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Office of the Governor | State of Wisconsin

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2025 State of the State Address
Gov. Evers Declares 2025 the Year of the Kid: "If We Want to Improve Our Kids' Outcomes, Then We Have to Shorten the Odds"

Governor's 2025-27 Executive Budget declaration builds on administration's commitment to doing what's best for kids, bolstering youth mental health, ensuring safe drinking water in schools and communities, and more

MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers tonight, during his 2025 State of the State address, declared 2025 the Year of the Kid in Wisconsin, urging the Wisconsin State Legislature to do what is best for kids in the upcoming biennial budget.

Gov. Evers announced his 2025-27 Executive Budget will include efforts to invest in and support Wisconsin's kids both in and out of the classroom, including:

- making 'historic' investments in K-12 education and investing in public education at every level, from early childhood to the University of Wisconsin System and the Wisconsin Technical College System;
- investing in comprehensive mental and behavioral healthcare in schools;
- addressing lead contamination in schools and communities statewide;
- providing school breakfast and lunch to Wisconsin's kids at no cost;
- supporting Wisconsin's child care industry by continuing the successful Child Care Counts Program to ensure access to reliable, affordable child care for working families; and
- working to keep Wisconsin's kids, families, schools, and communities safe by reducing crime and preventing gun violence statewide.

Additional details for some of the above initiatives are available in the above linked press releases.

Relevant excerpts from Gov. Evers' 2025 State of the State address are available below:

"...Every budget I have ever built began first by doing what is best for our kids, and this one will be no different.

"So, I will again propose historic investments in K-12 education. And I will again ask Republicans and Democrats to join me in doing what is best for our kids by making meaningful investments in public education at every level, from early childhood to our UW System and technical colleges.

"The good news is that the Legislature need not wait until I introduce my budget to get to work. Republican lawmakers can start today by releasing the $50 million we approved with bipartisan support nearly two years ago. These funds were already approved, they are available now, and they should not still be sitting in Madison. Folks, our kids and their futures are too important for petty politics. Republicans, release those investments so we can get to work improving reading outcomes statewide.

"We have to do more to improve outcomes for our kids. And, yes, that means making meaningful investments in our public schools. But our kids' outcomes are as much a reflection of what happens within our schools as they are, importantly, a reflection of what happens beyond them. And that's a simple matter of math.

"The average Wisconsin elementary school student, for example, spends less than 12 percent of their year receiving direct instruction in the classroom. That means they probably spend, give or take, about 80 percent of their time each year outside of our schools.

"So, we have to recognize that our schools and educators cannot single-handedly fix our kids' circumstances beyond the school doors that nevertheless affect learning and success in the classroom every day.

"Folks, the obligation to help address the challenges our kids are facing in the 80 percent of the time they are not in school falls squarely at the feet of elected officials in this building. So, tonight, I'm declaring 2025 the Year of the Kid in Wisconsin because I want everyone here to start taking that important responsibility seriously.

"I will keep saying this until the folks in this building finally hear me—if we want to improve our kids' outcomes, then we have to shorten the odds. If we want our educators and schools to be able to do their very best work in the hours our kids are with them, we have to set them up for success. And we have to start by making sure our kids can bring their full and best selves to our classrooms.

"Kids in class should be focused on learning, not wondering when or whether they'll eat next. Our kids should never go hungry, period, but especially not at school. In the Year of the Kid, the budget I will introduce next month will again include my "Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids" initiative. Let's end school meal debt and make sure every kid has a healthy breakfast and lunch at school with no stigma and at no cost.

"And let's start treating our state's mental health crisis with the urgency it requires. Yes, for everyone of every age. But especially for our kids.

"The state of our kids' mental health continues to be concerning for me, both as a governor and as a grandfather. A kid in crisis may be distracted or disengaged and may not be able to focus on their studies, if they are able to get to school at all. I fought hard to secure $30 million in our last state budget to support school-based mental health services in schools across Wisconsin. But that was just a fraction of what I asked the Legislature to approve.

"Tonight, I'm announcing my budget proposal will invest nearly $300 million to provide comprehensive mental health services in schools statewide, including support for peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs and expanded mental health training.

"Making sure our kids are healthy—physically and mentally—is a crucial part of improving outcomes in our classrooms. But we have to connect the dots between school achievement and the challenges our kids are facing at home and in our communities.

