

SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION CANDIDATE QUESTIONS 2021 ELECTION

GRASSROOTS NORTH SHORE

Dr. Deborah Kerr

Thank you for this opportunity to share why I am running for Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction

1. What do you believe is the role of public education in our society writ large? What are the broad policy implications of that role?

Education is the great equalizer. Education should be the heartbeat of our democracy and prioritized in all that we do as a community and society. 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. A child's education should not be dictated by where they live. All students need access and opportunity to an excellent education, and this is equity. Equity in state and federal education includes both policy and resources, which should remain available to all students, schools, and states. The state and federal government's role in education is to help ensure access to equitable educational opportunities and supplement and support, rather than dictate, local efforts in education. It is unrealistic to expect all students to achieve college and career readiness without providing districts the necessary funding to do this challenging work. Formula funding and policy at the state and federal level should support the total child, from physical and mental health to the development of fundamental, lifelong learning skills.

State and federal education funding must be protected and preserved and not cut for other priorities. Further, both state and federal investment in education must be a priority within budget conversations. Education policy should support additional funding to provide mental health services for students, staff, and families. Both State and federal resources, both funding and policy, should supplement and support high-need students and communities to address equity. One example is to work with all stakeholders to provide full broadband internet access for all in our great state of Wisconsin. This approach is vital for our rural and urban districts. Our economic prosperity depends on partnerships with education, business partners, and workforce development.

My vision is to create a world-class education system that is the highest performing in the country by working in partnership with all stakeholders to unlock a limitless field of opportunity, ensuring equity and access for all of Wisconsin's children. Our kids deserve nothing less. 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. 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 includes 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 alike. We will become stronger together.

2. How would you make the Department of Public Instruction more active/effective in making state K-12 education policy? How can (or should) DPI address the differing needs of urban and rural districts?

I am an equity leader that believes in a continuous improvement approach to all of our educational practices. My new diverse leadership cabinet and I will work collaboratively with the DPI employees to listen and support them in this transition. Our goal is to understand best their roles and responsibilities as well as their challenges. This leadership coaching process will also include how we can best support all team members as a part of the new DPI professional learning community that will become equity champions. I believe that feedback on what the DPI staff have done is essential and plays a decisive role in determining our collective future. As a "professional learning community," we will first ask ourselves without blame or judgment, "Why, for the past ten years do our black and brown children have the worst achievement gaps in the country? (according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress testing and a recent DPI presentation). Then we will work collaboratively to create coherence and a shared understanding of the most urgent needs with an aligned, laser-focused, and comprehensive approach to improving student achievement. For years, we have had too many moving targets

with too many initiatives and unfunded mandates to focus on what matters. Using a new equitable review process of achievement data, we will identify the root causes, the needs, and continuous learning cycle of improvement to measure what matters. We will communicate our goals and commit to full transparency to all those we serve across the state. We will ask ourselves every day, "How are the children?" We will become a mission-driven world-class education system that is responsive, reflective, and willing to do whatever it takes to help all children succeed in post-secondary success by developing strategic actions and processes. This will be our new target with clarity, on-going improvement cycles, accountability, and frequent communication to all stakeholders. We will focus on executing our organizational aims and strategic priorities and, most importantly, learning from our progress. This type of collaborative culture with transparent execution is an unbeatable combination in building capacity across all new DPI teams for learning and impact across the organization to serve our stakeholders better. To prepare for this transition, I have interviewed many DPI staff members and talked with DPI cabinet members so that I am ready to take on the transition the day after the election. We do not have any more time to waste when it comes to better serving our kids and eliminating the marginalization and barriers preventing them from achieving at high levels.

Urban and rural districts have similar challenges. The majority of our school districts in Wisconsin and across the nation are rural and less than 1600 students. My first superintendency was at Wilmot Grade School. A 150 student K-8th grade school next to the fairgrounds and a block away from Wilmot High School in Western Kenosha County. I was the superintendent, business manager, principal, curriculum director, and shoveled snow when needed. I know that our rural school leaders are committed to their school communities and wear many hats in their leadership roles. The success in my role as a rural educator and leader is the openness to partnerships, consortiums, shared staffing, recruiting retired teachers, parent volunteers, and any university or college that wanted to have a great learning experience to spend time in my rural schools. In one of my schools, I did not have a nurse. I was able to get university nursing students to conduct vision and hearing exams. It's about leveraging the support of various CESA's as well to serve rural students best. We also used internships to get the cream of the crop student teachers, which allowed them a small stipend in exchange for teaching experience and being mentored by a master teacher. Several of the interns I supervised become teachers in our rural school.

