**State Superintendent Forum Transcription**

Jennie M: Hi everybody I’m Jennie Mauer. I’m the executive director at Wisconsin Head Start Association and I am super, super excited, for this entire conference. But I’m really excited to be here with our two state superintendent candidates. This is an election that doesn’t necessarily generate as much turnout but I think it's one that I’ve really tried to convey to our membership that it is really important to our head start kiddos, families, programs, and all of our staff. I do see that a couple people might have to leave so I want to encourage you if you want to share your questions into the chat box. We have a smaller group so I think we’re really going to get to delve into things with the two candidates so please feel free to share your questions if you need to step out. Great! So, I had it up just a second ago. So the election is April 6th. I believe I already requested my absentee ballot. I want to encourage you on this call and to encourage the folks in your programs and your own families to make a plan for voting today. Think about what you need to do to get to the polls or get your absentee ballot and to be encouraging the families that are in your programs. One of the points of clarification I have gotten from the office of Head Start is that while you can’t use federal resources to get people to the polls it is certainly within your, the appropriate use of head start time to just be encouraging people to get out the vote. So definitely be sure to encourage people to get out for this election. So I am really, really happy that both candidates made time here to be with us today. So we have Dr. Deborah Kerr, sorry all I’m a little nervous, and Dr. Jill Underly. Kind of the way our format is going to go here today is I’ll just do some quick introductions and then I’ll give time for both candidates to share a little bit about who they are and what they’re hoping to do with this role and then I have a list of questions that I want to put out there and then also have time for all of you to ask questions and then to close out right around 5:15. So with that I’ll just do introductions of both of the candidates and we’ll get this party started. So our first candidate is Dr. Deborah Kerr. Dr. Kerr has worked in the field of education for over forty years. She was most recently the superintendent of the Brown Deer School District, which was a rival school district to mine as a kid. Prior to her 13 years at Brown Deer, she served as a middle school principal, a professor, an assistant principal, a health teacher, a coach, and an athletic director. She earned her doctorate of education leadership from the National Louis University and has a master of education from the University of Alaska Fairbanks and her bachelor of arts and science from Valparaiso. And when she’s not traveling the state virtually, sign of the times, Deb enjoys spending time with her husband and her black lab Rizzo. So welcome Dr. Kerr. We also have Dr. Jill Underly. Dr. Underly is currently the superintendent, and I gosh I can never pronounce this word, “Pecatonica”, Did I get it right?

Dr. Underly: Yes, nice!

Jennie M: Hazzah! The Pecatonica Area School District. Dr. Underly has over two decades of experience in public education, teaching in a classroom, a principal, a UW advisor, and also she worked at the Department of Public Instruction. Jill lives on a small farm in Southwestern Wisconsin with her husband, her two kids, and a handful of chickens. Two animal lovers here. So first to give remarks I want to invite Dr. Kerr to tell us a little bit about who she is.