"Take lack of access to clean and safe drinking water, for example. There is no safe level of lead exposure for kids. According to the CDC, even the smallest exposure to lead can have serious, long-term consequences, and can even "reduce a child's learning capacity, ability to pay attention, and academic achievement."

"A 2019 study of kids over several early grade levels found that even low-level lead exposure during early childhood can affect a kid's achievement, including reading and math scores. It also showed that even additional schooling and physically maturing, "are not sufficient to offset the damage caused by early childhood exposure."

"My Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids plan will also help modernize bubblers at schools across Wisconsin to remove harmful contaminants. And, as we kick off the Year of the Kid, I'm also announcing we're going to invest over $6 million in our biennial budget to support lead poisoning intervention and response. And I'm announcing that this week I'll approve a Department of Health Services emergency rule strengthening Wisconsin's lead standards so more kids and families will be eligible for these critical resources.

"With each day of inaction, addressing harmful contaminants in our water grows more and more expensive. So, I'm announcing tonight that I've directed an additional $5 million to continue our work getting harmful contaminants out of water wells in 2025, the Year of the Kid. It's about doing what's best for our kids and families. Simple as that.

"If we want our kids to bring their full and best selves to our classrooms, elected officials have to start acknowledging how policy decisions and investments—or lack thereof—here in this building affect kids, families, schools, and communities across Wisconsin every day.

"Whether or not kids and families have access to safe, reliable housing affects kids at school. Whether or not kids and families have a way to safely and efficiently travel to and from home and work affects kids at school. Living in a traumatic or unsafe home environment affects kids at school. Lack of access to preventive healthcare and dental and eye care affects kids at school.

"The state cannot continue to shirk responsibility for the 80 percent of the time our kids are not in our classrooms—that 80 percent falls on us. …"

As a former educator, superintendent, and state superintendent, Gov. Evers has always believed that doing what's best for kids is what's best for the state. Over the past six years, under the governor's leadership, the state has seen historic increases in public school funding and special education funding, Wisconsin's K-12 schools have returned to the top 10 in the country after falling to 18th under previous leadership, and nearly every school district in the state had benefitted from expanded access to school-based mental health support for kids through the governor's "Get Kids Ahead" program.

While Gov. Evers will continue to propose meaningful investments for public schools in Wisconsin in his executive budget that will be announced next month, the governor emphasized in his address that doing what's best for Wisconsin's kids also includes ensuring kids and families have the tools and resources needed to thrive outside of school. Kids spend only a fraction of their year in the classroom, with the average elementary school student spending less than 12 percent of the year receiving direct instruction. In coordination with his declaration of 2025 as the Year of the Kid, Gov. Evers announced several new initiatives that will work to ensure Wisconsin's kids have access to mental healthcare, safe, clean water free of lead contamination in their schools and at home, free and healthy meals at school, affordable child care and early childhood education, and safe communities to play and learn.

SUPPORTING KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH

During his address, Gov. Evers reiterated the need for significant mental health investments to better support kids in and out of the classroom and announced an approximately $300 million investment over the biennium for comprehensive school-based mental healthcare initiatives for students and schools across the state. The governor's proposal builds on the Evers Administration's efforts to address the ongoing mental health crisis, including investments in several programs aimed at offering mental health trainings to schools, parents and guardians, and students, bolstering mental health literacy and stigma reduction in schools, and hiring more pupil service professionals such as school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and school nurses.

Wisconsin continues to see troubling statistics regarding youth and student mental health in Wisconsin, underscoring the urgent need to invest in statewide, comprehensive, evidence-based mental healthcare for Wisconsin's schools. Gov. Evers' nearly $300 million investment in comprehensive mental healthcare for kids includes:

- More than $167.7 million to help fund comprehensive school mental health services aid to school districts and independent charter schools. Aid will provide payments of $100 per pupil with a minimum payment of $100,000 for school districts and independent charter schools with eligible uses, including both in-school and out-of-school time activities, such as mental health evidence-based improvement strategies, mental health literacy and stigma reduction programs for students and adults, collaborating with community mental health providers, consultants, organizations, CESAs, and other experts, parent training and informational events, student and family assistance programs; school-employed mental health professionals accessible to all students; mental health navigators; mental health system planning; and translator and interpreter services;
- More than $129.9 million to modify the existing aid for school mental health programs to provide 20 percent reimbursement for the costs of pupil services professionals employed by school districts, independent charter schools, and private choice schools, including school counselors, school psychologists, school social workers, and school nurses;
- $500,000 for Peer-to-Peer Suicide Prevention Programs to double grant amounts for peer-to-peer suicide prevention programs in schools and increase the grant amount; and
- $760,000 to increase the amount and types of mental health trainings provided to schools by CESAs and the Wisconsin Safe and Health Schools Center.

