of our state.

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?

As a former high school math and computer teacher, I value data and facts. As state superintendent I will encourage our teams to identify any performance gaps, investigate reasons and solutions, establish a plan, and execute. The stakes are too high for our decisions to be made on political ideology, hunches, or feelings. Again referencing No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State, I suggest we benchmark our policies, practices, and outcomes against high-performing states and school districts. Then align our policy reforms with our strategic vision and implement with fidelity.

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?

Having been in more than 50 school districts during the past few weeks, I can honestly say from my stop in Milwaukee (72,000 students) to my stop in Gilman (250 students) the pandemic has caused a permanent disruption to schools of all sizes in our system. It has further exposed the impact of race, poverty, and zip code.

As your state superintendent I will first assert the entire 2020-2021 school year will be disrupted by the pandemic making the 2021-2022 school year critical in returning to “normalcy” and in recovering from the disruption. I will support a coordinated statewide effort to reconnect with students and families to our school districts to reestablish a sense of community within our schools.

I believe a top priority for the department is leadership. I suggest the department gathers data and information from other states and from Wisconsin school districts regarding the impact of the pandemic on student learning. The department will then lead a collaborative approach to developing a statewide strategy in support of school districts as they begin to bridge the learning gap caused by the pandemic.

Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic create tremendous social disruption which can take years to repair. They also bring about the opportunity for breathtaking leaps forward. Working collaboratively with a “we are all in this together” focus assures we all benefit from the success of others.