

The Year Of The Kid

An Interview with The Honorable Tony Evers, Governor of Wisconsin

EDITORS' NOTE On November 6, 2018, the people of Wisconsin voted Tony Evers the 46th governor of Wisconsin. Four years later, on November 8, 2022, Wisconsinites re-elected him as governor. Prior to his election in 2018, Evers served as the Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction, winning statewide elections in 2009, 2013, and 2017. With over three decades of public education experience, Evers has spent most of his life fighting for Wisconsin's kids. He



The Hon. Tony Evers

began his career in education, first as a science teacher in Baraboo before going on to serve families, students, and communities across the state, including in Tomah, Oakfield, Verona, and Oshkosh. Born and raised in Plymouth, Wisconsin, Evers graduated from Plymouth High School and earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Will you discuss your career journey?

I grew up in a family full of healthcare workers. My mom was a nurse, and my dad was a doctor who took care of tuberculosis patients at a sanatorium in Sheboygan County. I grew up always wanting to be like them – I wanted to help people just like they did.

In 1974, I was in my first year of medical school in Austria when my wife, Kathy, and I found out that we were expecting our first kid. So, we moved back to Plymouth to get ready to start our family, and the night before I was supposed to start a job at Kohler, my mom handed me a stack of mail with a letter from UW-Madison notifying me that I had been accepted into their master's program for education. That letter changed my entire trajectory, and because of that letter, I went on to become a science teacher, a principal, a superintendent, and state superintendent, but I knew we could be doing more and better for our kids.

That's when I ran for governor and won, and then ran again and won again, and I've been proud to serve the people of Wisconsin in this position for the past six years. I've worked in public service now for five decades, and I have never stopped believing that what's best for our kids is what's best for our state, and that drives everything I do as governor.

What attracted you to public service?

I was lucky enough to grow up in a family of hardworking healthcare workers who instilled in me Wisconsin's core values of empathy, compassion, service, and taking care of our neighbors. So, I've spent most of my life in public service – and I wouldn't have it any other way. My public service began in education because I have always believed there's no better way to help people and make a direct impact on their lives

than through public education. Public education is the great equalizer. I always say, "What's best for our kids is what's best for our state," because if we're taking care of our kids, that means we're also taking care of their schools and teachers, making sure they have safe communities to play in, and taking care of the folks and families that raise them, too. A kid who is hungry isn't going to be able to focus on their studies; a kid who doesn't have a stable roof over their head isn't going to be able to engage in class; and a kid who is struggling with their mental

health isn't going to be able to learn. I call this "connecting the dots," which is just my fancy way of explaining that, as policymakers, we have to recognize how every challenge facing our state is connected to all the others – all of these issues are interconnected. I realized I could connect more dots and help more kids and families as governor, which is why I ran for this office when I was state superintendent of public instruction.

Public service means a great deal to me – not just as governor, but also as a born-and-raised Wisconsinite. To me, it's always been about helping people, being a good neighbor, and doing what I can to give back to the community and the state that raised me.

Will you highlight the priorities for your administration?

Over the past six years, my administration and I have been working to do what's best for our kids and working families, invest in needs that have long been neglected, and build a Wisconsin and a future that works for everyone. Among just a few of my top priorities have been investing in our kids and public education at every level; delivering tax relief for middle-



Governor Evers working with Wisconsin dairy farmers on preserving and improving water quality



Governor Evers with elementary school students after declaring 2025 the Year of the Kid across Wisconsin

class and working families; getting harmful contaminants like lead and PFAS out of our water; expanding high-speed internet; building more affordable housing; making healthcare more affordable and accessible; lowering the cost of child care; fixing and improving our roads and bridges; supporting our farmers, veterans, and small businesses; protecting and conserving our natural resources; and addressing our state's generational workforce challenges to build a 21st-century workforce to support a 21st-century economy – and that's just the short list.

Each year, I usually declare a top focus for my administration and our state – they've ranged from clean drinking water to broadband to workers. This year, I declared 2025 the Year of the Kid across Wisconsin because I want everything we do together to be focused on doing what's best for our kids and the folks, families, and communities who raise them. I was proud to introduce the most pro-kid budget in state history, which included historic investments in public education at every level and the largest investment in Wisconsin's kids by any Wisconsin governor, ever. My budget plan also helped support the families and communities who care for our state's kids by ensuring access to safe, clean drinking water; lowering every-day, out-of-pocket costs on everything from diapers and medication to child care and healthcare; helping families get a little breathing room in their household budgets by preventing property tax increases on the average homeowner statewide, making healthcare more affordable and accessible, cracking down on price gouging, and so much more.

At the end of the day, for me, this work is about always trying to do the right thing, putting politics aside, and getting things done for the people of our state – these will always be my guiding principles as governor.

How do you describe Wisconsin's strengths?

