

SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION CANDIDATE QUESTIONS 2021 ELECTION

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?** The intention of public education is for democracy to thrive. A well-informed citizenry is the intention — so that they can ensure that democratic principles continue in our republic: to elect responsible individuals to the leadership roles in the executive and legislative branches of not just the federal government, but also our state government (the basics of federalism), and that we can also have an independent judiciary that can make impartial decisions without fear of repercussion. Our society at large depends on a well-educated public: one that can keep our economy working well, where innovation can continue to grow, and that our public universities and public schools are well funded by our public tax dollars, and that our roads and parks and public services can continue to operate because people pay their taxes — all for the public good. The broad policy implications of the role of public education is to ensure that there is always a strong public option for public schools — that no matter a person's background, immigrant status, language, ability, or zipcode — they will receive a top-notch public education, receive the assistance they need, the guidance, the ability to be challenged, to grow, to learn to live among and appreciate diversity of humanity and thoughts, so that they can continue those democratic principles; so those democratic principles survive and stay healthy, and maybe even evolve.
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?**
 - a. The first thing is to make DPI more effective by getting a more diverse staff — not just in appearances, but in background and experiences.
 - b. The second is getting more diversity around the table when we're crafting policies and decisions. Most notably, the perspective of teachers has been left out of the conversation; parents are another group, and special education advocates too. When we're developing policies and going to hearings, we need more voices to testify that bring the full perspective. Other groups like the school choice lobby, are very effective at this — and have no problems bringing their students to hearings to testify or stand in solidarity with whomever is providing testimony.
 - c. The third piece is communication — when we're shaping policy and getting feedback, hardly anyone ever knows about it. The communication piece has been my biggest concern with DPI and I feel that it can be more robust and more transparent with our stakeholders throughout the state (not just parents, but with the public at-large). Wisconsinites, even those without children in schools, need to understand why good public schools are necessary and how it impacts them directly and indirectly.

DPI needs an office or a cabinet level position for an Equity Officer. The other cabinet level positions needed, and perhaps this can be accomplished through an internal reorganization is Rural Education and Urban Education. Yes, there are certainly differing needs between rural and urban, but there is so much similarity too. Rural and urban school districts have similar concerns with crumbling infrastructure/aging buildings, high speed internet access, declining student enrollment, teachers shortages, teacher recruitment and retention, and low-revenue limits/school funding formula concerns. We also have larger minority populations, special needs expenditures in relation to our overall expenditures, and we have higher poverty in relation to other school districts in the state. We can focus on the things that bind us together: a strong library system, a UW System that does a nice job of educating our future teachers, and strong parent and community organizations. And we can work together to solve the issues that are so similar. When we work together on these problems,

rather than focus on what makes us different, we can be more innovative and have a higher success rate achieving positive outcomes for our students. From there, these offices of Equity, Rural and Urban Education, can work together — communicate solutions, provide technical assistance, and training, and work with the legislature to advocate for the resources and policies needed to accomplish these concerns.

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

a) **Do you believe that the decline in resources has impacted educational outcomes in our state? How?** Yes. It’s been slight, but there are a few things to keep in mind. The first is that the outcomes haven’t fallen more dramatically due to the fact that we have dedicated teachers and administrators who are working under lower pay and higher stress conditions than their peers in other states. We can’t continue to operate on their good will or at the expense of them being able to support their families. So we need to increase our per-pupil spending and put it in our biggest expenditure: salaries/personnel. In rural and urban districts alike, teachers are stretched thin and administrators are wearing multiple hats — and they are the glue that keep this together, and it’s unacceptable that they are exploited this way. We need to fix our school funding formula so that the financial resources go to the schools that need it the most — the highest poverty schools, for example, and we have to agree on a base amount of funding for teaching positions and administration, otherwise our talent will leave Wisconsin and go to other states where they can pursue their professional passion and have fulfilling, family-sustaining careers.

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

Again, we need to fix our school funding formula instead of watering down licensing requirements to attract more people into teaching. We need to work with our colleges and schools of education to ensure that we have a highly-trained teaching force of our best and most talented professionals for both teaching and administration, and we also need to pay them what they are worth. Otherwise we won’t have the right people in these positions and Wisconsin will sink to the ranks of some of the worst states for public education, and parents who have the access or the means will take their kids out of public schools and enroll them in private schools. The private school share of tax dollars will grow as there is more choice, and eventually we won’t have a strong system of public schools. If we don’t have talented and passionate teachers and administrators, public school students will not be able to compete in a competitive global marketplace, nor understand the democratic principles of what makes our republic function.

