

## Troy Gunderson – Candidate for State Superintendent

### WEAC State Superintendent Questionnaire – January 15, 2021

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

My vision for the Department of Public Instruction is one of servant leadership. We simply ask the fundamental question, “Do our schools become healthier, wiser, freer, and more autonomous while being served?” I recently visited more than 60 school districts across our state. From Superior to Milwaukee, school districts across our state clamor for leadership. The DPI must shape the discussion and facilitate the development of a vision by building upon the recent Blue-Ribbon Commission and by following the blueprint offered by *No Time to Lose - How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State*. Therefore, the first pillar of my campaign platform is entitled “Leaders Ready to Lead.” It calls for the creation of a vision for the future of public education in Wisconsin.

Addressing both achievement and equity begins with “Students Ready to Learn.” I believe the most impactful investments of our resources is in serving our youngest children and their families. My platform calls for universal full day kindergarten for all four-year old children, access to school program for all three-year old children, and programming to allow school districts to facilitate daycare options in their respective communities. I believe this focus on our youngest learners is a first step towards better statewide achievement and equity of opportunity.

Research indicates the number one predictor of a child’s success in school is the skillset of their teacher. My platform of “Teachers Ready to Teach” commits to the notion of teaching as a profession, the need to recruit the next generation of teacher, and the need to support teachers with effective professional development and a world-class curriculum. I advocate for stronger use of our CESA to ensure a more consistent approach to curriculum and instruction along with a statewide focus on culturally responsive teaching.

I believe the best strategic approach to improved statewide achievement and equity of opportunity is to focus on producing Future Ready Graduates. I am a strong supporter of the Redefining Ready model to assess the career, college and life readiness of our graduates. Using this model to define large strategic goals allows the state, CESA, and each district to align their work and their benchmarks to meeting this challenge. I believe our k-8 approach to assessment

must become more formative in nature to better align our work with producing Future Ready Graduates.

Finally, my priority for the department in terms of execution will be to facilitate a collaborative “we are in this together” approach. The school districts in every corner of our state are thirsty for coordinated support and adherence to a vision of success for all. When traveling across Wisconsin, I used the back of my left hand to symbolize our state. We are team Wisconsin! We must collaborate to ensure the success of each of our school districts. I will rely upon the CESA to manage a unified approach to success for all and to facilitate cooperation between districts through the creation and facilitation of statewide “similar district cohorts.” In recent visits to Sheboygan, Oshkosh, and Janesville we discussed the need for collaboration with similar districts in order to share effective practices and strategies. Districts such as this from different CESA require intentionality and support in order to enjoy a meaningful connection. Each of these particular school districts also mentioned a desire to learn from the larger districts within our state. A topic I discussed during my visit with the team at Milwaukee Public Schools. “We are all in this together” means everybody! If elected as state superintendent, I will expect teams from our largest school districts to collaborate and share ideas with the entire state. Statewide success requires each school district to understand and respect the work of others in order to create the collaboration and synergy necessary for improvement.

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 areas identified in my platform including Leaders Ready to Lead, Students Ready to Learn and Teachers Ready to Teach help guide a response to the many issues exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, COVID-19 will offer a once-in-a-generation chance to develop a long-term vision for public education. Like all social disrupters, the pandemic offers a window into our practice and creates fertile ground for improvement. With Leaders Ready to Lead we can reassert public education as our collective commitment to better serving each child and redefine public education’s role in creating a better social and economic future for everyone. Here is our chance to lead!

Ensuring that our Students are Ready to Learn and our Teachers are Ready to Teach in a post COVID-19 environment requires a safe and healthy teaching and learning environment. If I am elected as your next state superintendent I will begin working with the Department of Public Instruction and Health Department immediately following the election in April. We will review current data available regarding the safety of the various teaching and learning models across the

state. I will direct the team to update protocols and recommendations for summer school and to begin work on an updated document for the opening of schools in September.

