

April 6, 2026

The Honorable Tony Evers
Governor, State of Wisconsin
115 East State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702



Dear Governor Evers,

I need your help, as do our children. You know me and my work well. When I returned to Madison from Washington, DC in 2010, I did so for one main reason: to use my knowledge and skills to open doors of opportunity for Black and Brown children, and for disadvantaged families, across our state. **That is why I am writing to ask for your active, personal support for AB 818 / SB 818, the Demonstration Public School Act — and to share, with a broken heart, what I must now ask you to reconsider.**

I write today as a fifth-generation Madisonian. My family has called Madison home since my great-uncle [Samuel Pierce](#), who served as the executive messenger to five Wisconsin Governors in our state capitol, settled here in 1907 after working the railroad lines out of Chicago. His mother – my great-great-grandmother – [Hettie Pierce](#), died here in 1944 at the age of 115, after being born a slave in North Carolina in 1829. Her husband – my great-great-grandfather – [John Pierce](#), was among 49 Black men and 49 White men who helped write Louisiana's Reconstruction Act of 1867-68 after the Civil War. He also served two terms in the Louisiana State Legislature, led Jefferson Parish, and was a strong advocate for integrated public schools. I also write as the father of five adult Black children, three of whom were born in Wisconsin and all of whom were raised here. And today, I write with a broken heart, and I will tell you exactly why.

My Aunt Gretchen Caire raised me from the age of two-and-a-half on Madison's south side until I moved out at 16. With help from my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends, she gave me everything she could. But the schools I attended, from Franklin Elementary to Cherokee Middle and Madison West High School, weren't designed for kids like me. In 1989, I barely graduated from West with a 1.56 GPA, near the bottom of my class. I wasn't just a number back then. I was a boy, a young man who had no idea what he was capable of because no one in the education system had ever shown him. I was, however, a number in the 1987 Urban League of Greater Madison study that documented the widespread academic failure of Black children in Madison's public schools. That study highlighted a crisis that has never been fully addressed.

At seventeen, immediately after graduating from high school, I joined the United States Navy. In an environment filled with high expectations, discipline, structure, long hours, and people committed to preventing my failure, I was appointed as the leader of my troop. As the second-youngest member of Company 214, I led my crew of 96 men to achieve the best results in 14 years (1989) during boot camp at the former Naval Training Center in San Diego. Secretary of the Navy Admiral H. Lawrence Garrett III personally recognized my outstanding leadership and awarded my troop the Best Foot Forward Award. I then attended Hampton University, where, for the first time, I was expected to excel, and I did. This transformation forms the foundation of everything One City Schools does. It is also the foundation of this legislation.

After attending Hampton University, an HBCU in Hampton, Virginia, for one year, I returned to Madison in 1993 to enroll at UW-Madison. Since then, I have spent the past 32 years working to support children. I co-created the PEOPLE Program at UW-Madison, which has helped thousands of children of color, first-generation students, and economically disadvantaged high school students in Wisconsin prepare for, access, and graduate from four-year and two-year colleges both in Wisconsin and nationwide. This includes Senator Dora Drake, former State Representative Lakesha Meyers, and two current Madison Board of Education members (Savion Castro and Maia Pearson), all of whom are PEOPLE Scholars.

I also developed the prototype tutoring program that the Schools of Hope tutoring program in Madison was based on and helped create Nuestro Mundo, the first dual-language charter in MMSD, which eventually

expanded to nine schools. In 2001, as the founding president of the national Black Alliance for Educational Options, I commissioned the landmark national study on high school graduation rates: a report that revealed only half of Black and Latino students graduated and shifted the national focus from dropouts to graduation rates. This research influenced the accountability measures in No Child Left Behind and helped mobilize hundreds of billions of dollars in education reform investments. President Obama's administration appointed me as one of 64 expert reviewers for his Race to the Top initiative, and President Bush's administration appointed me to the Independent Rules Panel that advised the U.S. Congress on the evaluation and implementation of the No Child Left Behind Law. While leading Fight for Children in Washington, D.C., I also led the effort that secured an unprecedented \$1.4 billion investment in education spending in our nation's capital through the Three Sector Education Initiative.

