

## **WEAC State Superintendent Questionnaire**

**Dr. Deborah Kerr**

Thank you for this opportunity to share why I am running for Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction. I hope you are all doing well, and thank you for your commitment to serving our students.

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

Transformational changes are taking place right now across every sector. The pandemic has shined a spotlight on inequities that our communities, our school districts, and, most importantly, our most vulnerable children are faced with each day. The DPI must serve as a beacon of hope, a significant support source, and a responsive service-oriented Department, working collectively with all stakeholders to address these inequities while also meeting our students, staff, and administrators' needs and expectations, parents, and greater school community.

Tapping into my broad leadership experience on a local, state, and national level, my plan to achieve real transformational change begins with creating a diverse leadership cabinet, representing all education sectors, including a teacher.

As a priority, we will commit to evidenced-based practices to lead our teachers, district leaders, and school boards to close gaps by ensuring equitable access and opportunity to high-quality instruction (Universal Tier 1), including relevant real-life learning experiences for all students. We will engage stakeholders all across the state by using crowd-sourcing technology and other communication tools to learn what works well in getting excellent outcomes for their students. We will become a community of practice by learning from one another. We will distill this information to refresh and realign the department to focus on the right drivers to support teaching and learning and put the right systems in place. The new DPI will be held accountable for better results for all students, regardless of zip code, we serve across the state.

In collaboration with our stakeholders, we will create a new approach to our work called "Our Wisconsin Promise." Our promise will be a renewed commitment to our learners that they will be known by name, strengths, passion, and need, and be ready for career and/or college. This promise will be personalized at every school/district to reinforce the expectations of serving our students well, based upon their needs. We will connect the dots between business partnerships and the need for skilled workers. We will commit that every learner will have a strengths-based pathway and entry into the meaningful world of work or pursue post-secondary education in colleges and or universities.

Equitable opportunities will allow our students to choose a learning pathway based on their strengths and passion to ensure all students' success. The current academic and career planning focus across the state

needs to align with businesses, manufacturers, and other employers' workforce development needs. I believe every student should have access to an apprenticeship learning opportunity as the skills learned through these experiences prepare our students for the world of work whether they choose to go to college, the military, or a chosen career path. From apprenticeship to Ph.D. is the future of the world as we partner with business leaders all across the state, not only to fill the pipeline of skilled workers but create the working experiences that keep our talented kids in Wisconsin. There should be multiple pathways for our students to explore, with no path a dead end. This educational approach needs to start in our elementary schools to dream and envision what they want to accomplish in their lives. I believe it is too late to start in middle/high school as students as the choices are so vast and ever-changing due to the influence of technology and a more global economy.

Additionally, we will deliver child-centered personalized learning with innovative experiences, assistive technology, and opportunities taught by learner-responsive educators who have rich professional development when they need it. Our schools will not be mandated seat-time factories but places where they can develop their personalized learning plan based upon their interests. There should never be a high school scheduling conflict for our students as the learning can happen outside the school day and classroom walls. I would also advocate for school district digital learning plans approved by the DPI that would allow schools to continue learning online without making up days on an antiquated school calendar process. Other surrounding states have these types of accountability programs that provide each school district a choice to address the needs of their students, families, and staff.

"Our Wisconsin Promise" also involves fostering non-traditional partnerships in our school communities better to serve student's educational, psychological and nutritional needs. We will align resources with all entities to ensure that all children and families are well served. We will find creative ways to engage and communicate with families as valued partners in supporting their children's learning. Their voices are essential to help lead us to world-class results.

My entire platform addresses equity through excellence. We can and will ensure success for all students by creating a learning culture of high expectations with rigorous and relevant learning opportunities that reflect the real world, focusing on the NEEDS of our learner. We will build off this success by creating schools that prioritize character education with rich social-emotional and mental health supports. We will foster and celebrate innovations in our Wisconsin schools. "Our Wisconsin Promise" is child-centered and honors all educators so that our students, no matter where they come from, are joyfully served to be well prepared for success in life after high school and contribute to our citizenry.