We will provide statewide leadership through analysis of comparative data and effective instructional strategies from state and national sources to assist our CESA in facilitating the most effective approach to delivering instruction to the children of our state. We will pay special attention to data collected from teachers – what worked best for you? By the time the election is completed in April, we will be entering our second year of battling COVID-19. We will have the data, the experience, and the willingness necessary to offer the effective leadership required to serve our children, families, and workforce.

Finally, like all industries across our state, the pandemic is impacting employees. Whether you are an exhausted medical worker or an unemployed restaurant worker, the pandemic has dramatically altered your workplace. Reconnecting with teachers to ensure they are “ready to teach” is a precursor to success. Teachers, principals, and support employees who interact with children on a daily basis are the backbone of our industry - they do the work! Critical to our success will be working with our teachers to assess what they learned while working remotely, to address their post-pandemic social and emotional needs, and collaborating with them in creating a new workplace environment that will better serve our children and families. Reengaging our workforce with a focus on both safety and student achievement is critical. Our teachers must be “ready to teach.”

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?

I began my teaching career in 1985 at Melrose-Mindoro School District as a high school math and computer teacher and soon found myself involved in contract negotiations. My wife recently retired from Melrose-Mindoro after thirty years as a middle school science teacher. Despite her colleagues voting to allow their union certification to expire following Act 10, my wife remained a dues-paying member of the association until her retirement. My mother and father-in-law are retired teachers who recall the days prior to the union working to improve compensation and conditions. Our family has deep roots in the teacher association.

I was serving in my first year as superintendent for the School District of West Salem during the period of Act 10. Following the economic, social and emotional disruption caused by Act 10, we began a journey to redefine and realign compensation and benefits. The journey culminated with a completed transition to a new salary model and a successful referendum to further increase teacher compensation. Our school board and local teacher union worked together to reach our goal of creating a sustainable, competitive compensation model that is supported by our community.

I see the current environment as an opportunity for a bigger role for the union in redefining public education and the teaching profession on the state level. I envision an expanded professional role for the union similar to the Bar Association or the American Medical Association. As state superintendent I will include state and local associations in our “Leaders Ready to Lead” initiative of establishing a new vision for public education. I will include the union in our “Students Ready to Learn” platform of expanding pre-school services and for assessing the impact of COVID-19. I will include the union as part of “Teachers Ready to Teach” when we develop plans for recruitment and certification of the next generation of teachers and for the development of a world-class curriculum. I think the current climate is ripe for the professional education unions of our state to enjoy an expanded role in collaboration with other state education leadership groups to ensure a brighter future for public education in Wisconsin.

I see a similar opportunity for expanded leadership at the local level. Active participation in curriculum development, program evaluation, professional development, mentoring, and workplace culture are excellent examples. In addition, I think our local unions should have an expanded role as trainers and leaders in our CESA.

In full disclosure, we struggled with this topic in my final years as superintendent in West Salem. As the transformation of our compensation program neared completion, we conflicted over the role of the union moving forward. I reached out to the regional director from Coulee Region United Educators to begin a process for defining the role moving forward. During our discussions we had difficulty letting go of workplace condition topics that are now managed by a districtwide Handbook Committee, and in removing barriers to participation with our leadership team regarding programming and curriculum. Defining a new role is messy but necessary work.

I firmly believe the future of public education requires us to reimagine the role of professional education unions. The ideological attacks on public education currently underway require all supporters of public education to work together to develop and promote a new vision for public education. Our “Leaders Ready to Lead” platform requires the involvement of all stakeholders including education unions and associations.

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?

The issue of recruiting, selecting, training and retaining qualified staff is impacting every corner of our state. I believe several factors are at play. First, the social and political impact Act 10 devaluated professional educators in such a way as to discourage the next generation from

seeking to become teachers. Second, the rapid escalation in the price of university tuition has been especially impactful on the teaching profession because teachers are often first-generation college graduates from families unable to offer financial assistance further skewing the cost-benefit analysis of becoming a teacher. An often-overlooked factor is the simple notion that teaching is difficult and demanding work. Success requires a true passion for service and a willingness to sacrifice for others. Finally, the teaching profession and the public-school workforce in general are similar to other fields with respect to demographics. There are simply not enough young people entering the workforce to replace those who are retiring.

