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[00:00:09] **Speaker 1** Thank you, Sarah, for passing the baton on to me and to all Wisconsin students. And I will now pass it again, this time to State Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Jill Underly. Dr. Jill Underly was elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction on April 6th, 2021. Dr. Underly has a deep background in public ed and since.

[00:00:31] **Speaker 2** 1999.

[00:00:32] **Speaker 1** She has worked in all facets of public education as a high school and middle school, social studies teacher and academic advisor at UW, a Title one consultant and Assistant Director at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and Elementary, Principal and Director of Instruction. And as a rural school district superintendent, Dr. Underly is committed to ensuring that every child, every day has the opportunity for a first class public education in the state of Wisconsin. She and her husband, John, have two children, both in high school. They live on a small farm in southwestern Wisconsin. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Jill Underly, Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction for her second State of Education address.

[00:01:41] **Speaker 2** Thank you. Thank you very much. Good afternoon. There's always that fear. Nobody's going to show up. That is now subsided. But thank you for being here with us today to celebrate, support and learn how to further invest in the public schools and libraries of Wisconsin. It is my honor to be here as State Superintendent of Public Instruction to give my second State of education address. Public education serves our state because it serves our children. And our children are our most precious resource. The children are, of course, our future, but I think we take that for granted. Sometimes they are our future and they must be nurtured and they must be well prepared. They deserve no less, and neither do we. And the same goes for our democracy. See, public education is a constitutional right. It says it right there in Article five, Section three of the Wisconsin Constitution. The legislature shall provide by law for the establishment of district schools, which shall be as nearly uniform as practicable in such schools shall be free and without charge for tuition to all children between the ages of four and 20. As a constitutional right to public education is rooted in democracy. It also forms the roots for a democracy to grow and be healthy. Which means, in turn, that our public education system must be strong to provide a solid foundation for a healthy democracy to grow from and build upon.

[00:03:32] **Unidentified** Schools can be.

[00:03:34] **Speaker 2** And must be this foundation. I want my students, all Wisconsin students, to grow up to be active participants in the civic life of our state, to be future active participants in democracy. They need that strong foundation. They need to know how to examine our past. They need to know how to think critically about our present. They need to make informed decisions about our future, their future. And we, as current active participants in democracy, must do the same. Look at the history. Think critically. And make well-informed and productive decisions. The history of public schools in Wisconsin is one of innovation and meaningful and sustained investment. We do not see that investment today. We must think critically about how that is impacting our children and our state. And we must make a different decision. And all of that means that the state of education in Wisconsin and the future of our democracy stands on the shoulders of students who must be safe and nurtured and who engage in challenging curriculum. Because nurturing, challenging classrooms make it possible to learn and act on critical thinking. The state of education in Wisconsin is rooted in the strength of our students critical thinking, the health and future of our democracy require it. That's the function of a meaningful education and why it's a constitutional right and a moral imperative.

[00:05:12] **Unidentified** You see, public education.

[00:05:14] **Speaker 2** Must ensure that every single student is able to succeed, which requires equity and inclusion. Again, this is both a legal issue and a moral imperative and why these concepts are more than just concepts in public education. They are the driving force behind so many of our decisions as educators. Even though they are words that have been co-opted or people have tried to in current times. And when we talk about equity in public education, we're talking about each student getting what they need in the way that they need it. This is not equality where every student gets the same resources and the same instruction. That would be not fair to our students because differentiating and individualizing instruction is how we make sure we reach every kid. And if a student cannot see the board from the back of the room, we don't keep them there because every kid should have equal treatment in the eyes of a seating chart. No, we move the student to the front of the classroom. We help them see the board or the teacher better, or work through the school to get them glasses and reach their parents. And the same goes for if a student cannot see themselves represented in the curriculum. But more on that later. When we talk about inclusion, we're talking about the constitutional right to public education, because the fact is that students with disabilities and students without disabilities need to be taught together. Every student is an important member of the school community in classrooms where everyone belongs are stronger, richer and more effective in fostering learning and growth. Equity. Equity is established in the free access to public education, and it also means much more than that at its core. Inclusion is defined as the least restrictive environment, but also means much more than that. It means classrooms that honor and celebrate diversity and diversity creates meaningful learning environments. Equity is the foundation for the diversity we see in our workplaces, in our communities, and in our dialog with each other. In our schools, we recognize that individual students have unique needs to address barriers to overcome and strengths to build on. And that is challenging. It's also exciting. It's good teaching, and it's a good and needed investment. So this is why our budget proposal includes $750 million of investment in special education in the first year of the biennium. We will increase special education reimbursement to 45% and in the second year to 60% with our sites on 90%.

