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State aims for new way to gauge school progress

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Area school officials Monday gave early support to state efforts to create a new measure of student progress that could replace federally mandated No Child Left Behind testing.

The new accountability system could better demonstrate student improvement over a school term and focus more on preparing for college or the workplace, according to recent announcements from Gov. Scott Walker and the state Department of Public Instruction.

School districts now test students once a year. Those results often don't show the whole picture and can leave schools branded as bad - even if teachers do a good job, said West Salem Superintendent Troy Gunderson.

"The current system doesn't work very well at all," Gunderson said.

District officials in Onalaska and La Crosse echoed Gunderson's concerns and applauded state officials for seeking a solution that might more accurately represent what happens in the classroom.

Walker and State Superintendent Tony Evers will join a committee of other state officials to design a new system intended for all public-funded schools, including charter or choice schools.

A "growth-oriented" model of accountability will better indicate progress by students with difficulties who might not have the highest test scores, said Randy Nelson, La Crosse School District superintendent.

"I thought that was a nice breakthrough," Nelson said of the announcement. "Something we have been watching for."

The changes would reward schools for moving students forward, said Onalaska Superintendent Fran Finco.

"It will give them the credit that they should be getting now," Finco said.

State officials are entering the planning stage only weeks after U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan indicated he would exempt some states from No Child Left Behind if they reformed testing. State officials intend to seek the waiver and want to start rolling out changes in the 2012-13 school year, said DPI spokesman Patrick Gasper.

"We need a more robust testing system that provides credit for growth over time," Gasper said. "We need all schools in Wisconsin to be performing and having students perform."