

Leading with Empathy

State Superintendent **Tony Evers** talks about success and challenges facing public education in Wisconsin

With about 40 years in public education, State Superintendent Tony Evers has a lot of experience. But he also understands that experience doesn't carry much weight if you don't also have empathy.

"Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care," Evers said, quoting President Teddy Roosevelt.

Evers talked about the important work of connecting with teachers and students and telling their stories and sharing their good work.

"I can tell you the best part of my job is visiting schools and meeting kids, educators, school leaders, and families in every part of our state," Evers said. "As I sat down to reflect on the past year, I can say I have

never once been disappointed in the dedication of our educators or the engagement of our kids."

For the past six years, the state has been focused on Agenda 2017, which is working on raising college and career readiness standards, updating the state assessment from a paper and pencil test to an online assessment, and defining teacher and administrator standards.

While Evers is proud of the progress that has been made in these areas, he is even more proud of the effects the work has had on students. Since work began on Agenda 2017 during the 2009-10 school year, the state has seen an improvement in the graduation rate, especially for students of color, students with disabilities, and



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students who are economically disadvantaged. Additionally, Evers said, fewer students are dropping out of high school. Fewer are being suspended or expelled, and, among other positive trends, more students are receiving college credit for coursework they do in high school.

Evers also talked about some of the challenges facing public education in the state, including school funding and the achievement gap.

"The need and opportunity for real school finance reform has never been more evident," he said. "We are becoming a state of haves and have nots."

Addressing the fact that Wisconsin has some of the largest achievement gaps in the nation, Evers said the state's efforts to help close those gaps includes the work of the Promoting Excellence for All Task Force, and a \$5.25 million research grant to study classroom practices.

"There's no 'just one thing' that works, and talking about kids helps remind us why we need a multi-faceted approach to tackling this civil rights issue," Evers said. ■

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