The third pillar of my campaign agenda is entitled “Teachers Ready to Teach.” The focus of this particular pillar is promoting teaching as a professional career. We must continue to support and advance programs that will attract the next generation of teachers into this wonderful profession and offer the necessary training, support and compensation to ensure professional growth, personal satisfaction, and economic stability.

I believe that equitable, predictable and sustainable salary models are an important part of workforce stability. I fully support this concept as part of “Teachers Ready to Teach” which commits to the notion of teaching as a professional career. During my time as superintendent for the School District of West Salem, the district transitioned to an updated salary model based upon the book *Redesigning Teacher Pay: A System for the Next Generation of Educators* by Susan Moore Johnson and John P. Papay. The resulting compensation model provides predictable and equitable pay increases including a mid-career promotion process celebrating the craft of teaching. The model is mathematically sustainable and was fully funded from the beginning because the school board and district voters committed to the transition. The research completed as part of this project affirmed that predictable wage increases based upon equitable and attainable criteria are critical factors in creating a sustainable career path for teachers. Critical to the process is connecting advancement to both the professional craft of teaching and personal contributions as an employee.

In the long term, teaching must continue to maintain its status as a true profession. We must fully recognize that a highly skilled professional educator is the best predictor of student success. As stewards of the teaching profession, we are responsible for the next generation of educators. My mother often reminds me that when she began her teaching career in the early 1960s the occupation of teacher was similar to that of a Peace Corps commitment. By the time she retired it had become a profession. We cannot afford to go back.

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 will begin by asserting that racism, a racist culture, and the resulting racial achievement gap in Wisconsin are a terribly sad reality and difficult issues to solve. Generations of dedicated and talented education professionals in our state have worked tirelessly to address these issues. Meanwhile generations of children have suffered because we can't seem to get this right. We have to find the answer.

I believe these issues are partly rooted in a dominant social culture established by the European and Scandinavian settlers who made Wisconsin their home. While we all enjoy the positive quirkiness of a state known for bratwurst, cheese, and the Packers, the flip side of this dominance is a rather troubled history of simply expecting those from different cultures to conform to the dominant culture. The African American experience in our state is one such example. From redlining and systemic racism, to an expectation of conformity in our schools and a plethora of other hurdles too numerous to list, we've made academic and social success by African Americans in our state extraordinarily difficult. The tragic events of 2020 further exposed systemic racism across our nation and in Wisconsin. As noted in earlier candidate forums, I am no longer interested in apologies, promises, or excuses. I want action. It is not sufficient to simply be "not a racist." We must now become "anti-racism" and actively work for change. It is time for someone like me – someone who has benefited from a lifetime of gifts and opportunities with few barriers other than my own determination – to ensure all people in our state have the same opportunities for success afforded to me. We must do better.

If elected as the next State Superintendent of Public Instruction, I will make equity, racism, and closing the resulting achievement gap top priority. I will use the platform of this elected position to continually focus the entire state on the all too often racist nature of our culture. This is a Wisconsin "we" problem with a Wisconsin "we" solution that requires the engagement of everyone. As part of our Leaders Ready to Lead platform, we will begin by identifying our vision for public education in Wisconsin. We will leverage our CESA to work with school districts, teachers, and community members across the state to craft a collective vision for public education. Our Students Ready to Learn platform demands the creation of an empowering school culture free of racism and bias. Our Teachers Ready to Teach initiative includes training and support for a more culturally sensitive approach including more professional development for educators in the areas of engaging African American students and families, offering significant examples of positive racial identity, and celebrating cultural differences and experiences. Purposeful cultural awareness, high academic expectations for all students, and authentic relationships with families and their communities offer a path to success for all children. We must get better at meeting all children and families where they "are" not where we think they "should be."

I believe our public schools are in a position of leadership in the area of cultural awareness and in the fight against racism. We can make a difference for the entire state. Improving in this area

is an absolute imperative. Closing both the opportunity and achievement gaps for all students of color, especially African American students, is critical to the future success of our state. The demographics are clear - Wisconsin is going to become more diverse. How well we adapt will determine our fate.