Dr. Kerr: Thank you, Jennie M. And thank you everyone for hosting us today. And I just want to say hi to everybody. It's National Public Schools Week and I want to thank you all for all that you do to support our public education and our students. Our public schools are the heart of our democracy and so I want to thank you for your service and this opportunity to talk to you today. So, I’m going to share a little bit about why I’m running for Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction and why I have the unique qualifications and preparations that make me the most qualified for this position. I also want to talk to you a little bit about my plan moving forward and what that could look like and then how I’ve been a champion of early childhood education. So, thank you again. So, I have a vision to create a world-class education system that is the highest performing for the entire country because our kids deserve better. Right now our kids and families are not winning in Wisconsin and I hope we can create this promise to all of our families, and our parents, and our students that we will know each student by name, strength passion, and need as we create futures and opportunities for them to decide what they want to do in their futures. So, the first thing I would do as the state superintendent is I believe we need to get Wisconsin off the achievement gap list across the country. Wisconsin students have the worst achievement gap for ten years between black and white students and it also involves early literacy performance as well. And so this is embarrassing. It's reprehensible that our black and brown students aren’t performing and this has been a problem for many, many years. And I’m going to do this by looking at recreating a literacy roadmap that focuses on child development, early learning strategies of (inaudible) awareness and fluency in reading but it focuses on the science of reading to help our kids get evidence-based research and practice and assessments all aligned to getting better results. Right now, we have about 400 different ways of teaching reading in the state of Wisconsin and we need aligned practices, a curriculum that people can embrace along with any additional resources they might need to be successful. And we know that some students in some schools are doing a wonderful job so I’m not going to be asking them to change but I want to incentivize those schools who need some extra support because right now we are going in many different directions. Even our teacher preparation programs are not preparing our teaching to deal with the diverse needs of reading for our students, especially our black and brown students. So I want to talk to you also about my champion of being a champion for early childhood. So ever since I’ve been a superintendent, I’ve been focused on early childhood because we needed to stop the achievement gap before it even started. Or make sure our kids are prepared for when they enter our school. So I created and developed community based four-year-old kindergarten programs at both Wilmot Grade School and Brown Deer School District. And those programs were developed with task forces, local childcare providers, early childhood teachers, and special education staff. So in Brown Deer I started that in 2008. We started our program and I’m so excited, our first 4k class will be walking across the stage as seniors this year and what we have learned from those kids that are still with us is that they are above grade level, they’re attending school on a more regular basis and they are practicing in more school activities. So it is really exciting to see how that investment works in a child’s career long term. I’ve also created classrooms, both 4k and 5k students, in brown deer according to the national standards of early childhood. So we’re not talking about classrooms with 8000 square feet. We’re talking classrooms with 1200 square feet, especially with our 4k students and with two adults per twenty kids. So one adult for ten children in each of our programs and we have half day programs in Brown Deer going on right now. So we service twenty kids in the morning and twenty kids in the afternoon. And so it's been a very successful program for us, helping to get everyone exposed to all the types of early learning and play based strategies so that they can become very strong learners. We also had the same size classrooms for our 5k students, 1200 feet. And how I got lucky with that is that we converted a middle school to an elementary school so that allowed us to do that. We also learned very quickly on that our parents needed some consistent care for their child because we had half day programs so we made sure we had wrap around services in our schools with YMCAs or Boys and Girls Club and we even provided transportation for parents if they needed to (inaudible) other daycare providers. So, we didn’t expect our parents, we transported all of our 4k kids. The other program we focused on was in addition to reading at that level was partnering with our education foundation and local village library. So, we had a program that serviced our birth to three kids, our four-year-olds, called 1000 books before kindergarten. And so we made sure all of our parents were exposed to that and had lots of information and accessed all the story time programs that were going on at our local library. I also was very fortunate in Brown Deer to pass 54 million dollars of referendums over the last thirteen years. And what that allowed us to do was create these great learning environments that were based upon the needs of the kids. Andwe built a community room in our elementary school that had restrooms and meeting offices for clinicians. We had parent spaces in that room so they could bring their own children if they were going to be volunteering in our school. We also had separate entrances so that appointments could be made with clinicians’ weekends if they wanted to do some family time or family therapy sessions. I also had the chance to design an elementary school with very vibrant colors, with different kinds of lighting, lot of natural light, and open spaces. And one of the things I’m really most proud of is the way we designed our tile on our floor. It was swirls of color of purple and blue and red and yellow and our teachers were afraid that the kids would not walk in straight lines because they were going to follow the swirls on the floor but they worked with me and they eventually, the kids did a great job. But again the partnership is important for early childhood or Early Head Start or whatever programs were trying to promote. We made sure our parents had a room to go into, that they felt welcome and to bring their own children if they had to come to school for whatever reason and that they had a place. We also realized that some of our kids did not have extended families like grandmas and grandpas and aunties and uncles and so we have a senior volunteer program called the Elite Falcon Partner where they would come in and read to kids, or tutor them, or be a best friend and a best buddy and some of those senior citizens stayed with our kids from 4k on through fifth grade so it was very exciting. The other opportunity that we had is that we also valued the outdoor learning spaces as much as we did the indoor learning spaces, especially for our early childhood programs. So, we created an outdoor education program for our 5k kindergartens that we partnered with Lynden Sculpture Garden and so every week the consultant came and taught the class with our 5k teachers. They went outside rain, snow, sleet, whatever was happening they went outside and our ed. foundation provided the boots, the snow pants, the gloves, and the hats whatever was needed. Again, this partnership is so important and so I know that an investment in early childhood is well researched and well known but every dollar invested yields a sixteen-dollar return. And we know that it gets higher graduation rates, there’s kids going into post-secondary opportunities whether career or college. They’re earning a great lifetime wage and we’re reducing the school to pipeline prison. I’m excited to be the next state superintendent because I want to work with groups like you so that we can increase the access to high quality early learning experiences, childcare, and whatever funding is needed to support our kids learning and growing and becoming the best kids possible. Thank you.

Jennie M: Thank you, Dr. Kerr. And Next I’d like to turn it over Dr. Underly for remarks as well. Thanks.

