

**Final Eau Claire Testimony for Speaker's Task Force on Urban Education
Tuesday, February 2, 2016**

Good afternoon, Chair Representative Jessie Rodriguez & Committee Members

My name is Dr. Deb Kerr, Superintendent of the Brown Deer School District. I have been a Superintendent for 16 years and an educator for over 36 years with a wide range of experiences in parochial, private and public schools. On behalf of the students, families and staff that I serve, I thank you for this opportunity to share our strategies for closing the achievement gap in our schools. This Gordian knot of a problem will take our collective wisdom to build capacity for ALL of our school communities, revere our teachers, and engage every possible partnership to eliminate the "gaps of time and opportunities" for our students in WI.

Brown Deer is a first tier suburb of Milwaukee and one of the most diverse districts in the state serving 70% students of color with a growing population of poverty close to 43%. We employ 140 committed and dedicated teachers. The Brown Deer School District has made tremendous strides in closing the achievement gap and graduation gap of our diverse student population. Our majority-minority district of African Americans has one of the best graduation rates across the state if not the best at 98.6%. We have been able to accomplish this and close gaps with leadership from our school board and hard work and commitment of our students, teachers, staff, and Brown Deer community doing whatever it takes to help all children achieve. It truly does take a Village approach.

Closing the Achievement Gap is not elusive but very complicated. Learning is individual and should be personal to each and every student. There are many factors that influence student achievement such as: poverty, mobility, changing family situations, trauma, mental health challenges to name a few - however, research has shown that all of these challenges can be overcome and not used as an excuse for poor performance. We could talk for hours about the many ways to close our achievement gaps however, I am here today to share some ideas that we have found to be effective in Brown Deer in our journey to serve each and every child.

- 1) **Acknowledgement & Acceptance - We must accept the fact that ALL schools have achievement gaps.** We must first recognize that even the highest performing schools have pronounced gaps. Achievement gaps are unacceptable in any school district. However, if we don't acknowledge the gaps between student subgroups, those economically disadvantaged or

those with special needs, then valuable resources are diverted to other initiatives. With whom a child resides or their zip code should not determine their educational outcomes for life.

- 2) **Growth Mindset - Starting with the approach - we must use a Growth Mindset** of accelerating learning for all students no matter what entry point they come to us. It takes teachers & staff accepting the students they have and helping them grow in both their academic and socioemotional development.
- 3) **Time & Opportunity** - All children can learn under the right conditions. Some of our children just need the simple gift of time to develop their skills, build confidence as a learner, and feel successful. Research shows that non-proficient students need an additional 15-20 minutes a day of direct instruction in a school year to advance one grade level. This is referred as “catch-up” growth or instruction personalized for each student. This requires additional resources of specialists, interventionists, or additional staff.
- 4) **Literacy has been the focus** in Brown Deer over the past nine years. I believe that we ALL can agree that ALL of our students need to be proficient readers. Reading to learn and reading for pleasure is the foundation to obtain knowledge & skills for a life-time. We were the first high school in the area to hire reading specialists and employ dedicated staff across the district and in each of our schools to lead this initiative. Intervention time is scheduled district-wide to allow an all “hands on deck” approach to accelerating students in their learning. Staff work in small groups to improve proficiency levels of all students.
- 5) **Early Childhood Experiences are Essential** - Brown Deer started their 4K program 8 years ago. Pre-school and readiness programs need to be available to ALL children not just to those who can afford to pay for them. We strive to eliminate the gap before it begins with quality early childhood learning experiences. Of the students that started our 4K program and have remained with us over the years, there are minimal gaps compared to students who have not had these early learning experiences. A world-famous study 30 Million Words (by researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995))found that some children heard thirty million fewer words by their 4th birthdays than others. The children who heard more words were better prepared when they entered school. These same kids, when followed into third grade, had bigger vocabularies, were stronger readers, and got higher test scores. Students who come from poverty often have this

deficit of millions of words. The bottom line: the kids who started out ahead, stayed ahead; the kids who started out behind, stayed behind. We need to address building capacity of ALL parents as their first teachers of their children.