I share this not to impress you, Governor. You know this history. I share this because I want you and your team to understand the importance of what I am about to say: **I am asking for your active, personal support for AB 818/SB 818, the Demonstration Public School Act. Our children need you. And I am deeply, painfully hurt by what I must now address.**

A Direct Response to Your Office's Statement

I was hurt and disappointed last week when I learned from a *Capital Times* reporter – and not directly from you or your team – that a representative in your office said you do not plan to support additional funding for One City Schools because you oppose “giving certain specifically designated charter schools more funding over other schools.” Governor, I respect you too much to let that stand without examination because **you are about to do exactly that: fund athletic programs that serve student populations who look nothing like the children Wisconsin has most systematically failed.** To see, with your backing, AB 1034 secure a 95-1 vote to invest millions of taxpayer dollars in athletics while our staff, Board, supporters, and I have appealed to you and other state reps for support — and after I have nearly died twice in this job, in 2020 and again in 2023, from the physical and emotional toll of raising millions of dollars year after year to fill a funding gap the state should have closed long ago — that hurt my soul. I am still here because these children deserve someone who refuses to quit. But I am also telling you plainly: I cannot sustain this alone, and neither can they..

Assembly Bill 1034, which your office has indicated you will sign, allocates **\$15 million annually in General Purpose Revenue to support UW athletic facilities:** \$14.6 million for UW-Madison, \$200,000 for UW-Milwaukee, and \$200,000 for UW-Green Bay. I understand and do not contest the NIL landscape universities must navigate. However, this investment reveals a contradiction at the heart of Wisconsin's stated principles.

The UW System's own retention and graduation data show that, across all UW campuses, **only 41% of Black freshmen who enrolled in 2019 graduated within six years.** At UW-Milwaukee, where the most Black undergraduate students in Wisconsin attend, the graduation rate was just 42%. Even as Wisconsin's population increased, the number of Black freshmen enrolling at UW-Madison actually *declined* — from 136 in 2009 to just 113 in 2019, a 17% drop — meaning the university, which receives \$14.6 million in annual athletic facility support, is enrolling *fewer* Black students than it did ten years ago. **Fewer than 1% of Black Wisconsin high school seniors score high enough on the ACT to be competitive for admission to UW-Madison.**

Have you attended a Badger football game recently? Year after year, you need binoculars to spot Black students in the stands, and it's not because they don't want to be there. It's because the pipeline meant to get them there is broken, underfunded, and now being dismantled at the federal level while Wisconsin looks away.

Governor, we want our children to be in that student section someday, not just as visitors but as UW degree-holders. If we do our part and Wisconsin fulfills its duty, the scholars at One City **will be** sitting in those stands — not as spectators, but as degree-holders, community leaders, and yes, future governors. We want to make sure Wisconsin is ready to let them. Right now, every level of the pipeline is working against them. **The question is not whether Wisconsin will designate institutions for targeted investment; it already does and will do so again with**

AB 1034. The real question is which children that investment will serve, and when in their lives Wisconsin decides they matter.

The Crisis Wisconsin Has Chosen Not to Solve

The crisis I returned home from Washington in 2010 to confront has persisted for generations, and Black children in Wisconsin still perform worse academically than those in any other state. In just the past twenty years, an estimated 92,000 Black fourth-graders — enough to fill Camp Randall Stadium — have not achieved reading proficiency. According to the 2024 NAEP, only 5% of Black fourth-graders read at grade level. That remains **the lowest among all 50 states**. Not just struggling. Not just behind. Dead Last. And on the ACT college entrance exam, fewer than 1% of Black seniors score competitively for UW-Madison, and fewer than 10% qualify for any UW campus, compared to 57% of their white peers. This is not a gap. It is a wall — one that has stood, documented and unmitigated, for at least sixty years. I know. I was part of it.

You also know that one out of every 36 Black adults in Wisconsin is in prison, the highest incarceration rate for Black adults in the United States. Black men are incarcerated at 14 times the rate of white men. This creates a cycle: inadequate early literacy leads to academic failure, which results in dropping out. Dropping out then leads to unemployment, and combined with a biased criminal justice system, it often ends in incarceration.