Dr. Underly: Alright, well thank you. Thanks, Jennie M. Thanks everybody. Thanks for having me here today and I hope you’re all having a great conference and happy Public Schools Week too. My vision for a great Wisconsin school system is one that serves every child and meets every child where they are and gets them what they need every day. Every child deserves access to high quality preschool and birth to three programs, enthusiastic and passionate educators, access to mental health support and a well-funded public school district. And all kids deserve these things no matter where they live, no matter who they’re born to, and no matter what their abilities may be. I’m the only candidate who is leading during a pandemic. I’m the only candidate who has the experience of working in a school district as a superintendent, but also worked in preschool, k-12, higher education, and at DPI. And my vision for public (inaudible) including fulfilling their learning and social emotional needs. And to be honest, I’m getting the “connection is unstable” so I apologize. I’m on rural internet. If I clip out I’m sorry. I’m running because we don’t have these things and because (inaudible) public school system. I’m ready to lead the department on day one. As the superintendent of a school district currently in covid I see what it is that our kids and our communities and families need every day. And a couple of things to share about me that are just really essential to my platform which is all equity based early childhood education, full day 4k, and birth to three. My son was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder right before his fourth birthday. And public education and public school was really important for early intervention in preschool children. But when I was a young mom, we didn’t have those, we didn’t have access to those resources partially because of our socioeconomic status. We were not eligible for head start but we were also, David was too young for the programs in his public school. Instead, I had to jump through all these hoops to find him the interventions that he needed at a price that I could afford. And here was something, early intervention they kept telling us, these are things that are proven to work yet it was such as struggle to find these things for him. And I think about all the kids, every kid in Wisconsin should have access to these programs. Not just because they’re on the autism spectrum but for other reasons too. Maybe it's a speech delay, or maybe its behavior interventions, whatever it might be. And so young parents are often faced with the impossible option of having to provide for their kids and what's best for their kids versus being able to work or being able to pay their car payment or rent. So what every child deserves and what every family deserves is a high quality preschool program where kids can get behavior and speech therapy, or literacy and numeracy, the social interaction with their peers. And these are the things that lift up all kids, lift up all communities, and make our society better. It's also, it was also nearly impossible for me to find high quality early childhood programs for my child with disabilities but more impossible to find good quality childcare that could meet his needs too. And I noticed that also as a superintendent of a school district in rural Wisconsin. As a superintendent at Pecatonica we implemented a 4k full day program, at every day, no charge to the parents even though we’re only reimbursed 60% because of the belief that it will lift up all kids and prepare all kids and close those opportunity gaps for their lifetime. We also implemented a full day summer camp program that's modeled after the best programs that you would find in any suburban area of Wisconsin and a robust after school program where we partnered with different community groups for art classes for example. All of these things are difficult to find in a rural area and that's why under my leadership my school district was able to find and create these things because it's what is best for kids. I want to disrupt the inequities that plague our school system but plague our society as well. It's all connected, and you all know this, the best resourced communities have the best resourced schools. And that's not okay. It shouldn’t matter where you live, who your parents are. It shouldn’t matter but yet it does. And where you live in Wisconsin determines your public education opportunities. And I’m running because I’m deeply concerned about these opportunity gaps between our students after a decade of cuts. And they keep widening, therefore leaving the kids with the greatest resources with the fewest, or the greatest needs, excuse me, with the fewest resources. I’m going to tell you why I’m the right person for the job again I’m the only candidate running a district during the pandemic, I’m currently a public school parent, I’ve worked in all levels of public education, I’ve forged relationships with members of the legislature and I’m very active, in my professional organizations as well. And I have this 360-degree experience with public education. I have a reputation, and it's a very good reputation, of working with people across the aisle, both sides of the aisle, because public education is nonpartisan. We’ve also had to pass referendum in my school district and it's because, and they pass at high rates, because people in all parts of Wisconsin understand the value of public education to their communities. I have to add that reopening our schools is a major concern. And my school district is open. This is arguably the most challenging time in our lifetime, as well as our careers, and I could tell that our public schools, and you know this as well, that they are the center of our communities and they provide meals and technology. They’re checking in on our kids. Our teachers, staff, administrators, they're the first responders to the needs of our kids and I’m looking forward to serving all kids, in all communities, large and small. The impact of a teacher also is very life changing for a kid. When I think about my platform rooted in equity not only is it getting early childhood programs to our children but it's also looking at teacher recruitment and retention, looking at licensing, looking at getting mental health support to our kids and working our, making our school funding formula work for our kids too. Just a brief story, I worked in a high poverty school district when I first started teaching. I was a social studies teacher but I had an EL contingency within my classroom as well. And I had also a good number of kids that were neglected and delinquent in title one. And one kid had been released from juvie and he was now in my class. And really, there was this aura about him. People were nervous but he was really just, at the heart of it all, a kid. He had a rough start in life and I keep thinking if he would’ve had early childhood programming, if he would’ve had mental health to help with his ADHD or to cope with the grief, the death of his father, I think how that could have changed his life. And so many kids are hurting and I think about this child all the time and I think if he had had that strong start in school. That's what every kid deserves and I wonder how he could have turned out better if he were just given that chance. So again, my platform is in equity. I just, early childhood, high quality teachers, mental health and funding and that platform was crafted with my experience with kids like him in mind. So it's very, looking ahead, the future, I’m optimistic, there's so much potential. I look at our rural communities as well as our suburban and urban schools and we have so many opportunities to connect. And it's because public schools are the center of our communities and we need to keep our foot on the gas. We need to invest in our kids. We need to invest in the programs that we know work, such as early childhood programming, and we need to hire passionate educators who see past the labels and truly believe in kids and help them achieve their dreams so that’s a little bit about me. So thank you again for having me.

Jennie M: Alright well thank you both. So I have a list of questions and I think I’ll sort of alternate starting with each of you for the different questions. So the first question I have, and both of you spoke to this a little in your remarks. How do you plan to prioritize early childhood and early childhood education as state superintendent? And I’ll start with you Dr. Kerr.

Dr. Kerr: Thank you so much for this opportunity and I just want to clarify I’ve been a COVID-19 superintendent too. None of us asked for this last March but I’ve finished out my career at Brown Deer the last six months in COVID and so I understand what it takes to run a school district during a pandemic. But I think it's important to prioritize this early childhood because we need to take care of our little, our littles, I call them our littles, before they get to us so that they have the proper experiences, so that they can be ready to learn when they get to school. But we got to start exposing them to vocabulary, reading and print materials, and exposing parents to the opportunities, whether it's through partnerships with our local YMCAs, our Boys and Girls Clubs, or our community foundations like Greater Milwaukee Foundation or the Strive Foundations. I think it's important that we coordinate our resources because the next state superintendent, what I would to do is a collective impact inquiry because what's happening is we have all these wonderful resources but I’m wondering if we coordinated those if we could do better and serve more parents and more kids well because I you know you don’t (inaudible) all the kids who need your support in Head Start but I know there's a lot more out there. So for example in the Strive Foundation in Brown County all the pediatricians have aligned their developmental benchmarks to test kids as they’re growing up in the prenatal care and working with parents so that they can identify any possible maybe difficulties or challenges before it escalates into something else. So that when those kids go to the early childhood programs in the community that they know how to best meet the needs, as Jill said, meeting the needs of all kids that comes through their door. I do believe this is important. The early learning model standards are critical to making sure they’re taught with fidelity. And what we did in Brown Deer is we coordinated all the staff development and professional development with our childcare providers so that we could be talking the same language and we even shared lessons with our before and after school programs of what they were teaching in 4k and 5k so they could reinforce some of the reading and the math skills and understand what we were doing so again it's a shared partnership and I think it’s going to make it very critical moving forward. Thank you.

