Steve Krull, PhD
Candidate, State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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

Our educational system is falling apart in Wisconsin. There is a teacher shortage in the thousands. Children receive vastly different services depending on what district or school they attend. Also, there is a student loan debt crisis.

I'm running because I believe we can build an educational system in Wisconsin that can be a model for the nation. A system that no matter where you live or where you move, there will be a great school waiting. A system where our college students can begin their lives because they aren't stifled with mass amounts of student loan debt. Essentially, a system where every child has a chance for a better life.

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 believe in local control of our school districts. That said, money is a top issue. Districts rely heavily on property taxes to fund schools and many districts have to go to referendum every several years just to stay afloat.

I believe we need to move the vast majority of funding away from property taxes. Under our plan, homeowners could see up to a 30% decrease in their property taxes. The decrease of property taxes would shift to state funds. The state could raise funds from closing loopholes, shifting priorities, new revenue sources, and/or donations (which Wisconsin receives often).

Additionally, the state allows some districts to raise roughly twice as much money per child than other districts through revenue limits. Many well funded districts can attract the best teachers and provide the best services. Essentially, well funded districts can have the services that can help reduce the chances of drug use, teenage pregnancy, and crime. While at the same time increasing the chances for a better job with more pay.

I believe we must establish and fund a basic standard of care for all children. This plan will work because districts would have the funding they need and the local control necessary to ensure that every child gets the opportunities they deserve.

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?
There are many talented professionals at DPI. However, in my view, much of what is coming out of DPI is an overwhelming amount of one-size-fits-all requirements. Though DPI tries to act as an agent for change, there are many barriers preventing their progress.

Under my administration, we will work with legislators, the governor, and community members to implement meaningful and efficient change. We will work tirelessly to ensure that our districts and schools in every corner of the state are strong and can provide the education that can lead to a brighter future for our children and grandchildren.

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?

For years, Wisconsin has been focusing on instructional practices as a way to improve achievement and close the achievement gap with limited to no success. Strong pedagogy is very important. However, quality instruction alone, without structural changes, will not go far to close the achievement gap and improve academic achievement.

Wisconsin schools have serious structural problems that must be addressed. We can focus on differentiated instruction, but how effective can a teacher be in a classroom with 45 students? We can offer professional development, but how can rural teachers attend training when there aren’t enough substitutes to watch their classrooms? We can demand accountability, but how can we expect growth when some schools have too many of their classrooms “taught” by untrained, under-trained teachers, or a revolving door of new staff?

We need to end the teacher shortage, ensure high quality services, and expand great schools. We cannot do those things until we address the school financial issue. Only after we stop pretending that changing instruction alone will improve achievement, can we truly make the necessary structural changes that will lead us towards increased success for all children.

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?

Early learning opportunities are essential for reducing achievement gaps, especially for those students with special learning needs. We need to more holistically support birth-to-three programming and the transition to 4K programming. Creating more direct pathways from county programming to the classroom, facilitating and funding diverse early childhood learning environments and staffing support through this transition process is necessary to develop higher quality programming. Then kindergarten students should learn through play and social situations. We cannot develop a love for learning when our young ones are
forced to sit still through lectures. We will work to develop a kindergarten learning model that encourages learning through play. We will then support the implementation at the district and school level.

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?

We must support the expansion of social workers, guidance counselors, nurses, and school psychologists at our schools. Children can have difficulty performing academically if they've been a recipient of childhood trauma. We must ensure our students have the support they need to be successful. Wisconsin has taken an aggressive approach to equity through implementation of its EMLSS framework. Again, this pedagogy is constructive, but many districts lack the highly trained staff needed to put their plans into action.

These resources will provide the necessary supports for students with trauma. We should also work to remove the remnants of No Child Left Behind, and other top-down failed policies, that had disastrous effects on our children and still lingers in our classrooms.

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?

Top three problems that perpetuate the teacher shortage and their solutions:

**Problem #1** - Teachers earn roughly 20% less than other careers with the same experience and credentials.  
**Solution #1** - Level up teacher salaries.

**Problem #2** - Many new teachers feel unprepared to take on their own classroom.  
**Solution #2** - Expand teacher residency, increase training, and stipend student teachers.

**Problem #3** - Modern classroom conditions reduce productivity and hinder morale.  
**Solution #3** - Fix class sizes, restructure time, and decrease government mandates.