And now, the federal safety nets that once helped reduce these gaps are being dismantled. Since the Supreme Court's 2023 affirmative action decision, Black enrollment at the nation's 50 most selective universities has declined by 27%. Over 120 TRIO and Upward Bound programs have been cut, affecting thousands of disadvantaged students. More than \$350 million in Minority-Serving Institution grants have been eliminated or are at risk. Here in Madison, UW-Madison has shut down its entire DEI division, faces multiple federal civil rights investigations, and is under legal threat regarding the very scholarships that generations of Black Madisonians, including my family, fought to establish. **With the rollback of DEI in education and employment, a high-quality K-12 education may be the only viable pathway. Wisconsin cannot afford to abandon it or neglect supporting promising innovations like the one AB/SB 818 will create.**

A Question of Wisconsin's Priorities

The math behind Wisconsin's choices is straightforward. The \$15 million AB 1034 allocates annually to UW athletic facilities could fund three or four demonstration public schools across our state, or cover One City's annual per-pupil funding gap for nearly three times as many children we currently serve. If Wisconsin can dedicate \$14.6 million in GPR to ensure Badger fans fill Camp Randall on Saturdays, and pass a law that allows our state's higher education institutions to free up operating cash flow and spend millions on athletes, then we should be able to find and invest a quarter of that — \$4 million — to support children who have been left behind to someday walk through those university gates as students and graduates.

I am a recipient of the Distinguished Alumni Award from the UW Alumni Association. **I am a proud Badger and want Wisconsin Athletics to succeed. But Wisconsin must ask itself: Is the purpose of public investment to offer competitive entertainment for those already advantaged, or to create transformational opportunities for those left behind?** The answer should not be either/or. We are simply asking Wisconsin to consider whether the futures of the children we serve are worth one-quarter of the spending on athletic facilities for the university that enrolls the fewest of them.

One City Schools: The Evidence Is Already Here

We are not asking Wisconsin to gamble on a promise. We are asking it to invest in documented, DPI-verified evidence. **One City Preparatory Academy ranks at the 98.7th percentile statewide for academic growth and is #1 in Dane County.** Our elementary school ranks at the **75.8th percentile statewide, is #7 among all public**

elementary schools in Madison, and is #1 for Black students. Both schools have earned “Exceeds Expectations” from DPI for two consecutive years.

Black student reading proficiency grew from 2% to 21% in just one year: **more than a tenfold increase and more than doubling the statewide average for Black students.** Latino proficiency rose from 16% to 57%, now surpassing the statewide average for **all** Wisconsin students. We serve students from 35 ZIP codes: 94% are students of color, 70% are low-income, and 17% have special needs.

Innovations developed at One City are already expanding across the state and around the world. For example, EL Education, piloted here, encouraged MMSD to invest \$5.6 million to implement it in 31 elementary schools. Project Read AI, co-launched by One City’s co-founder, now reaches over 240,000 classrooms in 115 countries and serves more than 5,000 students in Wisconsin — all while receiving roughly half the per-pupil public funding of a traditional district. We have raised nearly \$52 million in private philanthropy over eleven years to bridge a gap that should never have been ours alone to bridge.

What distinguishes One City from other public charter schools in Wisconsin isn’t just our academic growth. **No other charter school in Wisconsin was established with the specific purpose of serving as a testing ground for innovation for others to learn from. One City was.** Our 2017 charter application explicitly mentioned the concept of demonstration schools. This legislation doesn’t create a new purpose for One City; it fulfills the purpose we were created for, and something I have dedicated my entire professional life to. Once again, I didn’t return home just to start a charter school. I came back to create a new pathway for charter schools to achieve their holistic mission and promise: to act as laboratories of innovation that help all public schools and the children they serve get better. The Demonstration Public School Act accomplishes this.

What the Demonstration Public School Act Will Do

The Demonstration Public School Act does not allocate funds from school districts. It is an additional investment in research and development to establish a teaching-hospital-like model for K-12 education. Just as teaching hospitals improve medicine through combined treatment, research, and training, One City acts as a laboratory that develops innovations, validates them via a formal UW research partnership, and freely shares them with every public school district in Wisconsin. The bill mandates this. Dissemination is not optional; it is part of the contract. I have attached a document to this email that further describes our impact as a demonstration public school model.