Jennie M: Thank you Dr. Kerr and now I’ll turn it over to you Dr. Underly for the same question.

Dr. Underly: Alright, thanks Jennie M. I am a believer in early childhood education, high quality daycare, childcare, birth to three programming and full day, fully funded, every day 4k kindergarten. Early childhood programs, and full day preschool and 4k, these are programs that are researched based. They are the programs that disrupt the inequities in our public school system and they are a major component of my platform. I shared a little bit about my experience with having a son with disabilities and I also have a daughter who’s 18 months behind him and so being a young mom, like I shared, it was really tough to try to find high quality childcare also and birth to three programs, especially for my son who wasn’t quite for an eligible for public school. No parent should have to make these choices because what we’re doing is, we’re making parents make a choice based on access and affordability and then setting some kids up for success and other kids for no success. And we know that these programs work and these are the programs that reduce those gaps that we talk about so frequently. And they really come down to opportunities that kids that do have these opportunities they’re going to be set up for success and they’re going to have that good head start and be successful in elementary, middle school, high school, graduate from college, have better healthcare, have better paying jobs, all those things and stay out of the criminal justice system and it really comes down to having a good start when they’re young. Kids need access to interventions and they need them at a young age, before they’re in elementary school for speech, behavior, OT, PT. And when you look across the state there’s just so much inequity. Rural areas in particular, they need affordable childcare options for their families and the best places to offer these are our school districts. I’m in favor of public and private partnerships for birth to three programming and early childhood programming and using our schools in a community school model. There’s plenty of programs out there that can help pay for this too. I look at federal programs like title one, title one preschool, local levies, like your community service fund also allows us to levy for community-based programs such as after school programming, summer programming, and preschool and that’s what we used here at Pecatonica. Let’s invest in our kids in the early years and let’s set our kids up, all kids for a lifetime of success and then set up their schools for success too.

Jennie M: Great, thank you both. Both of you touched on this in your response to the previous question but I wonder if you could elaborate on what your vision is for 4k, community partnerships, thinking about the funding model. Many of our Head Start programs are either partners with districts in collaborative relationships or they’re 4k community approach sites where they’re integrating that 4k work into their head start classroom. Dr. Underly if you could just share your vision of 4k.

Dr. Underly: Absolutely, Jennie M. Thank you. What you had just said, there’s a lot of different models out there and when we were looking at what worked for our community, we looked at all those different models and we’ve visited different sites and it's going to depend on the community, which model is best. But like I said before, I’m in favor of looking at public and private partnerships. I think that when we look at community-based childcare for example we should certainly be using those and private providers to provide interventions and services for kids. They can work through the school district to do this. Currently, 4k for example, is funded at 60%. We need to increase that percentage of fully funded, 100% so that kids can get programming every day. We know that the consistency matters. We did have a half day program at one point. We also tried every other day program model where kids attended two full days a week. But that’s inequitable. What we learned is that when had to close school for snow days for example it was one group of kids seemed to continually get short changed. And that’s not fair, it's not consistent. And we look at our preschool programs and our head start programs and the kids that they serve, what we’re trying to do is disrupt the system. We’re trying to end generational poverty. We’re trying to make sure that we have all kids set up for success. And so when my vision as state superintendent is let’s do it. Let’s get the stuff to our kids. Because what’s best for our kids is best for our state. And if we can do this, we’re going to set everybody up for success.

Jennie M: Great, thank you. And Dr. Kerr same question. Your vision for 4k.

Dr. Kerr: Well, I also support full day funding for four-year-old kindergarten because this is exactly what our students need. My platform is based upon excellence and equity as well and we need to attend to the wellbeing of all the children in our school communities. What I have learned in Brown Deer is we only had a half day program because that’s all we could afford. But when MPS hosted a full day program we lost kids to open enrollment because they had a 4k program. So that’s why we try to provide parents with more supportive wrap around care and wrap around services before school and after school. I also think it's the parent’s choice of whether they want their child in full four-day, full 4k programming or half day because some parents would like to again stay home to continue to connect with their children or their family so I think that’s really important that we allow a choice for our 4k parents. I think it's important that we offer all the professional development for our providers in the community, like I said, we hosted a lot of professional development around equity, around character education, around the early learning standard for early childhood. And I think it's very important that we share our resources because we’re all in this together. Time, talent, and resources. The other aspect too is what we learn from this pandemic that so many of our families did not have robust internet access and I will work with our federal government to make sure that all of our families are taken care of in this area and I know Jill experiences some of these challenges in the rural area, but we face similar challenges in the urban area as well. And so again this whole idea of partnerships whether private or public, bringing people together who have rallied around our kids all throughout this time. Whether they were creating a food bank, or food pantry, or making sure kids had devices, or making sure they had all the things from their locker, or their reading books. It's important that we continue to work together to make sure that all of our families are being served and being served well.

