

WASB • WASDA • WASBO State Education Convention Address

January 20, 2016 — Wisconsin Center, Milwaukee

By State Superintendent Tony Evers

Thank you Deb Kerr for your kind introduction. You're doing a fantastic job as emcee — and of course at the School District of Brown Deer.

I'd also like to recognize the great partnership I have with the organizations hosting this event. I thank John Ashley, the WASB board and their staff; Jon Bales, the WASDA board and their staff; and Woody Wiedenhoef, the WASBO board and their staff; for your leadership.

While I have lots of experience, I also learned a long time ago that leadership is not all about experience. It's also about empathy. I have this quote that I keep on my desk from President Teddy Roosevelt. He said, "nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." To me, leadership roles, like this one as your elected state superintendent, is all about making that caring known — sharing the stories that remind us of why we do this work. As Dr. Zorba, physician and radio personality, says, stories move information best.

That's why I can tell you the best part of my job is visiting schools and meeting kids, educators, school leaders, and families in every part of our state. As I sat down to reflect on the past year, I can say I have never once been disappointed in the dedication of our educators or the engagement of our kids.

And, I know you are as proud of them as I am. Our kids love to learn. Yes — our graduation rates, our ACT scores, our attendance trends can confirm this with numbers. But when I visit a school, I see it and feel it in other ways. I recently saw it in the critical thinking happening in a high school social studies classroom in Superior as they unpacked a compelling case study about freedom of speech. I felt this love of learning when I was the focus of a Sheboygan third grade classroom's "Two minute bombardment." This group threw out as many questions to me as they could in just two minutes. The engagement in this classroom was memorable.

Each time I visit a school, no matter where I am in the state, I also see tremendous energy and engagement from our educators in helping our students learn.

Our public school educators are dedicated to teaching rigorous academic content. But they know subject area knowledge isn't enough. Our teachers also are providing students with skills and habits that will help them become successful citizens. Woven into the lessons are critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. I see our teachers nurturing habits like perseverance, grit, and adaptability so that students know how to keep going even when the going gets tough.

We have a lot to be proud of in Wisconsin. As you know, we have been focusing for the past six years, on the work we call Agenda 2017.

- We have raised our expectations in terms of college and career ready standards.
- We have updated our state assessment system from an outdated paper and pencil test to an online assessment that measures the increased rigor in our classrooms.
- And; we have begun the difficult task of defining what it means to be a highly effective educator and school leader, as well as what it means to have a highly effective school and district.

(more)

Our accountability system is about supporting continuous improvement at the educator, school, and district level. It is not about punishing educators or shaming schools.

At the end of the day, Agenda 2017 is a collection of important efforts, and I'm proud of the hard work we've done. But I'm reminded that the stories we tell about this good work must feature the kids these systems impact.

For example, because of this hard work...

In every year since the 2009-10 school year:

- The graduation rate, including graduation for students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are economically disadvantaged, has increased.
- Fewer students, including students of color, have dropped out of high school.
- Fewer students were being suspended or expelled.
- The truancy rate has decreased.
- Student attendance has increased.
- Students reported less alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use.
- Students spent more time being physically active.
- More students are participating in co-curricular academic activities and athletic activities.
- And more students are receiving college credit for coursework they do in high school.

Give yourself a round of applause.

School funding is another. It's a complex discussion that can quickly feel bogged down in the weeds of formulas and levies, but ultimately it is about stories of kids. We cannot continue to neglect our obligation to provide students with a fundamental right to an equal opportunity for a sound basic education. The need and opportunity for real school finance reform has never been more evident. We are becoming a state of haves and have nots. I want my grandkids to attend a "have" school. All kids should have this right.

I've spoken on this before, and I'll continue to do so as long as this is true, but Wisconsin has some of the largest graduation and achievement gaps among the states, and this too must be talked about as it relates to kids. The cost in human lives of these gaps is staggering. Hispanic and American Indian students drop out of school at a rate of one in four, and African American students at a rate of one in three.

Our efforts to close the gaps span many fronts to ensure everyone graduates ready for college and careers. They have to. The thing with kids is that there's no "just one thing" that works, and talking about kids helps remind us why we need a multi-faceted approach to tackling this civil rights issue. Our work through the Promoting Excellence for All task force, and more recently, our \$5.25 million research grant to study classroom practices that work to close gaps, are important steps we've taken to connect our work back to the kids, stories about kids.

Again, as Teddy Roosevelt said, "nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care." I know how much you care. I see it every day, and I'm proud of the work we do on behalf of kids, so we have more stories to tell.

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Tony Evers is Wisconsin's elected state superintendent of public instruction. A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available on the Department of Public Instruction "Media Contacts and Resources" webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/news/contacts-resources>. This speech is available on the DPI website at http://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2016_08.pdf.