- 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?**

Who could have imagined a year ago that a pandemic would force schools to close across the country and so drastically affect our economy? “There’s no place like home” became a constant in our lives, as in-person interactions were abruptly suspended last March. Within a week, parents became teachers. Teachers became students learning technology tools to engage with their students in new cyber classrooms. And community leaders became social workers, assisting families in need of food and resources for life’s necessities.

When we look back on 2020, I believe we will celebrate a reawakening of support for education, including the Herculean educators, support teams, and school and community leaders who bravely served our kids and communities. The new year presents an opportunity for us to begin recovering from this pandemic, with the first step to return our children to in-person learning.

## **I propose a statewide plan to return our students and staff to school safely, a plan that is based on evidence-based medical and accelerated learning approaches.**

We are at a crisis point in our public schools. Statewide data reveals declining enrollment across Wisconsin; 4K & 5K students are not showing up in virtual school programs. Teachers are burning out, and there is a teacher shortage, not to mention parent fatigue, a stressed workforce, and an impacted economy.

It is time for a statewide recovery plan to return our students to school. It is time to address the learning loss and inequities that have been exacerbated by this pandemic, such as robust broadband access, tech devices, and food insecurity.

My plan includes the development of a stakeholder communication plan with school-based health and safety precautions. We will ensure personnel safety through ongoing collaboration and communication between administrators, building leaders, staff members, students, parents, health services, and health departments. Staff will be allowed to get vaccines first, adequate PPE along with safety training, and clear expectations for student and staff safety protocols. Other vital components are:

1. Start with elementary students going back to in-person instruction, then a gradual release to/from hybrid models for middle and high school students, and then full in-person teaching and learning in all schools.
2. Provide parents and caregivers with choices on how to serve their children best moving forward - whether in-person or virtual approach.
3. Support teachers with quality professional development that addresses their mental health and well-being and best practices to address student learning loss.
4. Implement a transition plan for social and emotional learning activities to welcome students back to school, especially those who did not have closure last year, and quickly reestablish relationships traumatized by school closures.

5. Use evidence-based acceleration practices to identify learning loss for all students, prioritize grade-level content, and target interventions to ensure growth in specified essential standards.
6. Support collaborative planning to develop modified school calendars that may require learning opportunities through the summer, evenings, and weekends.
7. Create innovative school partnerships with community non-profits, universities, and businesses that support the accelerated learning required for all students - high-intensity tutoring, before/after school programs, weekend programs, summer learning academies, evening classes, and online modules, etc.
8. Work collaboratively with policymakers to support state and federal funding resources to accelerate learning, support training for educators, and recover safely from the pandemic.
9. Let us learn from others across the country and the world who have safe and successful models in place with a plan to prioritize in-person instruction.

Finally, my plan would allow each district to customize its recovery approach to meet the needs of students, staff, and the school community. No two plans will be the same because no two students, schools, districts, or communities are the same. We can only recover from this pandemic together.

### **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?**

To achieve my vision is to create a world-class education system that is the highest performing in the country; it will take ALL of us, including the unions. By working in partnership with all stakeholders, listening to their hearts, and inviting their solutions, we will unlock a limitless field of opportunity, ensuring equity and access for all of Wisconsin's children. Our kids deserve nothing less.

I believe that all stakeholders, including unions, have a critical voice in serving and advocating for our students. Through my learning experiences with great educators, we can collectively work together to promote excellence and equity for all students. To recover from this pandemic, it will be vital that we move forward in the same direction. I would engage in a collective impact process in a structured way to bring people to the table to determine the department's priorities. I have been using a crowdsourcing tool in my campaign programs to get input from all stakeholders, including students.

