



**School Administrators Association  
January, 2017**

**Introduction**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to these critical questions about education in Wisconsin. As a seven-year staff member at the Department of Public Instruction, I had an opportunity to see up close how these issues were dealt with on a day-to-day basis. You have my commitment that, if I have the honor being elected, DPI will focus on student success as its number one priority. Just as the best local leadership teams are focused on the success of teachers, my DPI will be focused on ensuring that local schools have the best available resources, coaching, and support including funding support to reach our mutual goals of improved outcomes for our students. That's exactly what I was known for when I worked at DPI. Educators deserve better support so they can successfully improve outcomes for all students in Wisconsin.

**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?**

It's important that this question appears first on your list because it suggests that, like me, your foremost interest is in improving outcomes and academic success for all students. At DPI, I worked with the world's leading experts in state-level school improvement models. I am now endorsed by many of them because they know that this is the road to success for our students. If I have the honor of being the next State Superintendent:

1. My DPI will give you the tools you need to succeed and the support to make it happen. I will rebuild and refocus the Wisconsin RtI center to provide you with the level of detail, rigor, and specificity necessary to address the challenges school districts face.
2. My DPI will ensure that your new teachers have the skills they need to lead a classroom on day one. I will lead the restructuring of teacher training in Wisconsin. For too long our new teachers have not been provided with adequate training. That ends on July 1, 2017.

3. My DPI will revise school report cards so you have an honest and transparent yardstick--guideposts to help you monitor progress.
4. My DPI will be accountable to you through a new State Board of Education to ensure that educators are getting what they need.

When I joined DPI 2004, one of my first projects involved the critical issue of youth suicide. By working with my teammates, traveling the state and sharing best practices in suicide prevention, we helped schools cut the suicide rate in half in three years. It was the work of educators in schools that saved over 125 young lives. I saw firsthand that, together, we can *literally save lives*. It's that passion, commitment, and reliance on using best practices that I will apply as State Superintendent.

**Improving the quality of preschool education can help reduce achievement gaps for children. Although Wisconsin has made improvements with the expansion of 4K and the YoungStar program, the state has yet to realize a comprehensive preschool policy. As state superintendent, what policies or strategies would you advance to improve preschool education in Wisconsin?**

I recently met a young child whose parents had very limited means: no car, no jobs, living in an isolated, rural, trailer home. My team desperately wanted to help, but we had significant barriers: transportation, staffing, meals and supplies. It took a lot of effort and a significant financial commitment, but under my leadership the school district stepped in. This was a child who could've easily fallen through the cracks. I'm proud to say that this child has begun to communicate, interact with peers, and to ask for help instead of showing the frustrated cries for help we were seeing before. Our early investment is very likely to prevent the need for much more significant intervention later on. This is a model that I believe in: going the extra mile to ensure that young children have access to high-quality pre-K services.

As State Superintendent, my focus will be on the quality of these services so that the students coming into our schools have the skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. We cannot simply provide for additional programming without addressing the rigor and quality of that programming. Other states and many Wisconsin districts have done an excellent job of ensuring that they're getting the most return on their pre-K investment, but we are nowhere near being able to say that statewide. Our children deserve better. Our emphasis should be on pre-academic skills and on the value of play and social interaction that lead to healthy emotional development. As a pupil services professional, I am deeply committed to the social and emotional learning strategies that will help our students in later grades present fewer behavioral challenges. As an administrator, I invested heavily in both academic and behavioral programming to ensure that our students were getting the skills they needed to be successful in the classroom. As State Superintendent, I will do the same.

**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. As state superintendent, how would you address this problem?**

When I was with DPI, I led the development of a mental health toolkit for schools and then trained hundreds of educators on its use. Our main message was that schools can't do it all, but we can do better. ESSA defines pupil services professionals as *school based mental health professionals*. They need to be on the front lines, providing and improving supports for children with mental health challenges. Our focus should be on prevention, community connections, and classroom behavior management training for teachers. When was the last time that DPI released useful resources on classroom management? When was the last time the current DPI worked proactively with other state agencies where so many other mental health services are housed? My DPI will be focused on meeting the needs of educators, students, and families statewide. Having mental health professionals in schools who are ready and able to meet the needs of your students is a critical piece of our success.

**The recruitment, preparation and retention of effective educators is vitally important for our children's future. As state superintendent, what policies would you advance to address this important issue?**

In 2007, the National Council on Teacher Quality termed Wisconsin's teacher preparation programs "languishing." Tony Evers dismissed this troubling finding, saying that DPI is "a leader in...outcomes-driven licensing and preparation system." A decade later, NCTQ still gives us very poor marks, and coupled with Wisconsin's disappointing elementary reading outcomes, we have even more warning signs of major problems in teacher training. Too many well-qualified young people who want to be in the classroom spend four years and tens of thousands of dollars in college only to face a "sink or swim" approach as a new teacher. Our training is inadequate and so is our support system for new teachers. When I am State Superintendent, this will change. Successful models that reduce the amount of time in college classrooms and give more time to classroom-based experience need to be adopted.