- 6) **Character Education** - Promoting the values and virtues of good citizenship will never go out of style. Because non-cognitive skills are crucial to long-term academic and personal success, character development is a central component of our curriculum. We have transformed our school climate and culture by promoting respect, responsibility, honesty, integrity, even when no one is watching - this is the Brown Deer Way. Students and teachers design weekly lessons of character to co-teach with our staff. Development of great people skills is just as valuable of developing great learners.
- 7) **Engaged Professionals - We love our teachers and staff in Brown Deer** - Let's change the conversation about one of the most important jobs in our society - Revere our Teachers - we need to care and love them like our families. Quality teachers are the single most important strategy for closing the achievement gap. We are working with Deans of Colleges/Universities as we need teachers today - right now in the pipeline due to significant shortages. This is not only a challenge for WI but for the regional and in our country. Teaching is a valued profession in Brown Deer as it should be in all of our communities.
- Teachers have over 100 hours of Collaborative Professional Development/school year - teacher designed and teacher led
 - Students and teachers have longer school days and contact times - Teachers work 8.5 hours/day.
 - Summer school is required for those below grade level in reading and math. We provide accelerated opportunities for all students across the content areas and with enrichment classes. [Summer learning loss -Video](#) Please watch this video - a great visual on what this looks like for students who deal with poverty.

8) **Engaged Community**

Senior citizens in Brown Deer volunteer thousands of hours in our schools helping with every aspect of education - serving as mentors, reading helpers, greeters at main entrance, tutoring, Community members have talent and expertise - use them to help build and enhance our

communities. Engage with our clergy and congregations to support the ever changing needs of our families. We need to be able to support one another in this mission.

9) Partnerships - Garner support from your community and local businesses to support closing the achievement gap. 1000 Books before Kindergarten is a community program sponsored by our local library. Parents and caregivers are provided with book lists and materials to help them accomplish this lofty goal at any time in their child's development - birth to three. We are meeting with our local child care and wrap around service agencies to align expectations for behavior and academic progress. Our Education Foundation provides books and book bags to all 4K students to the district to show the value of reading books. Our students have built several "Little Free Libraries" for our school campus and stock those with reading materials for all age groups. Our middle school students are now building four more of these libraries for two housing developments in Brown Deer as these children need access to print materials.

10) Local Control - Provide school boards with the tools they need to support student learning in their communities. They understand best the context for learning in their neighborhoods. While the elimination of the 180 day school calendar requirement has created flexibility, we need to go further and create flexibility for school start date. Some of our students need to be engaged in learning activities year-round to prevent the summer learning loss. Juvenile crime rates would be reduced if students were engaged in school activities all throughout the calendar year. The tourism industry - multi-billion dollar industry can help us close the achievement gaps by allowing schools to have local control on when to have school and educate their future workers. This is about economic development and getting skilled workers into the workforce sooner - our high school are magnets for talent. Many parents in the Milwaukee area do not have the disposable income to take advantage of what tourism revenue brings to our state - let's work together to find some common ground that provides educational opportunities for our students year-round just like tourism provides a service our our citizens year round. With the advance of many technology resources students can now learn at anytime or anyplace. Our schools should never be closed. Open our schools every day to provide learning opportunities - partner with organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA, and other Youth Organizations that can help school districts to manage this.

11) Leadership across all sectors - I also serve as President of WASDA, the state professional organization for Wisconsin Superintendents. I represent the diverse views of our state leaders. One value we all agree upon is building capacity of all of our students, families, and citizens in our neighborhoods to help transform our communities. 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. Our students deserve the real-world experiences of working alongside people of many different cultures, races, and even income levels if we are going to transform education in WI. All of our communities have growing minority populations - we must not let diversity divide us but unite us.

In conclusion, as you all know, education is the great equalizer for our students and all of our citizens. Education is an essential element to the health and vitality of our communities as learning is a lifelong endeavor. Let's work together with the goal of improving existing and prevailing practices that are not serving us well. Change always starts with leadership and developing new ways for doing business.

It's simple - to close the achievement gap we need time and opportunities.

Thank you for leading this conversation across our state to better serve all children in Wisconsin. This is a conversation that is long overdue and I applaud your leadership and look forward to our continued work together to take action. Thank you for your time today.