Here in Wisconsin, our strength is our people. Wisconsinites are helpers by nature – it's in our DNA. We look out for one another and take care of each other, and when folks visit Wisconsin, they always comment on the friendly faces who welcome them to every community. It's who we are. We're also hard workers. Right now, we have more people working in Wisconsin than ever before, and we are a powerhouse for our nation's manufacturing and agricultural industries.

Wisconsin has a proud manufacturing heritage, and we're known internationally for our craftsmanship and hardworking people. Thanks to collaborations between industry, our technical colleges, and public sector partners, we have a highly skilled workforce that makes us second in the nation for manufacturing employment concentration, supporting more than 8,800 manufacturing companies statewide.

However, as America's Dairyland, perhaps what we're most well-known for is our outstanding dairy and agricultural industries. Agriculture in Wisconsin is a more than \$116 billion industry – that's billion with a B. We are the nation's number one producer of cheese, and if Wisconsin were a country, we would be fourth in the world for our cheese production. From cheese and milk to cranberries, ginseng, and soybeans, Wisconsin's farmers, producers, and agricultural industry feed our families across the globe and support 353,900 jobs, about 9.5 percent of the state's employment.

We're also becoming a hub for innovation with our thriving biohealth sector. The future of biohealth technology and personalized medicine is being invented and manufactured right here in Wisconsin, including medical device manufacturing, digital health, biopharmaceuticals,

and diagnostics. This has led to Wisconsin's designation as a U.S. Regional Technology Hub by the federal government. This life-changing innovation is fueled by billions in academic research and development thanks to the collaboration of our business and academic technology leadership.

Driving this innovation are our Wisconsin Technical College System and our University of Wisconsin (UW) System. With 13 universities and campuses statewide, the UW System is training the next generation of highly skilled, highly educated workers, innovators, scientists, artists, and leaders in every corner of our state. Guided by the Wisconsin Idea, the principle that our public universities should positively impact folks, families, and communities beyond their campuses, our UW campuses are improving lives and solving big problems here in Wisconsin and the world over. It is also the Wisconsin Idea that led Wisconsin to its reputation as the laboratory of democracy. Whether it's our hard work, our history and tradition as a manufacturing state, our namesake as America's Dairyland, or being innovative thinkers, all of these values and virtues are what make Wisconsin the state it is today.

How important is a strong public/private partnership in Wisconsin?

We believe that strong public/private partnerships are critical to advancing research and innovation, building the 21st-century infrastructure and workforce to support a 21st-century economy, and continuing to move our state, as Wisconsin's motto demands, "Forward." A great example of these public/private partnerships in action is our designation as a U.S. Regional Tech Hub by the U.S. Economic Development Administration. This designation will unlock \$49 million to grow the state's personalized medicine and biohealth sector, including advancing research and innovation, growing the state's economy and creating jobs, and boosting American competitiveness in a cutting-edge industry. The coveted designation will allow Wisconsin's consortium of 18 public and private partners to boost research and expand lab space, increase coordination and collaboration, improve access to capital to start and grow businesses, and further build out the personalized medicine and biohealth technology sector.

Over the first 10 years, the Tech Hub designation is projected to create more than 30,000 jobs in the personalized medicine sector and over 111,000 indirect jobs attributable to the Tech Hub in Wisconsin. Additionally, the Tech Hub is projected to create \$9 billion worth of economic development in Wisconsin within the first decade – all while advancing innovation, research, and manufacturing that will help improve the lives and health of folks here in Wisconsin and beyond. This would not have happened without the efforts of folks at every level of government, our industry partners, and our academic institutions. It was an all-hands-on-deck effort that will ensure Wisconsin continues to lead the way in innovation in this cutting-edge field.

Will you discuss your administration's focus and commitment to transparency?

There's a saying inscribed on the ceiling of the Governor's Conference Room in the Wisconsin State Capitol Building. It reads, "The Will of the People is the Law of the Land." Coined by U.S. Senator and Wisconsin Governor "Fighting Bob" La Follette, these words have guided me every day as governor.

I think a core part of being transparent is being available and accessible to the people I serve. It's one of the reasons I spend most of my time each week traveling across our state, meeting with Wisconsinites where they're at – whether in their homes, schools, businesses, farms, or anywhere else in their community – to hear directly about the challenges they face and the issues that are impacting their daily lives. Each year, I visit all 72 of Wisconsin's counties at least once because I think it's important to go anywhere, be everywhere, and be out listening to people as much as I can. In order for the will of the people to be the law of the land, I have to have a pulse on what the people want and need, and I take that part of my job very seriously.

Additionally, another way I want to make sure government is transparent, accountable, and works better for the people we serve is by making sure the people of Wisconsin can enact their own will if they so choose – and without the governor's or the legislature's approval. It's one of the reasons I've spent years proposing pathways to enable Wisconsinites to put binding referenda on the ballot in Wisconsin, enabling Wisconsinites to enact statutory and constitutional changes through a simple majority vote at the ballot box.