Many people do not realize that there are similar challenges for rural and urban schools to serve children well. Poverty and mobility hit rural areas just as hard as the inner urban centers. Some people are only one life catastrophe away from significant needs and financial challenges. COVID-19 has exacerbated these inequities now more than ever, and we need to ensure our rural schools have the resources they need to educate their students. Full broadband internet access was undoubtedly an issue for many of our rural communities. No amount of sparsity aid is going to solve this problem. I would advocate at the federal level for increased flexibility for the use of Erate, connectivity, and other funds to support the regional support of additional fiber that needs to be in place to future proof all of our rural schools and libraries. We can eliminate the digital divide and access to robust internet through partnerships with local libraries, colleges, universities, and business partners, especially in rural areas and under-represented communities. Internet access is a necessity for life - just like food, water, and electricity. Other states have leveraged partnerships to make this happen - I will do the same.

I also believe that we could better support the rural educators and school districts to establish a stabilizing baseline funding for all students in rural areas - this is equity in action, giving communities what they need. I also want to appoint a member of my leadership cabinet with rural school experience to have a voice at the table where high-level decisions are being made. Rural school communities need to have a say in educating their students and should also be involved in the DPI budgeting process. One size does not fit all. Some of our rural districts are the most innovative schools in our state, and we should recognize their leadership in this area. We should celebrate their ability to make systematic changes much quicker than our larger organizations. The pandemic has shown us that the internet is necessary not only for education but also for rural community members to run their business and get excellent telehealthcare when the nearest hospital is over fifty miles away. I will advocate for the expansion of robust internet for rural areas with the Department of Administration, the Universal Services ERate Committee, and the new President as our AASA is already working with the new administration on this crucial issue.

3. Wisconsin's per-pupil spending has declined from 12th highest in the nation (11% above the national average) to 24th highest in the country (2.6% below the national average).

a) Do you believe that the decline in resources has impacted educational outcomes in our state? How?

We all have had to make difficult financial choices and do more with less. Yes, a decline in resources has impacted all school communities across the state, especially our most underrepresented children. Coupled with a teacher shortage, rising costs of serving children with disabilities, and dealing with increasing mental health needs of students and staff, school districts have had to write grants, secure funding from community partners, and realign budget priorities to balance their budgets. Some districts passed operational referendums to deal with these shortcomings. However, this approach is not sustainable. We need to collaborate in more meaningful ways with our legislative leaders to understand our communities' needs best and prioritize the support needed for resources with specific outcomes for better results.

b) How would you predict that this decline is likely to impact educational outcomes in the future?

States across the nation are dealing with the pandemic's consequences regarding the lack of revenues to support state budgets. Unemployment is on the rise, and many parents have had to quit their jobs to support their children in virtual learning. We will be on the road to recovery for many years unless we come up with a statewide plan for schools to reopen safely now. Every aspect of our lives will be impacted if we don't invest in education.

4. How can we balance taxpayer concerns with educational needs?

We all have to be great stewards of taxpayer dollars. I believe it is essential to allow all stakeholders to have a voice in budget development on the local and state level. We need to communicate our students' needs across the state to serve rural, suburban, and urban school districts equitably. Our schools should not have to rely solely on taxpayers to fund our schools. We need to do a better job of communicating the importance of education, revere our teachers and educators, and how we are going to promise that every student will attain an excellent education. Our promise will be a renewed commitment to our learners that every child will be known by name, strengths, passion, need, and be ready for career and college. This promise will be personalized at every school/district to reinforce our students' expectations 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 universities.

5. What changes, if any, would you propose in the school voucher program? How have the policies of the Department of Education under Betsy DeVos affected school policy and achievement in Wisconsin?