Jennie M: Thank you. So as a follow up to that question about 4k, one of the really pressing issues facing our state is, as you both talked about, the lack of access to quality and affordable childcare and frankly the many childcare deserts that we have in our state, particularly as it relates to infant toddler care. One of the challenging dynamics around full day 4k is the competition for four-year-old’s and the impacts that that competition has on community partners like Head Start and childcare. And what we’ve heard a lot from the field is cautious interest in full day 4k because if they lose those four-year-old’s the implication that that has for those kiddos and the families and then also for their funding. So again, we have many Head Start programs that are partnering, in one way or another with districts in their services area or they’re actually 4k community approach sites themselves and so I’m wondering if you could speak a little bit to some of that funding mix. I think all of us are thinking about parent choice and thinking about how do we get kids longer quality days when they need them (inaudible) transitions and how to do that. I think I’ll kick that topic of discussion over to you first Dr. Kerr.

Dr. Kerr: Thank you. I know this is (inaudible) a lot of families. That is reason when I started the 4k program at Brown Deer that I had a task force that included all of the providers in the neighborhood. So, I didn’t want to make anyone have to close their business or lose an opportunity to be an entrepreneur. I think it's that you have to work collectively together and that’s why I like a lot of the Head Start programs are in our local schools. I think that’s very advantageous or on school campuses. So. like, in one corner of the Brown Deer campus is our village library. And so that’s a place where a lot of parents and families meet to do educational activities and community activities. But I think we have to balance that because I don’t support just expanding 4k and not doing it well. You might have an extra classroom but if you don’t have qualified and certified teachers, you don’t have the right resources to make sure you’re implementing the curriculum. I mean we use the creative curriculum and that’s expensive. And so, we not just open up the door to try and get more money. I think you got to be very thoughtful and you got to plan it. And right now, too, I’m also on the national, I’m on a national superintendent’s group as an elected president and I’m already working with the Biden Administration to come as they work on the childcare reimbursement opportunities for our parents because some of my parents in Brown Deer, unfortunately, had to quit their jobs to do the virtual learning. And, unfortunately, those were single moms black and brown and they were the only provider in their household. So not only did they have to take care of their kids and juggle childcare and homeschool learning, they had to quit their jobs to do it. And so that’s why I want to make sure we get back into school as soon as possible, and get our parents back into the workforce so they can afford to have a decent life in our communities. But I know this is a challenge and I think it's solved by people coming together and brainstorming some great solutions to these problems.

Jennie M: Thank you, and Dr. Underly, your thoughts on the funding mix.

Dr. Underly: Yeah, sure. This is certainly the issue that we had experienced at our Pecatonica School District too. And we were looking to expand the programming. It was how do you pay for it. Certainly, there are funding streams through title one community service fund, but what we found is when we went full day by eliminating that midday bus route, we were able to provide for another teacher. So, we ended up expanding our access and not really losing any money on it, even though we were only reimbursed for 60% of the cost. I think the other thing that is worth mentioning is that if you do have community providers, private providers in your school district, work with them. We didn’t have any. And so, but when I was doing my research and visiting other school districts and talking to other superintendents who do these programs partnering with the private providers is helpful because, yeah, parents at that age, or when they have kids in 4k or even 3k programs, they, sometimes they have connections whether it’s to a private provider or its to a family provider too. The other thing that I learned from that was that if you can, if you expand the programming within the public school district, hire those people. They could be your staff, and I learned when I was exploring this that school districts are able to offer a better rate of pay, they’re also able to offer benefits, and the teacher retirement system too. And so that was always an attractive reason for us to be able to retain childhood, early childhood providers or employees in our community as well. And so just having those relationships, and having those communication working with parents to figure out what works best for them. We found we had to be really flexible, that we offered the full day program every day because that’s what parents wanted most cases. But there are also the handful that wanted to pick up their kid or child mid-day. But yeah, there’s certainly money there but I think by nurturing these relationships and coordinating these state and federal resources as well as our local resources you could use Fund Eighty also for some of these programs too. I think you can make it and that’s what we want to do. We want to do what’s best for kids.

Jennie M: Thank you both for that. I’m going to ask one more question of both of you and then I’m going to open it up to our audience to see if they have any questions. So looking towards the future I wonder you could both elaborate on thinking about potential funding that might be coming whether it's either from the governor’s proposed budget or additional funds from the federal government, how, what you would prioritize, what’s your vision for potential new funding? And, I’ll start with you Dr. Underly on this one.

Dr. Underly: Yeah, that’s great. I know the Governor Evers did put that funding in his budget. He is a former educator, or maybe you’re always an educator if you were once an educator. But he understands that we have to look at, we have to look at the things that work, right. And we have to attack the causes of generational poverty, we have to attack the causes of these opportunity gaps for kids. And that means putting money into early childhood programming so his budget ask looks at that. It also looks at adding to mental health and it looks at adding to teacher, teacher retention in recruitment efforts too because we need to make sure that we have a diverse educator workforce to educate our kids who are also diverse as well. I’m grateful for that. I know that the Biden Administration is also offering through their Build Back Better opportunities for childcare reimbursement as well as funding for childcare programs. They also have with the, I can never remember the exact name of it, but it's the ESSER money, ESSER One and ESSER Two. ESSER Two is being distributed through the title one formula. And it can be used for anything that is basically a one-shot kind of program because the money’s not going to be annually given to school districts. In that case you can look at how that could also be used as seed money to start your early childhood programming, to look at your facilities, to look at your transportation models, to purchase car seats for your vans or whatever it is to get your kids to school and being able to receive these resources.

