

THE ACTIVIST STATE SUPERINTEDENT

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This month's spotlight highlights Wisconsin State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster's work as an advocate for a high quality universal 4 year-old kindergarten to bridge the achievement gap in her state. Burmaster is a member of the Council of Chief State School Officer's Cadre of Champions, a cadre that serves as national, regional, and state spokespersons for expanded quality and access to preschool education.

As far back as 1848, education has been a priority in Wisconsin. Wisconsin's Constitution made a commitment to its citizens that schools should be uniform as practical and free to all children from age four through age twenty. Wisconsin's commitment to education is evident in their schools today. This year, for the seventh consecutive year, Wisconsin students scored an average composite score of 22.2, the highest national average score on the ACT college entrance exam. Wisconsin has the nation's highest percentage of highly qualified teachers with nearly 99%¹ of its teachers deemed highly qualified. Finally at 2.6%,² Wisconsin has the lowest dropout rate in the nation.

While many Wisconsin students face bright futures, there are students who fall through the system. A closer look at Wiscon-

sin's ACT score shows the achievement gap, where statewide, white students had an average composite score of 22.5 and African American students scored 17.1. Most recently, the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP) scores revealed that while Wisconsin scored above the national average in reading and math and among the highest 8th grade scores in the nation, Wisconsin had the largest gap between white and black eighth grade students in the nation. Wisconsin's school system has been referred to as the Tale of Two



*Wisconsin State Superintendent
Elizabeth Burmaster*

School Systems: the Milwaukee Public School system and the rest of the state. Milwaukee has more dropouts than any other district in Wisconsin. Tackling the achievement disparity is at the top of the agenda for Wisconsin's highest level educator. Elizabeth "Libby" Burmaster, Wisconsin's State Superintendent, has vowed to make closing the achievement gap between racial groups and income disparities her number one priority during her administration. In Burmaster's "New Wisconsin Promise," she has committed to ensure the opportunity of a quality education for every child.

Burmaster comes into the office of state superintendent with a background as a music teacher, arts coordinator, and principal. She has been a teacher and a principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels --

¹ In a study of teacher qualifications, the Associated Press reported that 98.6% of Wisconsin teachers meet the standards for being "highly qualified" under No Child Left Behind.

² From the National Center for Education Statistics. This dropout rate reflects the dropout rate for 1998-1999 school year.

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experiences that have shaped her policies and priorities as state superintendent. According to Jill Haglund, the early childhood specialist at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Burmester understands the comprehensive approach to education, including the academic and arts components of education. “[Burmester] has a good understanding of all ages of children and how children function at all levels,” Haglund said. She also added that Burmester’s past experiences working with diverse populations contributes to her strong understanding of children from all backgrounds and socio-economic status and the importance of early education and family involvement in closing the achievement gap.

Education runs deep in Burmester’s family. Both of Burmester’s grandmothers were teachers, and her mother was also a music teacher. “Teaching was considered to be a noble profession in my family,” Burmester said. She combined her love of music and heritage of teaching into a music education degree and later an administration master’s degree at the University of Wisconsin– Madison. While teaching music and drama at elementary school and secondary school levels, she directed over a dozen plays and musicals. Teaching the arts shaped Burmester’s view on student learning. The same students who were described as unengaged and unenthusiastic by their academic subject teachers were eager to learn and to discuss difficult issues such as race and class issues through the arts. The arts provided a hands-on, interactive learning experience for students, and consequently, the students performed well in her class. Observing these students succeed in the arts, Burmester became committed in her belief that students who are engaged in learning can succeed

in school.

One of Burmester’s top priorities as state superintendent is to provide quality early learning opportunities for young children. She views the early years in a child’s life as a critical learning time and believes that a high quality preschool can significantly reduce the achievement gap between students of color and economically disadvantaged students and their peers. Burmester’s position reflects the research that shows that a high quality preschool program can be a powerful tool to reduce the disparate levels of school readiness between children, especially children from high-risk groups, when they enter kindergarten (Lee & Burkam, 2002). Burmester’s experiences both as a kindergarten music teacher and raising three of her own children has also shaped her views on early learning. “As a parent and a kindergarten teacher, I saw how important the early years are,” she stated. While teaching kindergarten in a school with predominantly low-income students, Burmester saw firsthand that the achievement gap starts as early as kindergarten. In her own family, she saw that her children were unique in their developmental needs. She recognized that in order to thrive, children had an entire range of developmental needs including good nutrition and development in cognitive, social, and emotional areas.

After establishing a solid resume at the classroom level, Burmester took on the next challenge of serving as an administrator in elementary, middle, and high schools. Burmester most recently served as principal at Madison West High School, commonly referred to as West, one of Wisconsin’s largest high schools and considered the jewel of the public school system due to the high number of National

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Merit Scholars it produces and its successful athletic program. Many of the challenges of Wisconsin's public education system as a whole are reflected in the microcosm of West. While the school was successful at educating middle class white students, the school was under criticism from the parents of black students for the challenges their children faced in high school and the lack of help they received from the teaching staff. West was also considered to be a difficult school to manage due to a racially and economically polarized student body and vocal and demanding parent groups.