Unlike in other states, Wisconsinites do not have the power to propose new laws or constitutional amendments through a binding ballot initiative process which would otherwise enable the people of Wisconsin to enact policy changes through a simple statewide majority vote. In Wisconsin, only the Legislature can approve and place ballot questions on the ballot, leaving Wisconsinites little recourse when the Legislature fails to enact policies that have broad public support. This has been a consistent problem in our state, where the majority of Wisconsinites support commonsense policies like legalizing marijuana, expanding Medicaid, enacting gun safety reform, and protecting access to abortion, yet the Republican majority has refused to act. That's because for far too long, Wisconsinites were voting under some of the most gerrymandered maps in the nation, which allowed legislators to depend on the security of their seats rather than the quality of their work. That changed last year, when I delivered on my promise to deliver fair maps for Wisconsin by signing into law new, fair maps, undoing a decade of Wisconsinites living under some of the most gerrymandered maps in the United States. This also marked the first time in over 50 years that Wisconsin has had fair legislative maps enacted through the legislative process rather than through the courts.

However, we've still got more work to do. I would like to see a nonpartisan redistricting process enacted in the state, which I've proposed to do many times over the years. I've also proposed in each of my budgets to remove the Legislature's exemptions from our state's open records laws by requiring that records and correspondence of any member of the Legislature be included in a definition of a public record to provide greater transparency for the people of Wisconsin.

Wisconsin has a proud tradition of transparency and accountability, and in the spirit of our traditions, over the past six years my administration has proposed several proposals to cut red tape and increase transparency and accountability for Wisconsinites, and we will continue to do so.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

In the world that we live in today, there are so many new opportunities for our kids. And that's so important because every kid is different, and it's okay for our kids to keep their options open. Just take it from me – I studied zoology as an undergraduate at UW-Madison and was on the path to go to medical school to become a doctor. Then, I was given the opportunity of a lifetime to continue my education, and ended up becoming a teacher, then a principal, superintendent, and state superintendent before becoming Wisconsin's 46th governor. I ended up on a different path, but I've never doubted that I've been exactly where I needed to be to do the right thing when it mattered most.

No matter which path a young person chooses for themselves, I think the most important thing is to always lead with kindness, empathy, respect, and compassion toward others. It's part of our values and who we are as Wisconsinites and Americans, but it's also part of what makes someone a good person and a good leader. This means being willing to hear others' perspectives – and sometimes doing more listening than talking – and recognizing and respecting the fact that each and every person has walked different paths to get to where they are.

I also think it's important for our kids to stay engaged and be aware of the world around us. We need young people to seek out accurate and trustworthy information from local news, leaders, or neighbors to make informed decisions. We need young people to be civically engaged, to appreciate the greater good and care for our neighbors, and to take the chance to be a leader in your community. And it means engaging with each other with humility and civility and the understanding that our differences and our unique backgrounds make us smarter and stronger, not weaker.

When you look to the future, what excites you the most, and what concerns you the most?

One of the things I'm most excited about for Wisconsin is the fact that, for the first time

in a generation, we now have fair legislative maps. For over a decade, the people of Wisconsin lived under some of the most gerrymandered legislative maps in America until February 2024, when I was proud to sign new, fair maps into law that were passed with bipartisan support.

Wisconsin is a purple state, but for years, the Wisconsin State Legislature has passed radical, fringe policies and has consistently ignored the overwhelming majority of the people of our state. Now, that's going to change. Thanks to the fair maps I enacted, Wisconsin's legislative maps are fair, which means each party will win a majority of legislative seats when they earn a majority of your votes; our maps are responsive, which means we'll see more competitive, contested races so every vote matters; and, finally, these maps reflect the will of the people, which means the people will be able to elect Republican majorities or Democratic majorities or even a split Legislature if they want. But the most important part is that Wisconsinites decide. And that's how elections should work.

Fair legislative maps ensure there's more collaboration, partnership, and, ultimately, more compromise between parties in the Legislature – that's good for the people of Wisconsin. While I don't expect Republicans and Democrats to agree one hundred percent of the time, I am hopeful that this means there will be more opportunities for us to make progress on critical priorities like reforming our justice system, fixing our roads, funding our public schools, and expanding access to affordable housing, along with everything else in between. This is great news for Wisconsin.

On the other hand, I'm deeply concerned about the direction of our country and what's happening in Washington. In recent months, we have seen concerning actions, including attempts to gut and cut federal funding, programs, and agencies that Wisconsin's kids, families, farmers, seniors, and veterans depend on every day – nearly all of which were approved, created, and funded by the U.S. Congress. At the same time as we have seen efforts to undermine Congress, we have also seen dangerous rhetoric in Washington attempting to undermine our judiciary at every level, even flat-out disobeying our nation's highest court and threats to impeach and remove judges for no reason other than unfavorable decisions.

These actions make me deeply concerned about our state and our country as they represent a direct assault on our constitutional checks and balances – a foundational part of the fabric of our democracy – that ensure no one person has the sole power to make decisions like this unchecked. As Wisconsinites – and as Americans – I believe it is incumbent upon all of us to stand against these efforts, respect the rule of the law, and protect the American values we share and hold dear. ●