Dr. Kerr: I also agree that the governor has put some great resources in the budget. However, I’m really worried that those might not make it through the budget process. I would be focusing on federal funds because I know the Biden Administration has already set aside funding for schools, k-12 schools to reopen and be able to use this money and free up state funds that are currently existing and so because of my relationships with people at the capitol on the Hill I would work with them to continue advocating to free up this money for all our state so that we can free up the money that might not make it through the budget process. But I do believe that the funds have been put in the right places to help us move education forward in the state. And I hope to see that become a reality. But my priority would focus at the federal level first and then the state level. The other thing too is we talked about mental health services and I truly believe a lot of our concerns about mental health would start to alleviate if we got our kids back to school. Because I know those kids and teachers are missing each other tremendously and I think that would be therapeutic in itself. Trying to get back to school safely and sensibly.

Jennie M: Alright, well thank you both for those responses. So now I want to see how this works in the virtual environment. If you could raise your hand either with the feature or raising your physical hand if you did have a question for either of our candidates. And Brian definitely, oh I see Christine. If you want to unmute and ask your question that would be great.

Christine: Yes, thank you so much to both candidates for being here and willing to share. One thing as an advocate for early parent education we, many of us are requesting is that we’re helping to professionalize the field for the professional field that it is. So we’re not ever referring to it as daycare or even childcare, really building it up to be early care and education as that’s what we’re doing right, we’re educating children at the zero to five years old and so if you would both be able to help us in that because we are here for kids, not just in school, 52 weeks a year. There’s no summers off. There are many organizations that are also still offering the benefits and retirement and there’s many that can’t due to five-year-old’s transitioning into school of course and then some areas three-year-old’s transitioning to schools. I heard both say that what’s best for kids is really what’s best for all. And one question I have is: How would you, in looking at the various requirements within our licensed programming, because even early Head Start and Head Start operate under state licensing and those standards are often much more stringent and higher, higher levels of quality than what we’re seeing in most schools. And that’s definitely not all schools, but even adult to child ratios are all areas that we’re providing that higher, or I guess that lower, adult to child ratio. How do you see that impacting in schools if students are then going into schools, and I know schools are at the point six reimbursement and there’s a lot of advocacy for the point or the full reimbursement? How are you going to, I guess, compensate that in the classroom? Meaning the quality of early care and education that you get in a childcare center, Head Start, or otherwise Early Head Start, or otherwise varies between what happens in a school and just wanted to understand a little bit more about any efforts that would be done to support schools adhering to those higher levels of quality that that licensed programming is required to do.

Jennie M: We’ll start with you Dr. Kerr

Dr. Kerr: Okay, well thank you. Is it Christine or Christina that asked the question?

Christine: Christine

Dr. Kerr: Christine, thank you for asking that. I had the same challenges to overcome when I first introduced the 4k program in Brown Deer because there were a group of people who thought that was just daycare, that wasn’t needed. I can definitely relate to that but I truly believe that’s an educational opportunity it’s creating opportunities for kids to be successful in their long-term life as a learner. And so that’s really great. Yeah, licensing is a (inaudible) problem not only in early childhood, but in some other areas as well. And I think we do need to make people accountable. So that’s not going to happen overnight but I would like to address what those issue and concerns are and then work together to try to figure out what kind of other support we provide teachers, either to get the training, because sometimes we need to understand what are the barriers or challenges to getting the people trained and certified at the highest possible level. I also know that I don’t know how much training is done throughout the whole entire the state but we could look at this trainer models better mentor teachers, especially those getting into the field early on and making sure those schools don’t have the right types of teachers in these programs, build capacity and get the support that they need. Because, again, that’s what equity is all about, is making sure that we have high quality teachers so that we have high quality learning experiences.

Jennie M: Thank you.

Dr. Underly: Alright, it's a very good question too Christine. And it was certainly something that we struggled with too when we were opening up our 4k program to be full day. But it was really the wrap around pieces that are outside of the school day that we had to basically address. And I think, to answer your question, I think there needs to be consistent standard for what quality is in these settings as well and whether its licensing, whether it's through ratios, whether it's through the size of the room, or in the opportunities that we provide the kids and the curriculum I know that Young Star currently has the rating system for the public centers as well as the, I’m sorry, the non-public school public centers, as well as the private centers. But we should look at what we can do to be consistent. And I think one of the things we could also do is we could offer the network that is already available, whether it's through the Wisconsin Head Start Association, the different regions of Head Start, you could certainly look at different models that DPI has right now for different networks, whether its title one, or whether it’s for like for the RTI Center, the Response to Intervention. I mean there’s different models out there but we can look at those as well to provide opportunities for professional development so that there is consistency as well. And I think doing that would also give parents the peace of mind to be able to understand what they’re doing also for their kids as well. And just being able to compare the different options for their kids, whether it's a private setting run by the school district or private setting in general, or public school system.