4. **How can we balance taxpayer concerns with educational needs?** A lot of it is messaging, in my opinion. I think that different lobbies have been masterful at painting public schools as dangerous, corrupt, “failing,” wasteful, and protective of bad teachers (for example). This has strengthened the argument for school choice. I think that in Wisconsin, taxpayers are acutely aware that a good portion of their tax bill goes to support public schools. And in 2011, with ACT 10, the legislature was successful again at demonizing public school/public employees as “fat cats” because they were compensated well in their supplemental benefits like health care and retirement, and failed to mention that teacher pay lagged behind other states as a result. I also think that we need to positive message public schools — and I would argue that DPI needs to take control of that narrative. Working with partners like WPEN, WASB, WEAC, and other groups like WIRSA, WASDA — we could easily develop a positive narrative that sets the table for what public schools do for our communities and our society. If we invested fully

in K-12 education and in higher education, the long term impacts on society, our health, our earning power, in addition to business innovation and entrepreneurship, would be more than significant, and transformative. If taxpayers knew that Wisconsin has shifted the burden of paying for public schools from promising 2/3rds funding to where now many smaller declining enrollment districts are paying 50% or more in school taxes, they might feel differently about their dollars going to public education. I also think there needs to be more transparency to taxpayers about how private school vouchers are funded, and that even though they may not have a voucher school in their boundaries, they are still likely paying for that school voucher.

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?** I am not in support of expanding the voucher program and I would work hard at DPI to make sure that it isn't expanded further. I would enforce the laws as they are, but I would also be active in initiating changes — including the changes to Title IX that DeVos implemented at the DOE. If there will be no changes to the federal dollars going into private schools, which also increased under DeVos, I would work with the legislature to strengthen transparency and accountability for public dollars spent in or shared with private schools. I feel that the vast majority of Wisconsinites have no idea how many public dollars are spent in voucher programs in Wisconsin, and I would work to spotlight that and how that correlates to a decline in public school spending in our schools.

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?** There is a lot of history in our society with racist policies that have prevented people of color from acquiring equality and equity in many aspects that impact academic achievement. For example, red-lining, policing — these are things outside of the school's control, but they impact the day-to-day life of children of color and minority students. Of the things that we can control, the number one impact on student achievement, once they are in our schools, is "teacher efficacy." This is the collective belief that teachers themselves, together, believe they can positively impact student achievement. How does one get there? A lot of it has to do with teacher training and ongoing professional development and support. Collective teacher efficacy is about having higher expectations which then also leads into producing higher student achievement. I strongly believe we need a diverse teaching force in Wisconsin — not just in race and color, but also in socio-economic backgrounds, in gender, and learning style. If we are serious about reducing and eliminating the achievement gap we need to work with our school and colleges of education on the recruitment of diverse teachers, and then also work on instructional coaching, and providing support in our schools for our teachers to believe that collectively they can offer a challenging and rigorous educational experience, that sets goals for student learnings, provides intervention and support for those student learners, and also provides accountability for that learning. This means that if a student isn't meeting the benchmarks, teachers need to work together to do whatever it takes to find the combination of skills and instruction that allows students to progress. I think we can work together with our CESAs particularly in literacy, to work through a comprehensive literacy framework that we can use statewide.

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?**

It's important to note that these challenges existed before the pandemic and now have been exacerbated. There are three components to this:

(1) Invest and reinvest in our schools through stimulus dollars so that we can get the resources needed into our schools.

(2) Assess: we need to assess each child and determine where their needs are both socio-emotionally and academically, and then plan through personalized learning for a pathway to academic recovery or academic growth.

(3): Recovery. We need to work extra-hard to get our kids fully recovered from the pandemic, which is arguably the greatest challenge of both their personal lives and our professional lives. Not everyone is going to come out of this the same. The school districts that were in good financial shape and well-resourced before this pandemic, and the communities where children were not living in poverty — they are going to be just fine. It's the kids who are the most-vulnerable already (the ones with learning needs, behavior needs, language needs, or the ones that were already disengaged from schooling). We need a statewide broadband and high speed wireless plan modeled after the legislation that electrified and brought telephone to rural America in 1936, for example. We need to stop playing politics with issues that we can seriously work together on and figure out together. The other aspect is resources: we need financial resources to provide technology to children and staff, and we need resources to hire more staff to work with our kids. We may not have fully licensed teachers, but we can still hire people as assistants and train them to work with children if they don't have experience working with children. We can also work within the rules that already exist for teacher licensing to get people licensed as teachers who come from other professions. But it's an expensive endeavor with all the bureaucratic hoops and standardized tests - that I would like to see eliminated for all pre-service educators.

8. **What is your position on police presence in our schools?** I don't think that police need a permanent presence in our school. My stand on this is that I would prefer to work on early interventions and invest in kids early on — in early childhood programming, after-school and wrap-around care for children, mental health/dental health, food security, and in high quality summer programming for enrichment, rather than pay for criminal justice support when children are older. I think that investing early, on the front-end of their lives, will save the taxpayers money by building our communities up, and ensuring that we disrupt the systems of inequity that plague our highest-poverty schools. Let's invest that funding into more social workers, school counselors, lower student to teacher ratios, and nurses, rather than for police in our schools.