

Governor Walz State of the State Remarks as Prepared

March 26, 2024

Thank you and good evening – let’s hear it again for the Owatonna High School choir!

Madam Speaker and Members of the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Madam Majority Leader and Members of the Minnesota Senate.

Madam Chief Justice, Distinguished Members of the Minnesota Supreme Court, and Chief Judge Segal.

My fellow Constitutional Officers.

Members of my Staff, Cabinet, and Administration.

Governor Dayton, and Mrs. Ana Dayton.

Distinguished Tribal Leaders.

Members of the Minnesota National Guard.

Chaplain Mark Patrick.

Superintendent Elstad, Principal Kath, the staff and faculty at Owatonna High School, and especially the students.

Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan, and Minnesota’s Second Gentleman, Tom Weber.

Minnesota’s First Lady, Gwen Walz.

Honored Guests, and my fellow Minnesotans.

Maybe it’s the smell of a freshly-sharpened pencil.

Maybe it’s the sight of the desks lined up perfectly in rows.

Maybe it’s the sound of nervous, youthful chatter filling the hallways.

But whatever it is, if you’re a teacher, nothing – *nothing* – beats the first day of school.

Take it from me and Gwen. For many years of our lives, we celebrated New Year's Day not in January, but in the early fall, when the doors opened and the kids came back from summer break. The first day of school is all about hope, and opportunity, and *possibility*.

That's never been more true than it was here in Owatonna last fall, when the doors opened on this beautiful new building – a 317,000-square foot, state-of-the-art symbol of this community's commitment to its children.

When you walk through the doors for the first time as a student, the whole world opens up for you. The classrooms here are gorgeous, full of natural light and modern technology. And as you explore, you'll find not just wood, metal, and engine shops, but next-generation hydroponics equipment, a nursing lab, a full commercial kitchen, and so much more.

This building is a factory, and what it manufactures are *futures*. You see, the curb appeal is undeniable. But this building wasn't designed with the *first* day of school in mind, but rather the *last*.

When students walk out of here for the last time as graduating seniors, they'll each have a ticket in their pocket – a ticket to a good-paying career they can feel excited about pursuing. They'll go on to become construction managers and firefighters, farmers, welders, and cardiac surgeons. And not only will they have the *foundation* to pursue any life they can dream of, many will have advanced *credentials* to give them a leg up on the journey.

Think about how many young people will walk out those doors each spring, full of passion and purpose, ready to make a contribution to this community and to the world, ready to work and build and grow, ready to make the state of our state even stronger than it is today.

I came to Owatonna tonight to celebrate this magnificent school and discuss the work we're doing to improve the lives of children across Minnesota. But I also want people to remember just how many things had to go right for this vision to become reality.

Everybody in town knows the backstory: The old high school, while beautiful, was a hundred years old, and people in the community had been talking about replacing it for decades. But it wasn't until a few years ago that leaders in the public and private sectors came together and decided it was time to stop talking and start building.

Federated Insurance – a cornerstone of Owatonna since the early 20th century – pledged a major investment, not just for the good of their community, but for the good of their future workforce. Other companies joined in, offering not just money but equipment and expertise.

Owatonna voters overwhelmingly approved a bonding referendum. And, finally, this community was ready to take the plunge and actually get some shovels in the ground.

That small window of opportunity – that brief moment when the stars aligned – produced a community institution that will stand for decades and serve thousands and thousands of kids.

You know, most of the time, politics is incremental, frustrating, sometimes gridlocked altogether.

But every once in a while, you get an opportunity to make a whole lot of progress in a short amount of time. It happened here in Owatonna in 2019. And, after half a century of waiting and working, it happened in Saint Paul in 2023.

I couldn't be more proud of the work we've done in our window of opportunity to improve education inside the walls of this school, and in every school across the state:

We've given our children a brighter future by making the largest investment in public education in our state's history.

We've increased teacher pay and doubled down on our efforts to recruit teachers from more diverse backgrounds.

We've expanded access to mental health resources, social workers, nurses, and chemical dependency counselors.

We've invested in making sure every student can read at their grade level.