Jennie M: Thank you. I see Dr. Tim Nolan is unmuted. Tim did you have a question for our candidates?

Tim: Yes, I definitely did. I had the pleasure to serve on the current superintendent’s advisory group for the 4k program and one of the most passionate issues for many of us on this call, certainly for me, is parent engagement. And in the history of 4k in Wisconsin obviously a premium has been made available to the schools to work with parents. All too often it's meaningless gatherings for families that are pretty much already in the community. So they’re really not engaging the parent. And what I would say to you from the Head Start model, what has made us wildly popular in congress, is that we’re working a dual-generational program. We respect that parent, prize the parent, and engage the parent. What would you propose to do around 4k to effectively engage parents because we know, we in Head Start only succeed when we’re working in close partnership between my talented teaching staff and a parent?

Dr. Underly: Do you want me to go first this time?

Jennie M: I frankly lost track of who’s next, but sure Dr. Underly.

Dr. Underly: No, that’s fine. I’m happy to go first. I can just share a little bit. It's a great question and it's a really, it's a very passionate component of, I think, of early childhood programming for sure. Parent engagement, especially the parents who are not likely to be engaged, the ones who had a historically hard time in school as kids, the ones who didn’t feel welcome in school, but then also the parents have children with disabilities, I think they’re also left out too of these networks as well, and parent who don’t speak English for example too there’s that aspect. I’ll tell you; I’ll share just really quickly something that we’ve done in my school that I think it works really great with especially with the lower elementary levels and so 3k, 4k, 5k, first and second grade. We have this program we call partners in learning and every week, depending on the classroom, but at least every other week we have opportunities for parents to come into the classroom and learn along with their children. It's really structured to make sure that parents are also engaged but so that they’re also with their kids and they’re helping their kids learn too. Whether it's a hands-on arts and crafts, whether it's like reading stations or literacy stations, whether it's an opportunity for play outside, whether it's in our school garden. We have this incredible vegetable garden at our school, and so we do a lot of farm to school activities too which are wonderful for that age. But we have a lot of activities and it's like this whole menu for this that comes out every quarter and it gives parents an opportunity to come into school if they can. If they can’t come in during school days, we do have the opportunities in the evenings. And we’ll have concerts and we’ll have other ways that parents can experience the learning along with their kids and their school. And it's just been very meaningful and it's very popular. Parents really like it too. But it makes sure that all parents get that opportunity to participate because it's really just not threatening. You are with your kid and you’re really busy too and so it's not intimidating at all.

Jennie M: Thank you. Sorry

Dr. Kerr: That’s a great question because our parents are critical as partners by helping us to work together and especially starting at 4k they stay with us for the whole entire career in our school districts that’s going to be so important. I think the most important thing for us as educators is, we’ve always looked at our schools as family places so that everybody was always welcome. So, parents whenever you’re coming to the school you can bring your kids with you, even if they’re not school age. And it’s understanding where parents are and what they can contribute at this particular time in their child’s education. Sometimes parents just don’t know what to do with certain situations. We want to make sure parents are gathering with other parents of 4k and 5k kids so that they can develop some, I call it social capital, and learn what other families are like and what they’re doing. I think it very important that we offer these activities just like Jill talked about. We did the same thing in our school. We let the, we wanted the parents to go on all the field trips that we had. We had field trips once a month and we had kind of like the same programs, lunch and learns, every other week for our community outreach. But I always knew when there was a field trip coming because I was signing a lot of volunteer approval forms and that was really fun because I wanted the parents to meet other parents and go to the apple orchard, or the pumpkin patch, or go to the choir concert together, or go to the holiday arts and crafts where they’re building gingerbread houses with one another so they could learn what other kids are doing and learn other parents. I also think that it's important that we continue to support them at whatever place they are because we’ve got parents who are doing a lot of things. They’re juggling sometimes two jobs, they’re raising an entire family, they don’t have a lot of other support at home. But it is an essential partnership that we need and we have to make them feel loved and cared and supported just like we do their children.

Jennie M: Thank you. I’m going to go to Yolanda Winfrey. For our, probably our last question. Thanks Yolanda.

Yolanda: Hi, yeah, no problem. I have two quick questions. The first of which is, I know in the past, not really sure where it stands right now, there was a funding formula for school districts that was really tied a lot to taxes, and often times when there were cuts, issues, inequities in communities that left a lot of districts with severely handicapped funding, or it didn’t meet the needs of the students. Would like to know how you plan to address that and those funding formulas for schools. And then the second part is, I know this is the early childhood community and early childhood formula, forum, however there was talk about what to do with addressing the achievement gap for early childhood. I would like to know what your plan is for those who are in middle school and high school because there’s a larger gap there as well. So what is your plan to address those gaps at those levels also. Thank you.