[00:08:05] **Unidentified** By the end of the subsequent biennium.

[00:08:15] **Speaker 2** Wisconsin families and educators have been calling for reform for special education funding for decades. And it's past time to make this investment in our students and in our schools. And for every single student to succeed is our constitutional and community responsibility to eliminate the achievement gap. But we cannot call it that. We cannot call it an achievement gap because a gap in outcomes is caused by a gap in inputs. And we can do something about the inputs. It's just that historically we have chosen not to, or at least chosen not to do enough. Understanding the achievement gap instead as a representation gap or an engagement gap means that there are clear action steps that we can take to address it. It's a powerful reframing because it puts the ball back in our court. Instead of blaming the students because of their learning challenges or their family, because their parents are working multiple jobs to get by, or their school district or teachers who are under-resourced, instead of placing blame about their achievement, we can make important choices about curriculum that can make a difference. Representative curriculum means every student in our classroom must see themselves included, acknowledged and celebrated in our lessons. Every student can see themselves in the struggles of our country and in the progress we've made and the challenges that persist. Our black and indigenous students of color, they must see themselves reflected in our lessons and not only in lessons about struggle and trauma in history, but also in lessons about growth. One of our 2023 Wisconsin Teachers of the Year. Laurie Dawkins is a high school biology teacher, and she shared a lesson with me that is an incredible example of representative curriculum. In her role as school forest coordinator, she worked with a middle school choir teacher to create an experiential lesson conveying the importance of taking on challenges. As the choir prepared for their upcoming concert. Lori used the perseverance. Emily Ford as the jumping off point in the lesson. See, Emily Ford is the first African-American, the first woman and first member of the LGBTQ community to hike the entire Ice Age trail during winter. Talk about taking on a challenge. And students learned about Ford's journey and how she overcame challenges by hiking through the school forest themselves, all while singing at the end of the lesson. Students reflected on the challenges they face and how they persevered together as a class community. And this is why representative curriculum is so important. Representation creates a future and a present of limitless possibilities. Because we've removed the limits. If you can see it, you can learn from it. You can aspire to it, and you can become it because you can believe in the journey that will get you from here to there. Representative curriculum is engaging curriculum. And engaging curriculum teaches critical thinking by tackling different concepts from gravitational pull to the structure of a cell to cubism to poetry, analysis and teaching. Difficult concepts can mean teaching about racism and sexism, and to do to not do this would be a blatant disregard of the truth of our country's history and an erasure of our students lived experiences. The only way to teach the complete story of the United States is to include the history of racism. After all, the founding of this country included both slavery and democracy and denying the centrality of slavery and racism. Just because it's uncomfortable does nothing but endanger the continuation and strength of our democratic society. Grappling with difficult concepts, including discrimination, is essential. It's culturally relevant and it's accurate. Teaching saying otherwise is problematic and racist. And when we talk about the inputs, the conditions that create disparities, we must also address the belonging gap. And that means creating safe learning environments. At its most basic, a classroom must be safe. Students must. And that means creating an affirming and welcoming community. Because building such a community and classrooms and schools results in emotional safety. The bare minimum requirement for every student, every single student in the state, building a welcoming and safe community, one that fosters a sense of belonging and where every child feels safe is challenging and meaningful work. And that work is made all the more difficult when we as adults in the community use rhetoric to try to pass policies that are fundamentally unwelcoming and unsafe, and such rhetoric and policies are harmful and dangerous to students. Emotional safety and mental health, but affirming identities through language and through our policies create belonging. Put more simply, affirming identities is a suicide prevention. It's proven self-care. It's strong mental health practice pronouns save lives. So let me say this.

[00:14:33] **Unidentified** So let me say.

[00:14:34] **Speaker 2** This to the students, the LGBTQ plus students, families and staff of Wisconsin. I believe in welcoming and affirming spaces. And as state superintendent of public instruction, I've got your back. When we have.

[00:14:48] **Unidentified** Welcoming and affirming schools in classroom, it creates belonging.

[00:14:53] **Speaker 2** And belonging creates community. Community creates young people who are engaged in the civic life of our state. And civic engagement creates a strong, healthy democracy.

[00:15:15] **Unidentified** They can grow up.

