

WEAC State Superintendent Questionnaire

1. What are your top priorities for the Department of Public Instruction in the areas of student achievement and equity?

As State Superintendent, advancing equity and improving outcomes for all of our students will be my most urgent priority and the primary focus of the Department of Public Instruction. All of our work will be viewed through an equity lens.

Student outcomes should not be predictable by ZIP code, race, income level, first language, or ability status. I believe that this is a moment in education when we must improve what is working, leave behind what is not, and move forward toward something better. Together, we must examine every system in place today to eliminate bias and ensure all of our students are supported for success. We must develop schools and systems that are actively anti-racist and anti-biased. At the DPI, we'll work hard to ensure schools have equitable funding and equitable access to materials and quality teachers. We will enhance the state's equity plan and ask every district to create their own equity and inclusion plan to make certain that local districts design their schools in a way that meets the unique needs of their students and builds a sense of belonging for all. We'll leverage the resources of the DPI to share what is working across the state so that we can spread success systematically.

We'll also start organizing education around what we care about most. It's time to rethink the outcomes we value for our kids and how we measure success. Reading and math are critically important, but so are the fine arts, world languages, and career and technical education. Our children need to develop the skills and abilities they need to interact with one another, think critically, and evaluate whether something is factual. Our students should graduate high school not just strong in academic knowledge, but also socially and emotionally healthy, civically engaged, and financially literate. They should have an understanding of themselves and others and be equipped with life skills that will help them succeed no matter what path they choose after high school.

As State Superintendent, I will continue working to guarantee that all students have the support they need to realize their dreams of a successful life. I will broaden our focus to ensure our graduates leave their K12 experience with rich content knowledge, critical thinking skills, well-rounded experiences, multilingual learning, a sense of self and an understanding of others, strong social and emotional skills, a sense of wonder and excitement about learning, and meaningful life skills.

I'll also work to reduce the use of high-stakes testing and focus on multiple measures of success. I will work with our stakeholders – first, and foremost, our teachers – to rethink the design and administration of state assessments so that we are getting the most accurate and helpful measure of how our children are doing with the least amount of testing possible. I will make sure that we are focusing on what is important and not simply narrowing the curriculum to tested subjects.

Most importantly, I'll use my experience – as a teacher, a principal, and a proven leader at the district and state level – to bring about the changes we desperately need in our state. I have dedicated my entire career to ensuring that all students have what they need to succeed, and I'm passionate about continuing this work as Wisconsin's State Superintendent.

2. Taking the helm of the Department of Public Instruction during a pandemic, what are the top areas you will address to balance student/staff safety while keeping learning on track?

The health and safety of our students, educators, and families is absolutely essential. Prioritizing vaccine access for teachers is critical to reopening our schools safely. When it comes to instruction, the most important and immediate thing we can do is ensure that the actions we take do not make matters worse.

Across the state, our students will be in need of acceleration – not mediation. That means our teachers must be equipped to provide high quality instruction at grade level with scaffolds to ensure that all students can access it. Of course, we will need appropriate assessments to know what supports will have to be put in place for students to access grade-level instruction. Standards-aligned instructional materials will support this work and will be more important than ever. At the statewide level, we need to ensure that we have strong core instruction in place for literacy and mathematics, and we need to make sure that we continue to provide a well-rounded education in science, social studies, art, music, world languages, CTE, and personal financial literacy.

Beyond that, it is incumbent upon us as education leaders to thoroughly evaluate the lessons learned from this pandemic and determine what positive changes we can make moving forward. Do all 16 and 17 year olds need to be learning in-person, full-time, 5 days a week? Or can we re-imagine what a school day might look like for these learners? Are some children – including those with the most challenges – better served in a remote or hybrid setting? If so, what can we change to better meet their individual needs? Regardless of what progress looks like in each individual district and for each individual child, we must take this opportunity to learn from this pandemic and make dramatic improvements to our schools instead of simply going back to what wasn't working before COVID-19.

As State Superintendent, I will be a champion for public education and partner with the Governor and Legislature to support the funding, policy changes, and resources our students, families, schools, and communities need to recover and build back stronger than ever. Throughout the pandemic, our schools have risen to the occasion and have continued to provide crucial, ongoing support to children and families. Now more than ever, schools need the resources to address students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs.

3. How do you see the role of education unions at the local and state levels when it comes to the operations of the Department of Public Instruction?

We must include teachers and teacher unions at all decision-making tables. We have to ensure their voices are heard and involve them in developing policies and practices that are good for the kids in their classrooms. Too often, decisions are made that impact the work of teachers without them being present. DPI should lead by example, and that means championing the meaningful inclusion of teacher voice at every level as policies and decisions are being made.

As a first-time principal at Schenk Elementary, I led a team that successfully closed achievement gaps for our 3rd graders in reading. We never would've been successful without heavily involving our teachers in every step of the program – from development to implementation. I never used the union as an excuse to not do what was best for kids, because I built a climate where teachers felt valued and trusted – they were eager to be a part of the success we were seeing. They saw themselves as the engine for our school's reform, and they were exactly right.

This is why, as Assistant State Superintendent, I created the first ever Teacher Leader Network to learn alongside and listen to teachers across the state regarding the instructional materials they have access to in their classrooms. This is why my team created the Wisconsin Teacher of the Year Network so that we could not only learn from these remarkable teachers, but so we could regularly get their input on decisions being made at the department that would impact their classrooms. It's why we are supporting the Professional Standards Council in their focus on retaining teachers by lifting up teacher voices. It is also why my team conducts focus groups, surveys, and individual interviews with teachers so that we are always directly connected to what is happening in the classroom.