We need to give people a voice, and especially our teachers, as they are the most valuable assets in front of our children. I believe that people have a more profound appreciation for teachers and have realized that our teachers do more than deliver instruction. Effective teachers nurture relationships, guide learning in personalized ways, and motivate them to develop their strengths and passion.

We need to build upon the pandemic's silver linings to better support teachers as we transform our educational process. To do this best, we need to understand teacher perspectives, what they need, and provide quality staff development that is personalized. I believe it is the DPI's role to support teachers, leaders, district staff, and school boards in this role. **As I indicated in the first paragraph, I would recruit a teacher leader to be part of my DPI leadership cabinet when elected.** This person would help

our team consider the perspectives of teachers and assist in support of teacher licensing. I am disappointed to learn from constituents from across the state that the teacher licensing bureaucracy is preventing too many teachers from getting into our classrooms. For far too long, teachers have not always been considered when changes occurred at the state or national level. I would welcome a teacher's voice at the DPI table.

I also believe that the DPI and the other state associations of WASDA, WASBO, and WASBO need to agree to some overarching goals of equity and how to serve all children moving forward; I would think that all of our members would demand and expect better communication between the entities in this regard. We need to take the politics out of education and focus our state organizations toward the children that we serve the state.

My mission in serving you will be setting out to transform K-12 public education and beyond in our great state of Wisconsin. Together we will create equitable opportunities and experiences to accelerate learning for all of Wisconsin's children. I am a firm believer in the continuous improvement process. My plan begins with our ambitious goals to address and start closing the achievement gaps within three years with a laser focus on high-quality instruction and providing significant support and resources for teachers, staff, administration, and parents. This will include the use of evidence-based policies and practices that will enable us to seize this moment in history to rethink schools in ways that can transform learning for all students, parents, and teachers, and support staff alike. I have been the voice of Superintendent leaders at the local, state, and national levels and will continue to do so after elected. I am the only candidate with experience working with our divided government at the state and federal levels.

Now more than ever, we need to stand together on behalf of all children and all who serve them every day. Schools can't do this alone, but we can unify our efforts and do this together. My track record of closing achievement gaps and ensuring success for all children is noteworthy. I have inspired others into the profession. I am a visionary leader of leaders, honored to have served as the President of the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA) and the President of the 13,000 members of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA).

**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 33<sup>rd</sup> 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?**

First, let's think about the goodness of education and why we all choose the teaching profession. I have dedicated the last 41 years of my life to education as many teachers. I had recruited my family into teaching and leadership positions because I believe this is the most excellent profession ever, even when others gave up. Our communities depend on a robust, high-quality education with the best teachers in

front of our students. Teachers are to be treated as professionals, and this is how I worked with all of the teachers I have been associated with in my various leadership roles. I believe it is essential to create equitable, predictable, and sustainable compensation plans. This is just what we did in Brown Deer as we worked towards more competitive salaries for beginning teachers and an agreement where each teacher could plan on at least a \$1,000 increase in addition to CPI or other stipends provided. We also created a "Critical Skills" program where teachers would get compensation for a particular project they wanted to learn more about. The goals of the critical skills program were to improve student achievement by strengthening instruction, reward professional growth and effective teachers by providing leadership responsibilities and increased compensation, promote collaboration by developing and supporting opportunities for teachers to learn from each other, and retain effective teachers by providing teacher leadership opportunities and increased compensation.

As State Superintendent, I will work with the Governor, Legislators, and Board of Regents to propose increased teacher salaries. We need to look at how other states have better compensated their teachers through various plans. According to Edweek, more than 22 governors across the United States proposed teacher pay proposals in the last year before COVID hit. Some of these states include Indiana, Florida, and Mississippi. We need to develop a better working relationship with the legislature. Retention and recruitment are so much better when you create a sense of community - a place where you feel valued, respected, honored, and welcome - that you're all in this together!