This issue is one that has deeply divided us. I believe in ONE system of accountability, full transparency, and equitable access for all Wisconsin's taxpayer-funded schools. My unique cross-sector background and experiences also lend well to us coming together to serve all children well. I am parochial school educated, taught in a private school, created a 4K charter school, and have dedicated the last 34 years of my career in public schools. I want to learn and work with all education sectors to create a world-class education system in Wisconsin. High tides raise all boats.

The pandemic has intensified and shined a spotlight on inequities all across rural, suburban and urban districts. We have known about these inequities for many years with little change. As we move forward into the 2020-21 school year, there is great urgency to address the nation's largest achievement gaps and the harmful impact of COVID-19 on students and school communities, particularly those most vulnerable. Our focus and resources must be on addressing these inequities. This issue has been legislated through law. Suppose we are going to become champions of equity for all students. In that case, we must work together, on behalf of all students, to improve literacy, close gaps, ensure equitable resources and support while also mitigating learning loss and addressing social and emotional needs exacerbated by the pandemic. Education is a nonpartisan matter as

each child is deserving! We must stay focused on equity, anti-racism, and social justice to improve all students' academic achievement and close achievement gaps in Wisconsin. I would work with all stakeholders involved to determine how to accomplish accountability and transparency best using state school report cards or other means of assessments that measure college and career readiness for all students.

Regardless of the quality of education, a school district can provide, we will never adequately prepare students for opportunities in a globally interconnected world if we ignore the inequities in our educational system. I believe we need to care for and serve the welfare of all children. As the State's Chief Education Officer, I will always advocate as a "Champion of Excellence and Equity" for all kids.

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The recent Department of Education Secretary's policies has started to be dismantled by the new Biden administration. She was not an experienced practitioner of education. One of the areas of criticism of her work was the Title IX sexual misconduct rules that provided more protection for the accused instead of the victim. This past fall, she also threatened the distribution of federal funds to schools if they did not open. She also advocated for parents to have the freedom, the choices, and tax-payer funds to follow children going to non-public schools. I believe the next Secretary of Education, Dr. Miguel Cordona, will provide a more balanced approach to equity in working with all children and families to provide quality education. We need to come together to address persistent achievement gaps, offer more early learning opportunities, and raise teachers' profiles.

6. Why has it been so difficult to reduce the gap between minority and white achievement? What changes need to be made if we are serious about reducing the achievement gap?

With the largest achievement gaps in the country growing due to COVID-19, there is great urgency to invest in promising practices that can be found both at a state and national level. The Blue Ribbon work is just the beginning of the efforts needed to address the current inadequacy and inequity in school finance. Even though the Wisconsin school funding is lauded across the country as one of the best in social justice and equity, it's challenging to change the formula without creating winners and losers. However, perhaps there are some creative ways to adjust the funding formula to stabilize all of Wisconsin's public K-12 schools. With COVID-19, per-pupil adjustments must also be made to hold school districts harmless while dealing with significant enrollment shifts many communities experienced this fall. Schools across the country are dealing with declining enrollment and, in some cases, have hired staff to find their previously enrolled students.

Also, the 2018 Blue Ribbon Task Force recommendations were enacted only in part, and a more serious effort should be made to address the solutions, such as funding the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) at 60% as the Task Force brought forth. However, legislators are unlikely to dedicate more funding to schools when they do not perceive that additional funding to be worth the investment. For years, the State Superintendent's voice has been limited in the State Capitol's halls due to a longstanding, broken relationship and misunderstanding about educational priorities. It's time to begin the serious work of collaboration and garner respect for both the State Superintendent and DPI's role. It's time to show them what we can do: raise achievement for all students AND close achievement gaps. It will be hard to argue against additional funding if we can deliver it will be well-spent and improve outcomes. From day one, I would work diligently to amplify the State Superintendent's voice as a reasonable and strong advocate for all students. The State Superintendent's voice should be welcomed in the legislature's halls, and I believe that I can work with both sides of the aisle to unite our efforts for the children and families of Wisconsin.

7. When the pandemic is finally over, what actions should we take to help our children catch up on what they have missed -- especially those who lack broadband access, computers, and/or adults who lack the education and/or time to become teachers-on-the-fly?