[00:15:18] **Speaker 2** And be the incredible leaders the state needs. I look forward to their leadership, to the leadership of adults who grew up in safe and welcoming classrooms and who learn to engage in challenging discussions respectfully and with curiosity. What a strong foundation they'll have to lead from. And what an important lesson they can bring to the rest of us. Lessons about belonging and Community Building. I think the adults in this room and across the state will learn a lot from them. But we also don't have to wait to learn those lessons or put them into practice. We can choose to engage more respectfully. We can choose to think more critically and with openness. And we can make our entire state a safer learning environment for us all. Considering the divisiveness of our current climate, maybe taking a cue from the nurturing classrooms in our state could be healing. And healing is so needed for our children right now. And when we think about creating leaders, about making it possible for our students to succeed now and in the future, our children must do more than survive. They must thrive. To ensure they belong and thrive. They need mental health support and high quality, integrated, social, emotional learning layered on top of these safe learning environments, mental health supports and social emotional learning. None of this is free, which means for our students to thrive, we need more investment in public education. Schools are asked to do more and more like take care of the mental health needs of our kids. But with less and less support, schools cannot solve everything, and we shouldn't expect them to.

[00:16:49] **Unidentified** Especially when we're not given the increased financial support from this legislature.

[00:17:07] **Speaker 2** We need your help. We need your help to ensure investment and to ensure our children's thrive. So think this through. What are you doing to ensure that our kids thrive? If you're worried about food insecurity or kids going to school hungry, are you advocating for universal free meals? If you're worried about our kids mental health and the need for work that supports suicide prevention, are you supporting inclusive policies that allow for pride, flags and using pronouns? If you are worried about every kid having access to opportunity like world languages and performing arts, are you advocating for increased and equitable funding for public education? The responsibility to advocate for our public schools and Wisconsin's schoolchildren should not be solely on the school district or the teacher whose program might get cut, or the parent with a child on the autism spectrum or the school board that continually has to sell a referendum to their community. It's on all of us.

[00:18:12] **Unidentified** We all have a role to play.

[00:18:25] **Speaker 2** My grandmother, who was a Chicago Public Schools food service employee. Her entire career would often tell me and my siblings that you are who you run with. And she would say this in reference to who we hung out at school or on the summer playground or in the high school activities. She even used to talk about the careers we aspire to one day, and she's right. We're influenced by those in our inner circle. So when I say we all have a role to play, I want you to think about who does that you run with, listen to their language they use, and take a look at the actions they take and then think about what impact it could have on the future of our public schools. We each have influence with the people we run with. And if they're disrespecting our teachers or calling to defund public schools or weaponizing our kids identities, then it's up to us to speak up and stop them.

[00:19:16] **Unidentified** And that's the role we all have to play.

