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WEAC State Superintendent Questionnaire (5 Questions All Candidates Answer)

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

I believe in the American Dream. Where we can work hard for a better life and see our children grow up with more opportunities than our own. Unfortunately, I recently read that for the first time in US history that a generation is not doing as well as their parents.

In my view, part of the problem is that our educational system is crumbling around us. We have a teacher shortage in the thousands. Children have vastly different experiences depending on which school they attend. For example, some class sizes are around 15 while others are around 45. Further, there are also differences in facilities, technology, and other student services. We also have a school finance system in Wisconsin which is essentially reverse-equity. Where it seems the richest communities tend to have the best student services and aren't impacted by the teacher shortage. To truly have an equitable system, I believe we need to both expand equity in our schools and reform our school finance system in an equitable manner.

At Garland, the school I lead, we've done a great job at providing a culturally responsive and equitable education for all children. Our student body is very diverse with the following demographics: ~22% Asian; ~12% Black; ~24% Latina/Latino; and ~41% White. We also have ~33% of students who are English Learners from over 20 languages. It is my belief that children cannot learn to their full potential without feeling physically, emotionally, and socially safe to learn.

We work hard to ensure a culturally responsive and equitable education for all students. We use culturally relevant books and texts to engage and instruct students. We individualize learning to meet the needs of each child. We host multi-cultural nights and because we have a large Middle Eastern student population, we even have a guest artist scheduled who specializes in Middle Eastern artwork.

All of our work around cultural responsiveness and equity continues to pay off. The Department of Public Instruction rates us high on our school report card. At our school, 12 out of 12 subgroups beat the state growth rate in English Language Arts and 11 out of 12 subgroups beat the state growth in Math. We also received numerous awards.

Unfortunately, our success is limited by serious structural issues. For example, our class sizes average is around 30. In my opinion, Special Education and English as a Second Language teachers have unreasonable caseloads. Lack of summer enrichment camps exacerbate the summer slide and we waste far too much time on mandatory standardized testing.

To expand opportunity to all children, I believe we need serious structural changes. Change that begins with school finance reform. Right now Wisconsin uses base revenue limits that allow some districts to have around twice as much base money than other districts. If a district requires more funds, then they need to go to referendum and ask homeowners to raise their property taxes. It's unconscionable to ask our elders on fixed incomes to choose between giving schools the funding they need or, in some cases, paying their bills and purchasing prescriptions.

In my view, the solution is to move away from our overreliance on property taxes. Instead we should switch to a state funded system where we can establish an equal basic standard of student care. Then we can use funding like Title I, Title III, and others to expand equitable programming.

If we fix our school finance system, then we will have the funds needed to address the teacher shortage. We will be able to fund reasonable class sizes, after school programming, summer enrichment camps, Special Education services, Bilingual programs, English Language programs, proper technology, Social Emotional Learning, etc.

The result from our proposed reforms can lead to the expansion of great schools across our state. So no matter where a child lives or where they move to, a great school will be there. This model could lead to Wisconsin becoming national leaders in equitable education and ensure that every child has a chance for a better life.

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?

Inauguration for the State Superintendent is in July. By that time, the school year will be over and vaccinations will be widespread. The reforms I am presenting are not only necessary to ensure an equal and equitable education for all Wisconsin children, but could also lessen the impact of a future pandemic. If we have reasonable class sizes, then we could physically distance. If we have funding for PPE and other equipment,

then we could be safer. If we have quality ventilation systems, then we could reduce the spread of airborne viruses like COVID-19.

This pandemic has shown how fragile our educational system is in Wisconsin. COVID-19 has unveiled the mass inequities between districts and schools. Let's work together to rebuild our educational system with a lens in equity and justice. Only then can we be prepared to manage the next pandemic. Only then will all kids have the opportunities they deserve.

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?

Unions are very important in cultivating a fantastic education for children while at the same time building up our teaching force. Unions advocate for children. For example, by fighting for lower class sizes, unions create a student environment that can increase student achievement and learning. Unions are also going to be instrumental in addressing the teacher shortage. Right now educators can earn ~20% more money if they were to accept a job outside of teaching with the same experience and education. Low and inconsistent teacher salaries, along with reductions of student services are some of the reasons there is an exodus from the teaching profession. Through true collective bargaining, unions can help increase teacher wages and create a better learning environment for kids.