COVID-19 has paralyzed the world, our way of life, and how we approach our work. Our students have suffered long enough, especially those students of color and from underrepresented communities. This New Year is the opportunity to recover from this pandemic. We need to get our kids back to in-person instruction to save our public schools as our kids are falling behind. Our district and school educational leaders are prepared to return to school. We not only need to get back to educating our children face-to-face; we need meaningful leadership now. We need a statewide recovery plan to address significant learning loss and inequities that have been exacerbated by this pandemic, such as full internet access, tech devices, and food insecurity. School boards, superintendents, and district leaders across the state have been planning for school reentry since our schools were closed last spring. They are ready to ensure that schools are safe, health protocols are in place, and staff has the resources and support they need to mitigate this disease's risk for themselves and their students. We are at a crisis point in our public schools if we do not return to educating students in person. The data reveals that many schools have declining enrollments across Wisconsin, and 4K & 5K students have not shown up in virtual school programs. There are significant teacher shortages, and there is no clear recovery plan to ensure every student's success. Other states across America have recovery and beyond plans that guide and support their educators and school leaders. We need a call to action for a statewide reinforced safety and accelerated learning recovery plan that addresses our children's social and emotional needs. To achieve excellence through equity after this pandemic requires focused leadership and innovative strategies. We need to get back to business: teaching our children in our schools. This will take persistence, not perfection, and a collaborative approach.

COVID-19 is not going away anytime soon despite the hopeful distribution of vaccines. However, we can safely return to school with evidence-based medical and accelerated learning approaches. Recovery from the pandemic will require a framework for safe reentry to our schools and improving virtual learning as some students thrived in this format. Here's an example of what a statewide plan could entail, allowing for each district to personalize the recovery plan for their students, staff, and school community.

- 1) Develop a stakeholder communication plan with school-based health and safety precautions and how each district will mitigate the disease's risk. Ensure personnel safety through ongoing collaboration and communication between administrators, building leaders, staff members, health services, and health departments. Staff should have adequate PPE along with safety training and clear expectations for student and staff safety protocols.
- 2) Start with elementary students going back to live instruction, then a gradual release to/from hybrid models for middle and high school students, and then live teaching in all schools.
- 3) Provide parents and caregivers with choices on how to serve their children best moving forward - whether in-person, virtual or a hybrid approach. Parents will always have the final say about what's best for their child and where to send their children to school.
- 4) Support teachers with quality professional development that addresses their mental health and well-being and best practices to address student learning loss.
- 5) 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.
- 6) Use evidence-based acceleration practices to identify learning loss for all students, prioritize grade-level content, and target interventions to start growth in specified essential standards.
- 7) Start planning for modified school calendars that may require learning opportunities through the summer, evenings, and weekends.
- 8) Create innovative school partnerships with community foundations, 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.
- 9) Work collaboratively with policymakers to support state and federal funding resources to accelerate learning, support training for educators, and recover safely from the pandemic.
- 10) Celebrate our school communities' success all along the way as we work together to ensure our students receive the education they all deserve.

8. What is your position on police presence in our schools?

As a teacher, teacher leader, and administrator, there has been an intentional positive relationship with local police departments in my public school experiences. Police presence has included teaching the D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program to upper elementary students to develop relationships with our local officers. D.A.R.E. is a nation-wide program that involves police officers coming into schools and teaching students about the dangers of drugs, alcohol, and violence. Police presence serves to support the social-emotional growth of our students at the same time providing additional security and expertise for safety. Police officers were always in plain clothes if working in schools daily. Their role was to support school staff in working with all kids, not a disciplinarian. In Brown Deer, this was not a punitive role but one of support and developmental growth. The school liaison officer went into classrooms to teach health and safety, encourage students to pursue police work as a future career, and participated in all school events as a staff member, not security. This visible presence created opportunities for the students, parents, staff, and administration to be seen as part of a working team supporting our schools' mission. I support police presence in our schools using this approach. What used to keep administrators up at night was an active shooter getting into our schools to harm our students and staff. School leaders have always had to operate, keeping the health and safety of all in their work. Now we are fighting a pandemic that puts all of us at risk. How to recover and safely re-enter our schools is what keeps us up at night. Safe school reentry needs to be our #1 priority. We have the immense responsibility to safely reopen our schools to mitigate the long-term educational efforts of lost learning and what changes need to be made to serve our students and families better.