According to the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health's (OCMH) 2024 Annual Report, youth across the state report increasing levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts at extremely concerning rates in the past decade, especially among girls, kids of color, and LGBTQ youth. By 2023, two-thirds of Wisconsin high school girls reported experiencing anxiety, an increase of nearly 33 percent in recent years. Additionally, more than one-third of high school students in Wisconsin experience feelings of sadness and hopelessness, and overall, kids feeling depressed has increased by 42 percent in the last decade. Furthermore, the number of students who have seriously considered suicide has risen by approximately 41 percent over the past decade, with nearly one in four girls and 40 percent of LGBTQ youth reported having seriously considered suicide in the last year. According to the OCMH Annual Report, in addition to environmental factors, like hunger and food insecurity, that the report cites as negatively impacting youth mental health, the report also notes that the key stressors reported by youth are academic pressure, along with societal stressors like widespread gun violence, political divisiveness, climate change and discrimination playing out in communities, schools, and online. More information, data, and fact sheets on youth mental health can be found on the OCMH's webpage here.

Gov. Evers has made investing in youth mental health a cornerstone priority of his administration. As part of his 2022 State of the State address, Gov. Evers announced he would be investing $15 million into a new "Get Kids Ahead" initiative to provide school-based mental health support and services for nearly every school district in the state. In August 2022, Gov. Evers announced he would be doubling his

investment in "Get Kids Ahead," bringing his total investment to $30 million. Furthermore, during his 2023 State of the State address, Gov. Evers declared 2023 the Year of Mental Health, calling mental and behavioral health a "burgeoning crisis" affecting the state and Wisconsin's kids, families, and workforce, and announced he would be including approximately $500 million in his 2023-25 Executive Budget proposal to expand access to mental and behavioral health services across Wisconsin. While Republicans in the Legislature slashed many of these investments, the final 2023-25 biennial budget provided $30 million to continue support for school-based mental health services modeled on the "Get Kids Ahead" initiative, allocating funding to every school district and independent charter school statewide for mental health-related programming and services.

ADDRESSING LEAD CONTAMINATION AND ENSURING CLEAN DRINKING WATER

Gov. Evers recognizes that in order for kids to bring their best, fullest selves to the classroom, kids must have access to clean, safe drinking water that is free of harmful contaminants like PFAS and lead. Childhood lead poisoning has affected every county in Wisconsin, with a disproportionate number of kids who have experienced lead poisoning coming from low-income families who often face inequitable access to the healthcare services needed to treat lead exposure, as well as the economic and social supports necessary to prevent lead poisoning in the first place.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Preventions (CDC), even the smallest exposure to lead can have serious, long-term consequences and can even "reduce a child's learning capacity, ability to pay attention, and academic achievement." Additionally, a 2019 study of kids over several early grade levels found that even low-level lead exposure during early childhood can affect a kid's achievement, including reading and math scores. It also showed that even physically maturing and additional schooling "are not sufficient to offset the damage caused by early childhood exposure."

No level of lead is considered safe for kids. Therefore, tonight, Gov. Evers announced he is approving a Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) emergency rule to lower the lead poisoning threshold to 3.5 µg/dL. In 2021, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lowered the blood lead level at which it recommends intervention in cases of lead poisoning to 3.5 µg/dL rather than 5 µg/dL, which is the current state value. According to DHS, between November 2021 and February 2024, approximately 3,272 kids had blood lead levels between 3.5 and 4.9 micrograms per 100 milliliters of blood, but they did not qualify to receive environmental intervention services, because they did not meet the definitions of "lead poisoning or exposure" provided in the statute. DHS estimates that about 1,400 kids are expected to have a blood level between 3.5 and 4.9 micrograms of lead per 100 milliliters of blood in 2025, and this emergency rule would allow those kids to be eligible for environmental intervention services.

In order to support this expanded eligibility and address this serious concern for the health and well-being of Wisconsin kids, Gov. Evers also announced his 2025-27 Executive Budget will provide over $6.2 million to increase grants to local health departments which support lead poisoning intervention and response. DHS currently grants $769,700 to health departments to support lead poisoning intervention and response, including education programming, screening, care coordination or follow up services for kids not covered by a third-party payer, and other activities related to poisoning or exposure. Each health department would receive at least a $40,000 increase, with an average award increase being $50,700 and jurisdictions with more cases of lead poisoning would receive more funding.