We also need to recruit new teachers into the profession, especially in shortage areas. In 1988 I was a new grad with a degree in microbiology from UW-Madison and valuable biotechnology lab experience. I enjoyed tutoring at-risk kids in science and math, but would have been required to get an entire new bachelor's degree in order to teach. That's not right. Fast forward to today: could programmers from Epic Systems in Verona and Skyward in Stevens Point offer their expertise to schools? What if the chef from a great restaurant in Wisconsin Dells was able to train high school students in hospitality and restaurant management? We've got to stop thinking like it's the 1960s: our teacher training programs must improve, and we must now create new training pathways from career to classroom.

We also have to recognize that early career professionals need support to sustain their work as educators. Our mentoring programs should continue for multiple years, and we should use student data to identify teachers who need additional training and support. We can no longer throw up our hands and blame others for these problems. We've got to step up and solve them in new ways with new thinking.

**As the expansion of taxpayer-funded private school vouchers continues according to statute in Wisconsin, as state superintendent, how would you propose taxpayers pay for adding thousands of private school students to Wisconsin's publicly-funded system?**

Fundamentally, it's a new landscape for education in Wisconsin. The State Superintendent does not control the number of vouchers, charters, or choice schools, or the funding for these schools. For too long Tony Evers has fought against vouchers and has not provided adequate support for public schools to improve. I'm a fighter for traditional public schools. I'm a fighter for charter and voucher and online schools too. It's time we ditch the mentality that says schools in one sector win by making schools in another sector lose--funding follows the student so each school must attract students based on outcomes. As State Superintendent, my singular focus will be on helping ALL schools improve and I'll do whatever I can to give all schools the flexibility they need to do what they feel is right for students.

**One of the greatest problems in Wisconsin's school finance system is the systemic gap between allowable revenue growth under state-imposed revenue limits and school district cost increases driven by state and federal requirements as well as community expectations. As state superintendent, what policies or strategies would drive your approach to school funding?**

As a district-level administrator, I would love more funding for our schools. Who wouldn't? I especially believe areas like Transportation and Sparsity Aid and support for schools educating many students from low-income families are significantly underfunded. These points align with the SAA 2017-19 Legislative Agenda and have been posted on my website publicly for some time. But like many, I'm tired of the constant calls for additional funding without accountability for results. As State Superintendent, I will begin by reducing rules, regulations, and red tape so administrators have more time to lead and local schools become more efficient in decision-making about high quality programming. Until we do the hard work of ensuring that we're making every dollar count, I don't think we're likely to get the funding we want from the legislature nor do I think we should ask.

**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 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?**

First, I disagree with the premise of the question. I believe DPI can help local schools be more efficient and effective with the funding they already have. I find it unreasonable to resort to threats of legal action, *and* I firmly oppose those who dogmatically reject any calls for new funding. Our public schools are vital to our children’s—and our democracy’s—future and they deserve to have educational programs that receive adequate investment. Instead of threatening to sue each other, politicians should be working together and offering more accountability for results.

A funding lawsuit being threatened by Dr. Evers would pit the courts against those most qualified to make funding decisions: voters, taxpayers, lawmakers, parents, and most of all, educators. It would also sharpen our already polarized education politics. To see what happens when lawyers become a substitute for leadership, look no further than Kansas, where the legislature's latest funding plan was struck down and schools were threatened with a court-ordered shutdown. Contrast that with Florida, where a judge recently threw out a similar lawsuit in large part because educators had used precious tax dollars wisely: to improve student outcomes. The ruling cited Florida's academic gains along with major reductions in racial achievement gaps as evidence that school funding was adequate and spent in equitable ways. In 4th grade reading, Hispanic kids in Florida now outperform ALL kids in 31 other states including ours. For the record, Florida achieved these outcomes while spending considerably less per pupil than Wisconsin or Kansas, and they did it because they focused on spending smarter, not just spending “more.” Do we need more funding? Probably. But let’s drop the legal threats, the “my way or the highway” rhetoric, and instead focus on ensuring that our system is designed to take the resources we can afford and use them most effectively: in the hands of local school boards, educators, and parents.

Thanks again to the SAA Legislative Committee for this opportunity to compete for your endorsement. While I know there are others who represent a familiar status quo, I am asking for your endorsement so we can begin to take seriously the deficits in our schools.