Burmester instituted changes aimed at reducing racism, classism, and sexism at West. When Burmester assumed the leadership of West, she was the first new principal in twenty-one years and the first female principal in the school's history. Initially, she faced resistance from the students and parents who were reluctant to support her proposed changes. Ever committed to her principles, Burmester required the school's history department to offer an African-American experience course as an option for students' U.S. History credit, confronted instances of racism in the school paper, and prohibited sexually explicit remarks in school productions. Burmester slowly won the respect of even her toughest critics who after a few years acknowledged that she was a good principal who faced difficult situations and pressures from students, parents, and district administrators.

After nine years as principal of West

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High School, Burmester was elected Wisconsin State Superintendent in 2001. She outlined her vision for Wisconsin in the New Wisconsin Promise. The New Wisconsin Promise calls for Wisconsin citizens to share in the goal of serving every child with a quality education and closing the achievement gap. In a 2001 speech she stated, “[t]o have an educational struggle linked to poverty or race is unacceptable, and we must come together as communities to lift all children up to their dreams. Investing in 4K and small class sizes are two ways we can accomplish this.”³ Since taking office, Burmester has been an activist for early education in a state with a long history of educating its youngest citizens. The first kindergarten in America opened in Wauwatertown, Wisconsin in 1856 and the first public school kindergarten in Manitowoc, Wisconsin opened in 1873.

Today, Wisconsin 4-Year-Old Kindergarten (4K) is operated by the public school districts and currently serves 16,000 students in 178 districts. In a state that has 426 school districts, this leaves greater room for program expansion. Interest in providing a 4K program is growing across the state, and currently 60 districts are actively looking to participate in the 4K program. 4K is considered a universal program because all 4-year-olds living in the districts that offer 4K attend the program for free. In fiscal year 2003, 4K was funded at \$43 million.

Wisconsin's long history of kindergarten

³Burmester, Elizabeth. (August 26, 2001). Back to school; Education issues to brush up on; Look beyond political rhetoric. Crosswords Sunday Edition pg. 01J.

does not necessarily protect the 4K program from the danger of severe cuts in the state budget, and the legislature has even proposed elimination of 4K. State funding for 4K is critical in areas such as the Milwaukee Public School (MPS) System because without state funding, they would most likely not be able to afford the program. MPS's property value is about half the state average and raising taxes to pay for 4K in these districts would not be sufficient to pay for the \$18 million necessary to operate 4K. Currently, an estimated one-third of the students who are enrolled in the 4K program are in MPS.

Since her first year in office, the Wisconsin legislature has either proposed to drastically cut funding for 4K or to eliminate 4K altogether. Through media outlets such as news conferences and op-eds, Burmaster publicly opposed the spending cuts proposed by the legislature and rallied public support for 4K by creating increased awareness of the importance of 4K. This past year, the Wisconsin's Assembly Speaker's State Budget Review Task Force recommended the elimination of 4K. Burmaster was vocal in her opposition against the task force's recommendation. In a March 21 op-ed article she wrote, "[W]e must not allow legislative leaders to eliminate our investment in four-year old kindergarten in Wisconsin...As your state superintendent, I will be working with Governor Doyle and the legislature, both Democrats and Republicans, to make sure that we prioritize in these tough times and continue to invest in early childhood opportunities."⁴ According to Burmaster, building support from the community involves both private and public collaborations around child-care and four-year-old kindergarten. She believes that local support, the brain research that demonstrates the power of early learning, and the research on the cost benefits of preschool make legislators pay attention to the importance of preschool education. This year, the governor vetoed the cuts for 4K

and in a year with a \$3.2 billion deficit, public schools funds were increased by \$189 million. In addition, funding for 4-year old kindergarten was maintained.

Burmaster is currently involved in several initiatives and collaborations with diverse partners to create a seamless system of quality education in Wisconsin. She co-chairs the Wisconsin pK-16 Leadership Council, a broad coalition of representatives from industry, labor, and government that focuses on early childhood education, transition from high school to college, and staff professional development. She has also advised Governor Doyle on the formation of the Governor's Task Force on Education Excellence, a task force designed to examine Wisconsin's system of financing education, including investing in early education. On the national level, Burmaster is a member of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Cadre of Champions for a high quality universal preschool. This Cadre of state superintendents and commissioners of education serve as national, regional, and state spokespersons for expanded quality and access to early childhood education. In addition, she is a newly elected director of CCSSO's board of directors and the chair of the CCSSO's Task Force on Early Education.

With all that is going right in Wisconsin's public schools, Burmaster believes there is still progress to be made. "I am very proud of all our successes. But we are responsible for the success of all our children," Burmaster said. Wisconsin students have an activist state superintendent who will not rest until all children have the opportunity to succeed, a true champion in their corner advocating for them from start to finish.

⁴Excerpt from Burmaster's op-ed "State's early kindergarten students reap many rewards" printed on March 16, 2003 in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

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