The governor's budget will also modify statutes to allow utilities to provide financial assistance in the form of 100 percent grant funding for the replacement of lead service lines (LSL) for property owners. Current law requires all property owners, regardless of income, to replace their own water service lines if they contain lead. The cost of replacing a customer-side LSL varies by location but generally ranges from $2,000 to $6,000 per line. This is cost-prohibitive for many low-income customers and potentially places them at risk of service disconnection.

Additionally, the governor's "Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids" budget proposal, would provide $250,000 for grants to school districts and independent charter schools to replace water fountains with water bottle filling stations with a water filtration component to reduce contaminants in water including lead and chlorine.

According to a 2023 report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum, more than 37,000 lead service lines have been replaced or turned off since 2018, which is more lines replaced or turned off in just five years than in the previous two decades. The report further states that while "this trend represents massive progress from previous decades, these service lines still lurk underground in scores of communities across the state," underscoring the urgent need to address this issue, most especially in spaces that care for Wisconsin's youth and kids, such as schools, daycares, and more.

In addition, based on the success of Gov. Evers' federally funded Well Compensation grant program, which demonstrated the significant need for the expansion of the well compensation program to better serve Wisconsinites, Gov. Evers tonight announced he has invested an additional $5 million in federal funds to this program to continue assisting Wisconsinites with accessing clean water in their homes and at their businesses. Additional, sustainable, and ongoing funding for this program will be announced as part of the governor's 2025-27 Executive Budget next month.

PROVIDING SCHOOL BREAKFAST AND LUNCH FOR WISCONSIN KIDS AT NO COST

Many Wisconsin kids face daily anxiety about where their next meal will come from, with as many as one in six children facing hunger in Wisconsin. Food insecurity and poor nutrition often make school difficult for kids and have been shown to have a negative effect on concentration, student outcomes and achievement, and increased behavioral challenges.

According to the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health's 2024 Annual Report, food insecurity has been linked to impacting children's mental health, and in 2023 alone, the Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey found 30 percent of students who were food insecure seriously considered suicide. Additionally, studies have shown that kids who face food insecurity have increased rates of stress, depression, and other behavioral challenges due to increased anxiety about their parent's financial well-being, access to food, and embarrassment surrounding their food insecurity. Studies have also shown that in households with children who attend schools that offer free school meals, household spending on groceries fell as much as $39 a month, roughly over $460 a year.

Gov. Evers' plan helps address food insecurity and hunger affecting our kids' learning and outcomes in classrooms every day while also working to lower costs for parents and families. The governor's proposal aims to make sure every kid has access to a healthy breakfast and lunch every day at school with no stigma and at no cost to families.

The governor's proposed $154.8 million "Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids" 2025-27 Executive Budget investment includes:

- Over $147.7 million for supplemental nutrition aid payments to provide free meals to all Wisconsin students attending a school participating in the National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program and prohibits schools from charging students for meals;
    - The state will reimburse schools for the difference in federal per meal reimbursements for free meal eligible students compared to reduced price eligible students and full price students.
- More than $6.1 million to fund school breakfasts by fully funding the statutory payment of $0.15 per breakfast served to kids at school;

    - These funds will expand the number of schools that are eligible for payments to include independent charter schools, residential schools, and residential care centers that participate in the federal School Breakfast Program.
- $458,900 to fully fund the projected eligible costs of the school day milk program;
- $500,000 to create a new annual appropriation to support the Farm to School initiatives that improve student health and eating behaviors and incentivizing schools to support Wisconsin farmers, food producers, and local economies; and
- $250,000 in FY 27 for grants to help school districts and independent charter schools replace water fountains with water bottle filling stations with filtration systems to reduce contaminants in water, including lead and chlorine, as mentioned above.

The governor's "Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids" proposal also includes prohibiting schools from preventing a student from participating in a graduation ceremony because the student has unpaid fees, such as school lunch debt, helping to reduce potential incidents of school meal debt shaming.

Gov. Evers first proposed his Healthy Meals, Healthy Kids funding in the 2021-2023 budget, and proposed funding again in the 2023-2025 budget. Unfortunately, funding for the initiative was removed from the final budget both times by the Joint Committee on Finance. Gov. Evers will continue to be a champion for making sure kids are fed at school so they can perform their best while in the classroom.

An online version of this release is available here.

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