I also want to better support teachers in learning how to become financially independent and savvy about their benefits from the beginning of their employment. For example, I supported and counseled my Human Resource staff to work with beginning teachers to sign up for short-term disability just if they needed this benefit within the first years of their employment. I believe we should showcase and make it a big deal when teachers sign a contract - a signing day picture, for example. In Brown Deer, we created a new staff booklet to welcome all new staff into the Brown Deer family.

Teachers love to learn, and that's one of the reasons they went into education. The DPI needs to build upon the Teacher Summit project and create a space and place for teachers to share lessons, resources, and talk. Sharing our ideas would create a place and space for teacher exchange and shared building of capacity. We have brilliant work across the state, but often we are not aware of it because we do not have a repository for our state teachers. These programs will help us build the capacity to put quality teachers in front of all kids, no matter if you are in rural, suburban, or urban school districts.

Also, teacher preparation programs are becoming more creative in recruiting new students into education programs and collaborating with their local school districts. We need to consider the UW System Task Force to Advance Teachers and Leaders into the Pipeline and help aspiring teachers to overcome the barriers of financial aid, indebtedness, and transportation.

To lead greatly and create a world-class education system in Wisconsin, we need to honor and respect the profession of teaching. I would promote the teaching profession by providing voice to teachers consistently, market and brand the teaching career, and recognizing the great “Grow your Own” programs occurring across the state.

**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?**

I have been immersed in equity, diversity, and inclusion for my entire professional career, starting in my first teaching experience at the University of Chicago -Laboratory Schools. Equity is about closing achievement gaps and providing access and opportunity - providing students, families, staff what they need. It is not giving everyone the same thing. Equity means having the courage to ask questions that help us understand our own inherent biases, create a culture of no shame, no blame, no judgment, and address inequities in our organizations. In Brown Deer, a defining moment was during the interview process when the interview team shared the recent state test scores and asked me to interpret the data. I had already researched the district, and I looked at each and every one of them on the team and said, “we have an achievement gap, and what are we going to do about it?” We need to speak our truth about the issues that divide us and create a process to create awareness, learn together, and lead together.

As superintendent of Brown Deer Public Schools, we got impressive results and closed achievement gaps with a laser focus on reading. The school board, leadership team, teachers, and staff at Brown Deer achieved these promising results by spending more time on teaching the science of reading, especially for struggling students, setting high standards, and making those high standards stick by providing individual attention. As we all know, kids who don't learn to read by the third-grade risk getting left behind, which profoundly affects their lives and their future livelihood. And now we have to contend with recovery from a pandemic that is widening these gaps and creating significant social-emotional learning issues for all stakeholders in our school communities. It was an all-hands-on-deck approach by measuring what matters and putting in evidence-based practices to get results in terms of time, expert teacher/staff interventions, and on-going support in and out of school. The systematic changes were: acknowledging the gap; daily professional learning community time with intentional focus, school improvement teams, monthly professional development time for staff; teacher-designed and teacher-led, equity and diversity training, hiring diverse, talented staff all across the organization, and district-wide intervention time in all schools. The Brown Deer team was “all in,” and we need to be “all in” to eliminate any achievement gaps as a state. No matter what district you come from, we all have achievement gaps to contend with. It will be our collective leadership that allows us to unite around this mission. This is what we will have to do across the state to get better outcomes. These research-based practices are scalable, consider the needs of students, and provide remedies to accelerate students in their foundational learning. Brown Deer has significantly increased scores on the state school report card for closing achievement gaps data over the past five years (higher than the state) and almost 100% graduation for all students, including our black



scholars, the majority group in our district. As evidenced by our seven-year graduation data, we never gave up on our students even after they left us after high school. This would have never happened if it wasn't for our teachers and staff committing to equity training and the willingness to make this a priority. It starts with us, and it takes a Village. The Wisconsin Teachers will become the Heart of Our Work!

May  
2020

**BD Teachers are the  
Heart of our Work!**



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