

Focus

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In brief

On February 17, the two candidates for state superintendent of public instruction, incumbent Elizabeth Burmaster (Madison) and challenger Gregg Underheim (Oshkosh), answered questions at a forum organized by WisPolitics.com. Responses are summarized here. Both candidates had one minute to respond to each question with no provision for rebuttals. As the result of a coin toss, Ms. Burmaster choose to answer all questions second.

Capitol notes

■ Get to know the candidates for state superintendent . . . Elizabeth Burmaster (Madison) has held the post for the past four years and is seeking a second term. She has over 30 years' experience as a teacher and principal.



A former teacher, Gregg Underheim (Oshkosh) is currently a state representative. He was first elected in a 1987 special election. In 1997, he made a previous run for superintendent.



■ The legislature's joint committee on finance will hold five hearings on the state budget during March. The locations and dates are: Watertown (9th); Cleveland (11th); UW-Stout (14th); Merrill (15th); and the State Capitol (17th).

State superintendent foes offer views

On April 5, Wisconsin voters will elect either incumbent Elizabeth Burmaster (B) or State Rep. Gregg Underheim (U) to head the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction for the next four years. Candidate responses at a recent forum follow.

"Two-thirds" school funding

■ Do you support two-thirds funding for schools and why?

U. said the two-thirds funding decision will be made by the legislature. Priorities need to be set to balance funding among all programs, including education. One area "cannot demand all resources," he said.

B. expressed support for two-thirds funding, noting that it means \$850 million in property tax relief. It "will ensure the level of quality Wisconsin citizens expect and," she continued, "ease tension between property taxpayers and schools."

Property-tax "freeze"

■ Which property-tax freeze do you support [governor's or legislature's]?

U. said we need to freeze property taxes in the state and let the legislature's joint committee on finance determine how much money will go to education. He noted that "the cost of public education is undermining public support."

B: "I will not support any proposal that does not protect education . . . Yes, there must be property-tax relief and the proposal for two-thirds funding is the way to get there." B. indicated support for the governor's proposal.

School choice

■ Should private school choice be expanded beyond Milwaukee?

U. supports expanding private school choice where poor school quality leads

parents to demand alternatives. Students should not have to attend schools where over 50% of ninth graders do not graduate. Added U: "Anytime schools are so bad in this state, we need to give options." He favors raising the Milwaukee private school cap [on enrollment].

B. said schools in Milwaukee are moving in the right direction—third-grade reading scores are at their highest. She continued, "My job as superintendent is to ensure accountability, equity and quality of all education systems that use taxpayer dollars; until education accountability is in place, I do not support the expansion of private school choice."

Class size

■ What is the ideal class size?

U. backed a local-control approach to class size. Ideal size "is a decision that ought to be made in local school districts," he stated.

B. endorsed the 15-to-1 pupil-teacher ratio of the state's SAGE program for "closing the gap in achievement." [SAGE reduces K-3 class sizes in needy schools.]

Qualified economic offer (QEO)

■ Are teachers over or underpaid?

U. supports the QEO [which limits teacher compensation growth]. He noted that, although Minnesota's salaries are higher than Wisconsin's, total compensation, with benefits, is greater here. U. said our teachers are "compensated at a high level compared to our incomes and ability to pay."

B. sees teacher quality as one of the most important factors in student success. She called the QEO "a roadblock to reform" and said that failure to repeal it will present problems in recruiting and retaining good teachers.

Passion for education

■ *What is your vision for improving education . . . ?*

U: “I have an intense passion for serving the needs of children, not serving the needs of the teachers’ union.” U. advocates more technology in schools to promote quality and to control cost. With technology, high-achieving and lagging students succeed, he said.

B: “My passion comes from having dedicated my life to education.” Noting that she is a third-generation teacher, B. said she wants every child to have the same opportunity as hers. She added that we must ensure “opportunity, equity and access to quality education.”

Teacher training

■ *How would you improve teacher training?*

U: “The teaching of teachers has to be a research-based endeavor. It currently is not.” U. said we must put in schools people who understand what educational approaches have worked.

B: “There is no more sound education research than that related to early childhood education.” B. said she also implemented reform of teacher certification, education and licensing.

Successful schools

■ *Why are some schools more successful and why do costs vary?*

U: “According to reliable analyses, there is no relationship between spending and test results.” Noted U., “Quality is not a product of spending. It’s not about how much you spend.”

B. observed that schools throughout our state face different fiscal challenges. Costs vary because school districts have different needs. “We need to close the gap in achievement . . . our economy depends on it.” If we don’t, we’ll pay later in social and corrections programs.

Bilingual education

■ *Do you support bilingual education?*

U: “The most important thing we can do for kids is make certain they speak English. The more rapidly we get them into English, the more rapidly they will succeed in this society.” U. favors moving children out of bilingual education more rapidly.

B. says she supports bilingual education: “My education budget calls for increased bilingual/bicultural categorical aid. In the last decade, our English language learners have doubled, while enrollment has dropped.”

Special education

■ *What are your views on special education services?*

U: “We must serve the needs of special education students.” U. said that

effective evaluations that avoid overidentification help ensure sufficient funding: If the program works, students leave it, freeing funds for others.

B. stressed the importance of parental involvement in special education, stating, “They are the first and most important teachers.” She noted that, as state superintendent, she has directed federal funds to high-needs students with disabilities.

Closing remarks

U. finished his part of the forum by urging education reform in Wisconsin. According to him, the superintendent must be more supportive of technology in schools; shutting down virtual schools was not a good decision. U. added: “The department can no longer be a tool and public relations arm of the teachers’ union.” Wisconsin’s education system needs a new voice that will stand up to interest groups, and U. said he is that voice.

B: “We have a lot of work ahead of us in the next four years. We’ve had a quality education system, but we are experiencing as a state some unprecedented fiscal challenges.” B. said she is working to ensure that our educational efforts will promote the state’s economic success. B. closed with a request: “I ask for your support to do what’s best for our children, best for our community and best for the long-term future of our state.”

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