We've expanded special education and career and technical education – as part of our commitment to making sure every Minnesota student receives a world-class education, regardless of where they live or where they go to school.

We're working to make Minnesota the best state in the country for a kid to grow up. And our work extends far past the classroom.

We've expanded access to pre-k and affordable child care.

We've made a billion-dollar investment in affordable housing.

We've established free public college tuition for low-income families.

We've made it easier to balance career and family by making paid family and medical leave the law of the land.

We've made Minnesota a more welcoming place for all by outlawing conversion therapy for LGBTQ youth and putting in place new protections for trans Minnesotans.

We've invested hundreds of millions to bring competitive, high-paying jobs to Minnesota and expand our economy with an eye towards the green energy jobs of the future.

We've expanded the right to organize – because Minnesota will *always* be a labor state.

We've lived up to our responsibility to our elders by cutting taxes for seniors.

We've invested \$300 million in public safety aid for communities across the state to fight crime and improve emergency services.

We've struck a blow against climate change by putting Minnesota on a pathway to 100 percent clean energy by the year 2040.

We've expanded voting rights and made it easier for people to vote. Thanks to the leadership of Secretary Simon.

We've announced plans to stop medical debt from ruining people's credit – and cut the interest rate on that debt to zero. Thanks to the leadership of Attorney General Ellison.

And we've put food on the table for struggling families by passing a new child tax credit that is estimated to cut child poverty in Minnesota by a third.

Speaking of putting food on the table, we're already seeing real results from our groundbreaking commitment to providing free school breakfast and lunch for every child in Minnesota.

The data shows that 30 percent more kids are eating breakfast, and 11 percent more eating lunch, than before – illustrating the scope of the problem we're working to solve. All those kids were going without before, and now they can focus on their studies with full stomachs.

And yet, for some reason, some politicians, especially from other states, roll their eyes when we talk about the importance of feeding and educating our children. They say it's not the role of government to make sure kids can eat and learn. Instead, they're spending their time and energy and political capital picking fights with beer companies and librarians.

Look, speaking on behalf of Minnesota to the leaders of other states, we're happy to take your jobs, and your private-sector investment dollars, and your brilliant young people. But we're not going to take your radical ideas.

That's especially true when it comes to interfering with people's families.

A bunch of judges down in Alabama recently ruled that a frozen embryo holds the same legal status as a human being. And, as a direct result, fertility clinics across the state closed their doors, leaving women and men who are desperate to start or grow their families with nowhere to turn.

Let me say something personal here: Even if you've never gone through the hell of infertility, someone you know has. When Gwen and I were having trouble getting pregnant, the anxiety and frustration blotted out the sun. All we wanted was something that seemed to come so easy for others: the chance to bring new life into the world. What those judges did was a direct attack on my family. My children. Gwen and I will not forget it. We will not forgive it. And neither will thousands of other moms and dads across this state.

When *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022, the door was wide open for this kind of attack on families. Now the attack is here. And it's up to us to stop it.

That's why, here in Minnesota, we took action after *Roe v. Wade* fell, writing protections for reproductive freedom into our state laws, and making sure that people – not politicians – can make their own reproductive choices. And that includes IVF.

So let me make this clear: As long as I'm Governor, IVF will continue to offer a lifeline of hope for Minnesota families.

Meanwhile, we're going to keep building.

Building families.

Building communities.

Building more roads and bridges, more career pathways, and more schools.

Building more opportunities for our kids, and their kids, and for generations to come.

Part of that work includes following up on the good work this legislature has already done. Things like building a new state agency focused on children, youth, and families and implementing programs like paid leave or legalized adult-use cannabis require an enormous amount of work. And I want to take a moment tonight to thank all the state employees who are working around the clock to serve Minnesotans and make this Legislature's vision a reality.

And part of the work includes building a foundation for more success. Just recently, we reached agreement on our next set of budget targets – and I want to thank our legislative leaders for their cooperation and dedication as we worked together on that.

Meanwhile, earlier this winter, Lieutenant Governor Flanagan and I announced a major new infrastructure plan – an ambitious effort to invest in the things that make our communities strong: clean water and safe streets and affordable housing.