[00:19:29] **Speaker 2** And of course, Gpei has a role to play in all this. And a huge part of that is our budget proposal on its priorities, one of which is funding mental health support in addition to meaningful increases and ongoing funding across the board. In my job and more specifically, my job is to advocate and promote these important proposals for public education and for Wisconsin's kids at the statewide level. Critics will say we spend too much on education or that EPA is always asking for more money. But let me put that into perspective for you. The past 12 years. Kids who are seniors right now, right from the time they're in elementary school, in the force, public schools have been historically defunded. The funding received hasn't kept up with an inflation. And in 2023, the experimental five year pilot on freezing revenue limits will turn 30 years old. For 30 years now, our school districts have not received their constitutional and promised investment from the state and instead the responsibility to increase spending so our schools can buy those computers or hire that tech ed teacher or update their specific bus fleet has fallen on the shoulders of local taxpayers. And more recently, in lieu of putting our state tax dollars into our schools, the taxes the taxes that we've paid responsible citizens have paid these taxes. Those taxes sit in the state reserve and grow to over $6 billion. So 30 years into this experiment, we must institute increases in our spending in a stable, predictable way. In the first year of the next biennium, we plan to increase per pupil aid by $350 with a $600 increase in the subsequent year, while also preventing an impact on property taxes. I also want to talk about more specific funding increases targeted at improving access to mental health resources in schools for children with a historic request for funding for evidence based mental health services at a higher level. We also know that every student needs high quality and integrated social emotional learning, and I think that's a pretty significant misunderstanding, willful or otherwise, of what social emotional learning really means. So let me give you a window into what it can look like in our schools. In May, we announced five Teachers of the Year for 2023. Sarah Copland you just heard from and I already told you a story from the Superior School Forest. They are all impressive and accomplished educators, and one of the ways they're impressive is their commitment to integrating social, emotional learning into their classrooms and beyond. Peg Darling, the library media specialist at Lake One Union, fosters community creativity and personal growth in her makerspace. Her students were really excited to share their experiences and the maker spaces that she had created in the library. It was a place for every student had an opportunity to shine in a different and maybe unexpected way. Dustin Anderson, elementary art teacher in Wisconsin Rapids Public School District, focused on creating interdisciplinary art projects for his students, including one in which students build dolls to help them portray their feelings. Mr. Anderson says says it makes them more empathetic and creative citizens. And I love that. And speaking of learning to cope with large emotions and strong feelings, Kaylie Heitman, a school counselor in Oshkosh Area School District, use drumming and rhythm to help students process how to respond to emotional situations and develop strategies to deal with daily stress, empowering them to take control of their emotions. Let me say that I think we are honoring some pretty incredible teachers this year. And I also say that we can find incredible examples of social, emotional learning and community building integrated in our classrooms all across Wisconsin. And that's wonderful and absolutely needed. It's absolutely strengthens the emotional health of our students. We also need to support our students even more with access to mental health services. And that need from community and for our community and from mental health services is always been there and it's become even more apparent and important as we move through the COVID 19 pandemic. And it's unfortunate that critics will latch on to test scores when there are so many other needs and so many other things that we should take precedence in a once in a lifetime or once in a century pandemic. The past few years were incredibly difficult conditions to learn, but also to live. And to thrive. And the test scores showed us exactly what we knew they would. That kids, families, adults, really everyone was impacted differently. And our most vulnerable students and families were impacted the most. COVID 19 has asked a lot of our kids, and it's asked a lot of our educators. And I believe in the resilience of our students and in our schools. I also wish they didn't have to be resilient. In fact, we talk a lot about resilience, but I'm not sure it's the right word to use. Resilience is about bouncing back, and I don't think schools should bounce back to the way that they were before. The reality is that our world has changed. We have so many challenges that require change. These challenges include COVID 19, but they also include many others, some of which were manufactured like one time federal dollars being used as an excuse to not increase ongoing state funding and others that are organic to the world we live in, like ever changing technology and the need to continually keep up with it in the face of challenge. We need our schools to continue to change in response to them, which is why they need robust, ongoing, reliable state funding. I went down the road. So here we are at the start of another school year. And so much has changed in our world. Well, nothing has changed in our state funding. Excuse me. The danger of taking a sip of water. I mean, when we talk about funding, our schools and libraries are talking about our collective future. In fact, let me make this even more urgent. We're talking about our immediate present, our current reality. We're talking about today because today our schools are making do because that's what they have become accustomed to doing. And because they have no other choice. But that's not good enough for our state. And it's definitely not good enough for our kids.

[00:26:44] **Unidentified** We need robust, ongoing.

[00:26:54] **Speaker 2** We need robust, ongoing, reliable funding for our public schools and libraries across Wisconsin. Without increased funding, schools and libraries cannot meet the needs of kids or all of us. Investing like this in our schools isn't new. The reason our schools are as strong and yes, resilient as they are today is thankful to meaningful investment decades ago. Investment that continues to have an impact today and today. We need to make meaningful investment again so that decades down the line, another state superintendent can say the same, that the state of public education in Wisconsin is strong. Then, because we had the foresight and willpower to make impactful investments today. Investing in schools like this isn't partizan either. Or at least it didn't used to be. In 2019. Just three. Short years ago. Seems like forever ago I was there though. The bipartisan blue ribbon commission on school funding recommended investments just like this. It's right there on page three. The very first recommendation that the legislature wrote that the legislature increases the resources for school districts through increases in the per pupil adjustment under revenue limits. I agree. We need more and better school and library funding here in our state. To be clear, the legislature has the financial means to help our public schools. They are simply choosing not to. It's a choice. And while they're able to make that harmful choice, we shouldn't let them. This legislature is sitting on a surplus. It's money that we paid as taxpayers, believing that it would be put to good public use. Instead, it just sits there helping no one. While all our schools face choices between school safety upgrades or teacher pay raises that are unsustainable, by the way, on one time federal funding or going to referendum yet again. But if this legislature spent the surplus. No, wait. If the legislature spent just. One sixth of the current taxpayer funded budget surplus in schools. It can make such a difference. We could pay teachers and bus drivers. Not to mention support staff and custodians of school personnel. Enough money to show them how much you value them. We could provide universal free meals to kids.

[00:30:17] **Unidentified** We could do so much.

