



State moves beyond No Child Left Behind

SCOTT BAUER | Associated Press | Posted: Saturday, July 9, 2011 10:00 pm

Republican Gov. Scott Walker and state education superintendent Tony Evers, a pair of politicians who have fought bitterly in the past year on issues ranging from vouchers to the union rights of teachers, are uniting to create a new system that will hold all publicly funded schools in Wisconsin accountable for their success.

The idea is to create a system that can replace the rules of the federal No Child Left Behind law, which Walker and Evers agree are ineffective. It's a step taken by a number of other states, including Idaho and Kentucky, and one both men say they're excited to take together.

"We want an assessment system that lets everybody know exactly what's happening, both those schools that are achieving well and those that have more challenges," Walker said in an interview Friday with Evers, during which they frequently nodded at each other in agreement.

"As leaders we have to find common ground," Evers said.

No Child Left Behind requires schools to meet 41 benchmarks for student achievement. A school's annual yearly progress toward improvement is calculated based on statistics that include test participation, academic achievement and graduation rates. Every few years, the percentage of students who must pass state tests increases.

By 2014, 100 percent of students are required to be proficient in both math and reading. That is a target no one expects schools to meet, which is helping to motivate the push to come up with alternatives.

What that alternative will look like in Wisconsin isn't yet clear. Walker and Evers envision convening a team of education leaders to develop a new accountability system with the goal of having a framework for discussion available this fall and a final version done by the spring.

The goal is to create a system that measures the effectiveness of schools using a variety of measures, including a new statewide test. It will identify high and low-performing schools, and Evers said deciding on the penalty to impose on those schools that fail to meet the state's new standards will be a part of the group's work.

The new approach will also expand the number of schools being measured for success. No Child Left Behind doesn't cover private schools that accept students with vouchers. It applies to public schools and charter schools.

Miles Turner, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, said supporters of public schools - such as his group - are ready to work together with those backing private schools to help develop the new system.

"Our interests are public schools, all public schools in Wisconsin, and ensuring that all organizations or schools that receive public money should be held accountable on how they spend that public money," he said. "It's absolutely essential that choice and charter schools be at the table with public schools."

Others aren't as enthusiastic, including the Wisconsin Education Association Council. The statewide teachers union vehemently opposed Walker's efforts to strip the union bargaining rights of the state's public school teachers and other public workers.

"Honestly, we're not clear or very trusting about where the governor's going with this," said Mary Bell, the union's president. "The governor has a record with us of saying or campaigning on one thing and implementing something that is even more disrespectful than we thought it was."

But Evers and Walker said they hoped their coming together will set an example and help motivate other education groups that have fought in the past to put aside their differences and work together.

Those who have committed to participating say they will try, at least for now.

"Maybe this is not the group that has demonstrated how to get along the past, but we don't really have a choice," said John Ashley, head of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. "It may seem to some destined to fail, (but) there's an expectation out there that we have to do things differently."

Jim Bender, who represents School Choice Wisconsin, a group that represents more than 100 private schools accepting students paying with vouchers, said the political disagreements should be put aside in favor of children's best interests.

"It will easily come down to what your perspective is," Bender said. "If you're there about getting the best educational results for students, there shouldn't be any problems. If you're there to rehash political arguments of the past six months, you won't get anything done."