Our plan invests in making sure every community has safe streets. Violent crime declined in Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and across the state last year. Still, we take public safety seriously, and we're putting real funding behind that commitment, including expanding capacity for the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension and planning for a new Minnesota State Patrol headquarters.

Our plan also invests in making sure every Minnesotan has a safe and affordable place to call home. We're backing the development of multifamily housing so that seniors, families, and anyone facing homelessness can find a place to be. And we want to update the Minneapolis Veterans Home to better serve those who have served us.

Our plan invests in making sure every family has clean water to drink. We want to invest in grants and low-interest loans to replace lead pipes and remove so-called “forever chemicals” from our drinking water.

And we want to invest in making sure every building owned by Minnesota taxpayers is in good repair. Buildings like the ones at Minnesota State and the U are in desperate need of renovation, and our infrastructure plan has funding to make it happen – and it will happen with *union* labor.

These initiatives will make an enormous difference in the real lives of real people across our state. There’s no reason we can’t get them done this session. And there’s no reason both parties can’t be *part* of getting it done this session.

I know we won’t agree on everything. But safe streets? Clean water? Affordable housing? Surely we can agree on *that*. So join me – and not just at the ribbon-cutting, but in the work to get it done.

There’s one more thing I want to talk about.

I walked around the halls of this school before I got up here in the auditorium to talk to you tonight. And I tried to put myself in the shoes of the kids who walk these halls every day.

I want those kids to feel hopeful.

I want those kids to feel inspired.

I want those kids to feel cared for.

But the one thing I never want those kids to feel – the one thing no kid should feel in any school in our state – is afraid.

High school students should be worried about pop quizzes and prom dates – not mass shootings. And that’s why, as Governor, I’ve made it a point to take on the NRA.

Last year, we implemented red flag laws and strengthened background checks. And by doing so, make no mistake: We kept guns out of the wrong hands. We saved lives.

Tonight, I’m urging the legislature to join me in making our schools – and our communities – a little bit safer still by strengthening requirements for safe storage of firearms, reporting lost and stolen guns, and increasing criminal penalties for straw purchasers.

This is a dangerous world. We were reminded of that this year when three of our bravest first responders lost their lives at the hands of a man with a gun he shouldn’t have had. We know that we can’t legislate against every act of violence but surely we can do more.

Asking our neighbors to keep their guns stored safely, and to report to law enforcement when their guns are lost or stolen, is a simple step that could save lives. And it's high time we took that step here in Minnesota.

Look: If Minnesotans want to look at our record of accomplishment and keep sending us to Saint Paul, well, I wouldn't mind that one bit. We've got lots more work to do, and as long as we have this window of opportunity, we'll keep on making as much progress as we can.

But I know that public service is not a permanent privilege for any one party – nor, for that matter, any one person.

No matter which party we belong to or how long we've been in office, each of us had a first day on the job. And it probably felt a lot like the first day of school. The nerves. The excitement. Figuring out where the bathrooms are and who you're going to sit with at lunch.

Well, the truth is, each of us is going to have a last day in office, too. We'll leave a little older – maybe a lot older, maybe a little grayer, hopefully wiser. And when we walk out the doors at the Capitol in Saint Paul for the last time, we'll have the opportunity to ask ourselves: What kind of future have we built – not for us, but for our kids, and for the state we love?

I don't know how long this window of opportunity will stay open for us. But I can commit to you that I will do everything in my power to make sure we keep picking the fights that matter and building things that last.

A generation from now, nobody will remember what silly fight was getting politicians in the news back in 2024. But the things *we're* fighting for will still stand. Better schools like this one. Cleaner water and safer streets. Better-paying jobs and more prosperous businesses. A state that invests in our children and our future.

That's what it means to build. That's what it means to grow. And that's what I think it means to lead.

Tonight, I'm proud to report that the state of our state is strong, Minnesota – because the *kids* of our state are better equipped to thrive.

And if you ever doubt that, just come on down to Owatonna. Take a walk through these halls. And join me in dreaming on the futures that will be built right here.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the great state of Minnesota!

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