The \$4 million this legislation allocates annually would help us, if selected by the OEO, pursue a goal that should matter to every Wisconsin educator, policymaker, and parent: reaching **80% proficiency in ELA/Reading and Math among One City scholars within five to seven years.** That is not just an aspiration. It is the minimum we will accept, because anything less leaves our children economically stranded in an AI-driven economy that is already eliminating entry-level jobs that once provided young people without college credentials a starting point. We are developing the model, the data, and the documentation so that what works here can be implemented in classrooms across Wisconsin.

Wisconsin doesn't need to settle for just one demonstration school, and we're not asking it to. **One City aims to be the first, not the only.** The Act offers a framework: a designation, a performance-based contract, and a duty to share results. If One City succeeds, and strong evidence already indicates (with equitable state funding) that it will, Wisconsin should expand this model to Milwaukee, Racine, Green Bay, Kenosha, and every community where persistent achievement gaps demand a sustained, evidence-driven response. This is the perfect moment because the pathways that once allowed students of color access to higher education and economic opportunity are being dismantled at the federal level. Wisconsin cannot wait for Washington; it must build its own pipeline. It must do so now.

The \$19,232 per pupil allocated by this legislation would **still leave One City far behind the actual per-pupil expenditure of \$29,160 in the Madison Metropolitan School District (MMSD), which is entirely funded by public**

sources. We currently receive \$12,369 in state aid. The legislation would bring our state aid to \$19,232, still thousands below what MMSD spends on its highest-need schools, all from public funds. The per-pupil amount in this bill is set at the *average* public funding received by school districts across Wisconsin. No more. No less.

On accountability: One City undergoes annual, high-stakes performance evaluations by the University of Wisconsin's Office of Educational Opportunity, with enforceable consequences including closure. Our charter is renewed every five years solely based on results. Traditional public schools can be labeled "failing" for years without facing consequences. Our right to operate is not guaranteed by law; it must be earned each year.

A Personal Plea

Governor Evers, you are the only Wisconsin governor to serve a decade as State Superintendent of Public Instruction. You sat in those classrooms. You read that data. You looked into those children's faces. You know, better than any other governor in this state's history, what inadequate school funding causes. The Black Education timeline from 1960 to today attached to this letter details programs launched and abandoned by MMSD, gaps documented and left unaddressed: six decades of good intentions without consistent investment. The chance to break that cycle, with a bill already drafted and a champion who understands its stakes from personal experience, is slipping away. Your term ends in January 2027. **This is your moment to leave a lasting legacy.**

I am not asking you to passively support this bill. I am urging you to **advocate for it—actively, personally, and with a sense of urgency**—in your current negotiations with Speaker Vos and Senate President LeMahieu on the Education-Property Tax package. Tell them you want this. Tell them that \$4 million to launch Wisconsin's first demonstration public school, which is already delivering the strongest growth results for its most underserved children, is not a partisan request. It is a Wisconsin request.

As I finish this letter, I think of 25 eighth graders, mostly Black boys, who moved on to high school from One City this year. All of them are succeeding in local public and private high schools. I also think about the children who enter our schools two or more years behind in reading. Their parents work long hours and hold multiple jobs, many struggling to maintain transportation and keep a roof over their heads in Greater Madison's increasingly expensive housing market. Yet, with our support, their children are climbing the mountain and getting closer to reaching their North Star.

Governor Evers, after over a decade of relying on private philanthropy to support this work, we can no longer fill the funding gap ourselves. Without the state's leadership and investment, we will be forced to do what Wisconsin school districts have too often done: compromise our mission, slow progress, and ultimately let down the children who have no other options. **We cannot let another generation of Black and Brown children grow up facing impossible odds when we have documented, DPI-verified evidence that a different outcome is within reach, facilitated by a new strategy – A Demonstration Public School.**

Wisconsin's children are counting on you. We are counting on you, and we need your help.

With deep respect, admiration, and sincere hope,



Kaleem Caire
Founder & CEO, One City Schools, Inc.
President, One City Advocates, Inc.
cc: One City's Board of Directors, Key Partners, and Major Funders

On behalf of One City's Boards of Directors and our entire One City community.