[00:30:33] **Speaker 2** Public education is about providing access to knowledge and opportunities for growth. But the fact is, looking at a budget surplus, this legislature would rather starve kids of those opportunities than provide funding to schools. Because instead of offering solutions, they're attempting to undermine public education through their funding decisions, but also by specifically targeting the relationship and trust between schools and families, all for political gain. So who stands to lose? Our schools. Our children, our state. All of us. Really? Who stands to gain? Politicians. But only if we let them. Instead of letting them, let's examine our history of previous investment. Let us think critically about the recent bipartisan support of further investment. And let us make informed decisions about who our leaders are and where they plan to take the state. This austerity that this and previous previous legislatures have insisted on for our schools is starving our public education system. Our schools and children deserve investment. We deserve investment because investing in public schools is an investment in us to. Public schools can be and should be creators of opportunity. And when we think about our gap in outcomes and how we need to change the inputs, we have to look at the opportunity gaps that exist in our state and the need for enrichment and innovation in every district of our state. Innovation can take so many forms, and one of the exciting forms it takes in Wisconsin is innovation through sustainability and environmental stewardship. Like our Wisconsin schools that have received national recognition as green schools for their commitment to learning. And that is good for our students because it's a good for our planet. Milwaukee Public Schools, the school district of Cambridge and Washington Island School District all have green schools this year. I'm so impressed by these districts and how they represent the diversity of Wisconsin schools that are taking on challenges and succeeding. And I'm excited to see where their innovation takes them and our state next. Public schools can and should be a celebration of teaching and learning, and they are. Despite all the challenges, educators have persevered because you've had to and because you know that your work matters in the lives of your students, our children. You are shaping Wisconsin's future, and we owe you a debt of gratitude. In fact, we owe you more than that. We owe you an investment. Teaching is the most important job in the world. Teaching is an art. It's a science. It's calling. And most of all, teaching is a skill. And teachers must be paid as the skilled professionals that they are, because they're even more than that for heroes. They see the incredible potential in our students, and then they grow that potential through a safe and challenging learning environment until our children are equipped to be successful and active citizens of the state. That's a tall order and our teachers are up for the job and at the same time they need respect and support. And just because they're in a profession that is also a calling, they shouldn't be taken advantage of.

[00:34:14] **Unidentified** I still remember.

[00:34:15] **Speaker 2** The very first teacher I ever had who really saw me for who I was and for the learner I could become. And I bet, and I hope all of us can remember a teacher like that. Mine was Mr. Holmberg, and his choir class made me made such a difference in my life. He had given me so many rich opportunities to grow and I could try new things in his class because I felt safe and supported in the classroom community. He created. Schools and libraries are the cornerstones of our communities precisely because they create community. At your public library. All are welcome. Think about it. Being at your local library doesn't cost a penny. How many places are there left in America where no one expects you to spend money while you're there? But at libraries, you're always welcome at your public library. All are represented. The collections include diverse representations of characters and stories and histories and concepts, and they create connection and empathy. They reflect our own experiences. And they also stretch our perspectives. At your public library. All our respected libraries can stand firmly on intellectual freedom, that you can go in there and engage with ideas that affirm your own beliefs as well as those that challenge them. What a gift. Freedom to read is to be allowed such space for curiosity and judgment. When we talk about the need for investment in our students. All because the future success of our state relies on our children. It's often framed in economic terms and honestly, it's in our own self-interest. However, when I talk about the need for investment in our children for the sake of the future of our state, I'm talking about it in civic terms. I'm talking about the future, stability and success of the state of our democracy and the strength of our leadership and government. The future of our state. Civic and economic will rest on their shoulders someday soon. Which means today rests on ours to prepare them well. Investment is how we do that. We've done it before, and it created a strong foundation that our public schools still stand on today. But think about it this way. If our schools were cars, then the last time we filled the gas tank was decades ago. Our schools are running out of gas and we're running on the fumes as we spend on the principal of that decade old investment. Decades old investment. We need to keep it strong. To fill up the gas tank and shore up that foundation for our current generation of students and the generations to come. Public libraries and public schools are the foundation, the bedrock of democracy. They make a difference. I shudder to think of Wisconsin and what it would mean for democracy, for our communities, for families of public schools are no longer funded. We are at a critical juncture. We must make the decision to invest in public schools and libraries. Education is and libraries are all about changing the world. And thank goodness, because the world is always changing. Thank goodness we have our public schools and libraries where we teach students how to make sense of that change, how to harness it, how to use these lessons to make their lives and our world a better place. These kids are going to change the world one day. We must nurture them. We must prepare them well. And that's exactly what we're going to do to ensure the strength of our democracy and the future of this great state. Thank you. Thank you to.