



June 28, 2026

Governor Brings Official Commendation to Fiddle School Finale Concert

Accepting a longstanding invitation

By Joe Bjordal

Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers attended the Finale Concert of this year's West Denmark Fiddle School on June 18, accepting a longstanding invitation. To mark the occasion, he brought official greetings from the State of Wisconsin, commending Haugaard's West Denmark Fiddle School "for its years of dedicated service to the state."

The concert, marking the conclusion of the annual, week-long event, featured over 60 string performers—students and instructors—performing outdoors, on the Great Lawn between the Parish Hall and the Dane School.



In the photo - The Finale Concert of the 2026 Haugaard's West Denmark Fiddle School, performed on June 18.

Photo from the Fiddle School Facebook Page

The Certificate of Commendation goes on to say that "for 11 years, Haugaard's West Denmark Fiddle School has brought people of all ages, cultures, countries and musical styles together to learn, play, and share the joy of music." The Commendation notes that the Fiddle School was

founded in 2015 and that the community surrounding and supporting the school has brought “many beloved Danish traditions” to West Denmark and has spread a “passion for music.”

Governor Evers signed the Commendation on June 11, 2026 and concluded by saying “On this occasion, I extend my congratulations to Haugaard’s West Denmark Fiddle School upon the conclusion of its season, and I wish everyone involved many more years of service and success.”

The Certificate of Commendation was officially received by Mark Pedersen, director of the West Denmark Heritage Council, an independent nonprofit organization closely affiliated with West Denmark Lutheran Church. The Council got its start in 2012 when Pedersen had the idea to bring Nordic and folk music concerts to his childhood church. The West Denmark Heritage Council is also the producer and presenter of Haugaard’s Fiddle School.

Pedersen said there “were no politics” at the visit, just a love of music and tradition. He said it was arranged in advance that the governor would simply attend as a guest, with no introduction and no fanfare. “It’s what he wanted,” said Pedersen.



In the photo - (back row left to right):** Marta Pedersen Lee, Elsa Pedersen, Kristi Pedersen, Mark Pedersen, Tony Evers, Kathy Evers, Viggo Pedersen, and Dagny Pedersen; (front row): Annelise Lee, and Arn Pedersen. **Photo by Emma Weinrich, Office of the Governor

A chance meeting and an invitation

What some in attendance called a surprise visit by the governor, was anything but. It was carefully planned and orchestrated—more than two years in the making.

“What are the chances that the Governor of Wisconsin would end up sitting next to me in a 16,000-seat arena?” said Pedersen in a recent telephone interview. But, that’s what happened when Pedersen attended a basketball game at the Kohl Center in Madison “a couple of years ago.” He ended up sitting next to Governor Tony Evers and his wife, Kathy.

“I resisted the urge to talk politics,” said Pedersen, “and instead told him about the West Denmark Fiddle School, that had just finished its first year, and invited him to learn more about it and perhaps come for a visit.

Official and personal responsibilities prevented a visit by the governor—until now. Earlier this summer sEvers wrote to Pedersen telling him that it would likely work out to visit this year. Over the course of what Pedersen termed “four or five emails,” the visit was set and the Chief Executive of Wisconsin got to experience something that is unique to his state and to Lutheran congregations in the United States.

A European idea comes to West Denmark



The idea to hold a Fiddle School at West Denmark dates back to 2013 when famed Danish violinist and composer Harald Haugaard and his wife, Helene Blum, performed a concert at the Nisswa, Minnesota Stammen Festival. Pedersen was serving as a sound technician for the event, got to meet Haugaard, and invited him to give a concert at West Denmark Church.

By this time Haugaard had finished hosting his fourth annual International Fiddle School in Breklum, Germany. There, according to the school’s website, he brought together a group of “the best musicians and tutors from the contemporary Nordic, Anglo/Celtic and Alpine music traditions.” The focus was on playing music, singing, dancing, making new friends, and building community.

In the photo - Harald Haugaard waits to take the stage at the 2026 West Denmark Fiddle School Finale Concert. Photo by Liz Dodge

A discussion began about hosting a similar school—with the same goals—at West Denmark. The next year Pedersen and his wife traveled to Breklum to observe the International Fiddle School. Seeing that it could easily be replicated on the West Denmark campus, a decision was made to

launch the American version of Haugaard's Fiddle School in the summer of 2015. There were only 23 students, but enrollment has grown to the maximum over the years. The 2026 West Denmark School—the 11th annual—drew 60 students.

Haugaard was joined at this year's school by four other instructors: Emma Kragh-Elmoe and Sebastian Bloch, from Denmark; Hanneke Casel, from Boston; and Kevin Hendersen, from the Shetland Islands. At the annual Instructors Concert on June 16, the group played to a packed house at West Denmark Lutheran Church. Everyone involved in the school—instructors and students—performed the Finale Concert on June 18.

Registration for the 2027 West Denmark Fiddle School is already officially open on the school's website at www.wdfiddleschool.org. There are also photos and videos from this year's Fiddle School on Facebook at: www.facebook.com/wdfiddleschool.org.

Affirming a welcoming partnership

"The Finale Concert was just one of those magical nights at West Denmark Lutheran Church," said the Rev. Shawn Mai, interim pastor. "The weather, the community, the setting, with the historic Dane School as a backdrop, and the music were all beyond compare."

"We are truly blessed to have this working relationship with the Heritage Council as, together, we welcome the wider community to West Denmark Lutheran Church. It's the core of our being and ministry," said Mai.

*Joe Bjordal, a freelance communicator, is a friend of
and consultant to West Denmark Lutheran Church.*