



Memorandum

To: Michael Best Clients
From: Michael Best
Date: August 25, 2025
Subject: Meet the Cabinet with DCF Secretary Jeff Pertl

About Secretary Jeff Pertl (*Verbatim from DCF website*):

Secretary-designee Jeff Pertl was appointed by Gov. Evers in September 2024, after serving as the Department of Children and Families (DCF) deputy secretary for six years.

Prior to working at DCF, Jeff spent a decade as the senior policy advisor at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI), working on issues around early childhood education, school finance, and closing the achievement gap. He was the liaison to DCF, working collaboratively on early childhood and family policy issues.

Jeff was as a long-time county supervisor and possesses a wealth of experience in local government financial, personnel, and human services issues. Additionally, he served several years on the Wisconsin Counties Association (WCA) board of directors, working on statewide issues like youth justice reform, child welfare funding, and early childhood education access.

As a child of divorced parents, Jeff experienced firsthand the vital role child support has in creating a positive, stable family environment. As an adult, he and his wife have been licensed foster parents, and their two boys were adopted at birth in Wisconsin. Both boys love participating in their neighborhood early care and education program.

The “Meet the Cabinet” event, hosted by Adam Barr of Michael Best Strategies, served as a platform for clients and guests to engage directly with members of Governor Tony Evers’ leadership team. The featured special guest was Secretary Jeff Pertl of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF), who shared insights into his personal and professional journey, as well as the department’s current priorities and challenges. The event welcomed both in-person and virtual attendees, including representatives from a diverse array of Wisconsin organizations.

Secretary Pertl began by grounding his remarks in personal experience. He spoke candidly about growing up in a household affected by divorce and addiction, and about his and his wife’s path as foster and adoptive parents. These experiences have deeply informed his understanding of the systemic barriers families face – particularly those related to financial insecurity and access to

supportive services. His career has spanned roles in education policy, local government, and child welfare, consistently focused on improving outcomes for children and families.

A central theme of the discussion was the growing economic pressure on young families, especially in relation to childcare and housing costs. Pertl highlighted those childcare expenses alone can consume 20-30% of a family's median income per child, and in some areas, combined housing and childcare costs can exceed a family's entire income. Despite the existence of the Wisconsin Shares childcare subsidy, only about 20% of families benefit from it, leaving the majority to shoulder the full financial burden.

Pertl also addressed structural issues within the childcare system. He noted a shift from family-based care to larger, center-based models, which has led to reduced geographic accessibility – particularly in rural communities now facing “childcare deserts.” The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the essential nature of childcare, as providers remained open to support frontline workers, often at great personal risk and for minimal compensation.

To address these challenges, Pertl advocated for systemic transformation of childcare akin to the evolution of public education. He proposed policy innovations such as expanding subsidies to middle-income families (as implemented in New Mexico), transitioning to provider-based payment models, and incentivizing business to support employee childcare needs.

In discussing child welfare, Pertl emphasized a shift toward prevention. Wisconsin has seen a significant reduction in out-of-home placements over the past 15 years, a trend driven by bipartisan policy efforts and a focus on minimizing trauma associated with family separation. Reunification remains the primary goal, and Pertl highlighted opportunities to remove financial barriers to this process—such as ending the interception of child support and disability benefits for children in foster care.

Pertl also provided insight into the legislative and budgetary process, describing efforts to build bipartisan coalitions and secure funding for childcare initiatives. These efforts included direct engagement with lawmakers, data-driven advocacy, and collaboration with lobbyists and stakeholders. While recent budget allocations introduced new funding mechanisms—such as support for four-year-olds in childcare—Pertl acknowledged that the system remains in flux and requires continued investment and reform.

Looking ahead, Pertl outlined a vision for a more equitable and sustainable childcare system in Wisconsin. This includes expanding access for middle-class families, implementing provider-based payments, and fostering public-private partnerships to support working parents. He cited New Mexico and several Northeastern states as models for progressive childcare policy.

During the Q&A session, attendees raised questions about legislative opportunities. Pertl identified bipartisan interest in child welfare reforms and tribal childcare parity. He also shared strategic advice for advocacy, emphasizing the importance of balancing long-term goals with achievable short-term wins to maintain momentum and organizational focus.

Overall, the event provided a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing Wisconsin's families and highlighted the Department of Children and Families' commitment to innovative, inclusive, and family-centered policy solutions.