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 believe we should focus our attention on providing the best education for all children. Most people are in their corners around school choice. Therefore, if we focus on what divides us,
then our children lose. Instead, let's all join together and make sure every school is a great school. Let's solve the teacher shortage. Let's establish a basic standard of student care. Let's finally fix our failed school funding system. Only together can we create an educational system that leads the nation. Only together can we ensure the success of all 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?

I believe we need to fix school funding in two ways. First, we must establish a basic standard of care. Ensuring that no matter where you live or where you move to, you will have the comfort of knowing that a great school will be waiting for your child.

Second, we must cut our reliance on property taxes. Homeowners would see up to a 30% reduction in property taxes. We would then fund schools from state coffers and private donations. Because investing in our kids now will save us all in the future and help ensure Wisconsin children have the opportunities they deserve.

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?

Easy. We move to a system where the state provides full and balanced school funding to districts for operations and maintenance. We can do this by shifting most funding away from property taxes. Then the state can establish and fund a basic standard of care for all children. After there is a balanced financial system, then we can use state/federal funds to provide equity as needed (Title I, Title III, Special Education, etc.).

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?

At the school I lead, we have an amazing staff who is doing great work. We provide standards based learning, differentiated instruction based on data, focus on higher level Depths-of-Knowledge, etc. Our state report card shows us “Exceeding Expectations” and our value-added growth scores shows 12 of 12 subgroups beating the state average in English Language Arts.

Though we are seeing success because of our staff, we could do so much more if we could afford better services. We could see greater achievement if:

- Class size averages were about 15 instead of an average of 29 students per class.
- Staffing was increased to reduce caseload of Special Education and ESL teachers
- There were summer enrichment programs to stop the summer slide.
- We stop wasting time on excessive mandated standardized testing.
- There were a reasonable amount of standards.

Let’s expand great schools across the state. To do this, we must fix our school financial system. We can end the teacher shortage and ensure a basic standard of student care. Only then can we help guarantee opportunity for all.

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?

There are several things we need to address to ensure the success of our small and rural schools. I believe we must first shift away from a mostly property tax system to a state funded system. Many rural districts are considered "land rich" covering large areas, yet lose students to geographically closer school districts. Also, the cost of transportation for many rural districts can break budgets. Students have long rides to school and home at night which impede on their ability to be well rested and/or academically prepared for their school day.

We must also modernize our aging schools and increase digital access and WiFi capabilities. We also need to address the teacher and substitute shortage with incentives for educators to move to rural and hard to fill positions. Also, we should provide incentives for additional licences and certifications. After school programming also faces unique challenges in rural areas. Again, there are increased costs with transportation and staffing shortages. There is limited access to community resources and county support programming. We want to ensure that no matter where someone lives or where they move to, there will be a great school waiting for them. Increased support in staffing and finances could help alleviate many of these issues.
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 campaign relies on evidence-based policies. We know that great schools increase achievement and tend to lead to better jobs with more pay. We also know great schools reduce the chances of teenage pregnancy, drug use, alcoholism, and crime. We will continue to advocate for the use of the best evidence-based policies available.

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?

There are so many differences in how districts are handling learning during the pandemic. These include in-person, hybrid, and virtual learning. This is partly because of the vast difference in resources districts have available to them. Some districts get nearly twice as much money per student in revenue limits than other districts. This allows some schools with low class sizes and great ventilation systems to have more success than other schools.

The inequity also expands to how children learn if they are diagnosed with COVID-19. Some students are sent home for long periods of time and may not have the same educational opportunities as those who remain in hybrid or in-person learning. This disparity in learning grows an already troubling achievement gap in our state.

We must address the current situation and prevent this type of chaos if there is another pandemic in the future. To do so, we need to lower class sizes, establish safety standards, and improve our buildings with quality ventilation systems. Because achievement gaps are likely to grow due to our current situation, we need to find creative ways to integrate literacy into other subjects. We also must look to expand social-emotional learning and collaboration within our classrooms.

This campaign is about ensuring every school in Wisconsin is a successful school. To do this, we must end the teacher shortage and ensure a basic standard of student care. Expanding great schools across Wisconsin will reduce the chances of drug use, teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, and crime. Great schools will also increase the chances of getting a better job with more pay. Essentially, great schools help ensure that every child will have a chance for a better life. Let's make every school a great school together.


Be well,
--Steve Krull, PhD