As for the role of education unions and DPI/districts, I see the benefits of having an on-the-ground view of how federal and state policies actually impact what happens in the classroom. I continued to be part of the union after Act 10 took effect. As a Principal, I have not forgotten what it is like to be in the classroom. I know the struggles, workloads, and unreasonable expectations placed on teachers. To mitigate some of these issues, we expanded teacher leadership and collaboration at Garland. We selectively abandon what does not work and focus on what matters. Our efforts paid off and our state report card shows high marks. I think one of the biggest tells of our success is that teachers love working at Garland and we have very little turnover. We are successful.

I will take the same strategy as the state superintendent. We will bring teachers into the cabinet and administration. This teacher leadership will give us practical insights for how theories might actually turn into practice on the ground. The previous approach to education policy has not worked. If it had, we would not see the inequities and teacher shortage we have now. So to see actual positive change, we need current classroom

teachers who know first hand what works and what doesn't in relevant positions at DPI. The teachers union definitely has a role to play in empowering teachers and helping children succeed.

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?

I believe we must rebuild the teaching profession before it is too late. We have teachers leaving in droves and the pandemic has only made it worse. Garland is a hub for student teachers and we know first hand the drastic reduction in the number of students who desire to become a teacher. It is not sustainable to have fewer people joining teaching and more people leaving education. The shortage also cannot be solved by lowering standards or simply bringing back retirees.

I believe we need to address several major issues if we are to truly tackle the teacher shortage. First, teachers are paid ~20% less than if they had a different job with similar education and experience. We need to level up salaries and ensure equitable pay with sustainable salary schedules.

Second, teacher workloads have increased exponentially. Often, teachers are told to find more time in their schedule, when in fact they are already spread so thin. Teachers do not have any more time to spare. From when I started teaching until when I moved into administration, I estimate that my workload increased around 40%. That is unsustainable, which is why we need to reimagine workloads.

Third, teachers need more preparation. It's estimated that 40% - 50% of teachers leave the field in five years. Student teachers currently work half a year for free while taking classes. Too many times student teachers also have to work a second job just to have a roof over their head. In my view, we need to expand student teaching to a year and give them a stipend. This will give them the time to fully prepare without the financial burden.

Last, we need to put an end to the false ideas that some have about educators. Media outlets continue to say teachers are lazy and are to blame for many issues out of their control. I know there are teachers who refrain from telling their profession to others because they don't want to be criticized. I also know amazing teachers who are telling

their own kids not to enter teaching. We need to ensure media outlets know of the great things happening in our classrooms across the state and end this negative narrative.

The era of paying less, overworking, underpreparing, and name calling must come to an end. Let's lead the nation by fixing these structural issues and rebuilding our teaching profession together.

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?

At Garland school, we put in place several structures to foster an anti-racist culture. As a staff, we discuss how racism and privilege impact student learning. We have embraced and integrated BLM principles and projects into our curriculum. Before COVID, we also were working to host a guest trainer from UW-LaCross to inservice staff on anti-racist principles and practices. During my tenure as principal, we also expanded staff diversity when hiring. I have also suggested to district leadership that we could expand teacher diversity by creating a teacher prep high school in Milwaukee Public Schools.

The results are that students have embraced a culture of acceptance, diversity, and anti-racism. Students stick up for each other and support one another. I believe that the culture we established is not only good for society, but also increases engagement, collaboration, and learning among students.

As a state, we need to do more to expand anti-racism and culturally/linguistically responsive principles. When I'm State Superintendent, we will bring the successes we see at Garland to the state. We will expand anti-racism professional learning opportunities and materials to staff across the state. These along with a strong focus on pedagogy, collaboration, reflection, autonomy, teacher leadership, teacher recruitment, addressing failing structures, and school finance reform will allow us to finally shrink achievement gaps and expand opportunities for all children. We will work with partners to grow diversity in teacher preparation programs. We cannot truly have opportunity for all children until we make systemic changes to our structures and embrace a culture of equity/justice in all our Wisconsin schools.