Not surprisingly, the two DPI initiatives seeing the greatest impact and improvement in student outcomes are a direct result of teacher input. My team worked closely with teachers to continuously improve the Educator Effectiveness and the Instructional Materials work in ways that supported best practice and meaningful learning. Because of the voices of teachers, those programs improved and, because of those improvements, student outcomes improved.

We are facing an absolute crisis in our profession – a crisis that is only exacerbated by the pandemic. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves, and our struggle to fill the pipeline with the next generation of teachers is only getting worse. Adjusting licensure requirements and other fixes we have tried may help around the margins, but I believe that we will never solve this problem until we fix the working conditions in our classrooms and stop demonizing teachers. Teachers will be critical voices in determining and shaping these solutions.

As State Superintendent, I'll continue these efforts and expand upon them throughout the DPI. Teachers – and the unions that represent them – will play an integral role in shaping the policies we develop under my administration.

- 4. An effective teacher is the most important school-based determinant of education outcomes, so it is therefore crucial that school districts recruit and retain high-quality teachers. Recognizing that Wisconsin average teacher pay has dropped to 33rd in America, what will you do to make sure a qualified and**

well-trained professional educator is in front of every student, every day? Do you support equitable, predictable and sustainable pay plans?

Of course. As State Superintendent, I will be the chief advocate for fully funding our public schools so school districts have the resources they need to support each and every one of our kids. Our educators are the most important asset we have. They are an invaluable resource, and our kids cannot be successful without them.

How we fund our schools and prioritize public education dollars is causing stark inequity in the educational experiences of our children, and the demographic make-up of our communities has left key programs underfunded and ineffective. We now provide 30 cents for every dollar spent on special education, and around 8 cents for every dollar spent on an English language learner. A growing number of districts get no funding whatsoever from the state's largest aid program, which is designed to equalize their ability to provide an appropriate education. As the needs of our kids get more complex, we cannot ask our schools to do more with less.

We cannot deny that this pandemic will impact the next state budget. Tens of thousands of Wisconsinites are out of work and the impact of COVID-19 will be felt for years, but we cannot once again balance these budget problems on the backs of our kids or our teachers. They need more resources, more access to mental health services, more access to supplies to reopen safely, and more access to broadband – our schools cannot do with less. They must be equipped to succeed during this trying time so that all of our kids can thrive.

5. How will you lead efforts to ensure an anti-racist school culture in Wisconsin, where students and staff of color feel supported, safe, and empowered?

Student outcomes should not be predictable by zip code, race, income level, first language, or ability status. For far too long, Wisconsin has been known for having the worst racial achievement gaps in the country. Our state must examine every system in place today to eliminate bias and ensure that all students are supported for success. It is not enough that we care deeply about our children. We must develop schools and systems that are actively and intentionally anti-racist and anti-biased.

I have dedicated my entire career to ensuring just that -- that all students have what they need to succeed. My dissertation on closing racial achievement gaps earned me the Dissertation of the Year award at UW Madison. But more importantly, I have successful experience closing achievement gaps as a teacher, as a principal, and as a leader at both the district and state level. As State Superintendent, I will extend these efforts throughout all of the work of the agency, statewide.

Ensuring anti-racist school cultures where students and staff of color feel supported, safe and empowered begins by first ensuring all of the adults in our schools have a deep understanding of their own identity, biases, and what it means to be anti-racist. My team has begun this work and, in 2022,

will introduce the culmination of three years of work incorporating equity and understanding of identity and bias into the Educator Effectiveness System. As a result, Wisconsin will adopt a statewide process for reflecting on practice through an equity lens.

We will further extend this work by introducing these concepts during pre-service learning. Educators must learn early in their pre-service programs that leading for equity is critical to changing Wisconsin's education trajectory. Future teachers must also understand that leading for equity is an ongoing journey and self-reflection is a critical part of this journey. This message will be reinforced statewide through the continual reflection built into the Educator Effectiveness system.

Paramount to creating and sustaining safe, supportive anti-racist school cultures is diversifying our educator workforce. The presence, voices and perspectives of educators of color is essential to fully understanding their needs and the work necessary to authentically improve the culture in our schools. My team will continue its statewide efforts to diversify our educator workforce and identify practices that aid in successfully supporting and retaining our educators of color.

Teaching all of our kids an accurate history of oppression, racism, and injustice in our country is important to creating and sustaining anti-racist school cultures. As our leaders of tomorrow, knowing and understanding our true history is critical to ensuring our work to dismantle inequitable systems and structures progresses as we continue towards building a better future. Part of an accurate history includes ensuring positive representations of people of color in our books and resources, and highlighting the tremendous contributions of people of color in our society – not just in fighting oppression, but in the finance, healthcare, entrepreneurship, and STEM fields. As State Superintendent I will fight to make this happen.

A significant part of ensuring our kids and teachers of color are safe, supported and empowered means ensuring our schools and districts that serve them have what they need to make this happen. That is why I will work every single day to ensure our schools have equitable funding and equitable access to materials and quality teachers. As State Superintendent, I will ensure the DPI leads by example. I will prioritize the effective implementation of DPI's new equity and inclusion plan and ask every district to create their own plan to guarantee their local systems are designed in ways that meet the unique needs of all of their students and families and build a sense of belonging for all.

Finally, I will increase DPI's focus on supporting the implementation of our teacher evaluation system and increase the use of aligned instructional materials, both which have demonstrated success in closing achievement gaps. A coordinated statewide system to share what is working to close gaps is key and I will work to create a program to share these successes in a systematic way.

Equity will be at the heart of everything we do – our kids deserve nothing less.