Dr. Kerr: I think it's my turn to go first. So, its funding for and gaps. Okay so I do teach school finance at Cardinal Stritch University, and so I’m very familiar with our funding formula and you’re right. The more state aid you get the less taxes you pay, but when there are cuts to state aid taxes go up. Okay, that’s a very simplistic way of explaining it and you’re right, Yolanda. Many of our communities when we had to face budget cuts had to make very hard decisions, whether they’re going to lay off staff, reduce programs. What I propose is bringing DPI, doing a DPI equity audit of where we’re spending the money right now in our own department, but also working with the school finance experts to deal with this every day. I would like to see more of a weighted funding formula come to fruition. And I want you to know that the funding formula was developed many, many years ago when there was basically basic public education going on. But now there’s all these other mandates that we’re having to deal with. And so I do think there’s a way to continue to look at how can we fund kids with early childhood, children with disabilities, our English Language Learners, and better deal with our kids who are most vulnerable and marginalized because of poverty. I do think that we can work on a creative funding formula to make those changes. It's going to take some time and it might not solve the problems in the first year or two. But it, we might need to look at a graduated approach to bring everybody what they need. Nobody’s been brought to the table to others need. I would do that. The second part about the achievement gap. So, as I said in my opening, is Wisconsin has the largest achievement gaps between black and white students in the country for the last ten years. And that includes early childhood and early learning issues. And so my team is working on a roadmap that will get us back on track. That we’re going to have milestones that we reach. Just like you all do in your milestones for early childhood. We don’t have those in education right now below third grade for reading. It's a great goal to say I want all of our kids to read by the end of third grade, but we don’t know how we’re going to get there. And so I would, as you look at continuous improvement models, we need to measure the metrics that really matter to help us measure growth, meeting milestones and get to eighty percent proficiency. And I believe working with the five largest school districts across the state that Madison, Green Bay, Milwaukee, Racine, and Kenosha which also have the highest number of black and brown kids and minority children in their districts we can get better results and reduce and eliminate that gap. And that’s exactly what I did at Brown Deer in my leadership. I hired extra reading specialists at the high school level and that is unheard of in a lot of places but we’re already getting extra help we joyfully served them and accepted them where they were. And that we got better, we go increased achievement, we closed the achievement gap and have the highest graduation rate of black and brown kids and white kids walking across the stage at nearly 100%. So that’s what I would do as state superintendent.

Dr. Underly: Alright, what I would do as state superintendent, I mean I think when you look at the school funding formula, yes, it's absolutely, it's absolutely unequal. I mean there’s definitely, when you look at the best resourced communities, they’re able to raise revenue and snap of the fingers almost, with very little impact on their property taxes, where the other school districts are taxing or levying to the max and that's not how it should be right. Because like you said, when budgets go down things get cut in those things that usually get cut are these programs like early childhood or after school programming and the things that we know work for kids. So as state superintendent I would have the bully pulpit, I would certainly use that highest office as the executive of the state for education to share how our school funding formula works with parents and community members throughout the state. But also, transparency, where does the money go? People need to know how much we’re spending on private school vouchers for example. The numbers available but people really don’t understand it. And they don’t understand that we are transferring money out of our public schools and they’re going into vouchers. My job is to advocate for public schools and all public-school kids. And as state superintendent I would advocate, I should say I would work with the legislature on this and our school boards association and use their recommendations that they came with the Blue Ribbon, the Blue-Ribbon Commission on education funding, which was reported out in 2018, because that is our plan for fair funding in Wisconsin. And it increased high poverty aid. It increased reimbursement for special education and EL learners, high-cost transportation. And the governor’s budget put an allocation in for early childhood programming. So, the system needs to be updated and that’s what I would do as state superintendent. As far as gaps, I like to call them opportunity gaps, because that’s what they are. As I shared in my opening, it's the best resourced kids who do the best. That really when we look at our report cards and our accountability system right now we know that the low poverty schools are going to have the best report cards and the best scores in literacy and math. And they’re going to have the best graduation rates. And they’re going to have the safest schools. And they’re going to have the best the veteran teachers, who are passionate about learning and teaching. What we need to do is we need to say, we need to do that for all our kids. We need to make sure all kids have the best, that they all have these opportunities to be successful and it starts with early childhood programming. You look at the programs in the suburbs and the wealthiest parts of our state and the private centers that maybe are, I think of like, the kids that have access too because they cost so much. Why can’t we have programs like that for all kids? And that’s what I want to do because I want to set all kids up for success. Because that really impacts them in the rest of their elementary years that impacts them in middle school. That impacts them in high school. It helps them graduate ready for career or college. It increases their life expectancy their health, their ability to navigate the system, and have a good paying job, and become really productive citizens. And that’s what I want for all kids. And so, when I look at what we call gaps, it's not necessarily what we call gaps in achievement. I mean that’s how it manifests but when we call it achievement gaps, we’re putting that responsibility on the kids. But really, it's the responsibility of all of us and these racist structures that we have that are just embedded in all our institutions. And that’s what we need to disrupt.

Jennie M: Well, thank you both very much. We are already past time but I really appreciate everyone sticking around. I just want to remind everybody again that this election is April, April 6th. Sorry, I was just looking at the chat box. Make that plan, make hope this is going to be a helpful piece of information for folks in our field and we’ll work on getting the recording up on our platform. And then we’re also going to be sharing it with the league of women voters. But I encourage you to check out. They have lots of great resources to help inform your decision about this important election and to again to just be telling your friends, family, coworkers, colleagues, that this is a really important election. I definitely encourage folks to check out that information. Thank you both Dr. Underly, Dr. Kerr. I really appreciate you making time we’re going to be pushing this recording out to lots of folks and really encouraging people to get out and vote for this important election. I want to thank you all for sticking around the end of a long but productive day with lots of learning and lots of virtual time together.