

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

THERE ARE NO “D OR F” SCHOOLS IN WISCONSIN

Have you ever had the feeling that you had to set the record straight or needed to tell, as Paul Harvey used to say, "the rest of the story"? Well, having served on the statewide school report card committee, I can't sit quietly and let the valuable work of that distinguished group be distorted and misused.

This story started in August of 2011, when State Superintendent Tony Evers and Governor Walker created and co-chaired the School and District Accountability Design Team for a new statewide accountability system. Also co-chairing this team were Republicans Senator Luther Olsen and Representative Steve Kestell, who chair the Education legislative committees in the senate and assembly.

This group's mission was to “design a fair and accurate accountability system that measures the growth and attainment of all students....” Serving on this 29 member Design Team for five months were representatives of the following groups: Wisconsin PTA, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, University Of Wisconsin System, Wisconsin Technical Colleges, Wisconsin School Administrator Associations, School Choice Wisconsin, Wisconsin Charter Schools Association, Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools, Wisconsin Indian Education Association and several other groups.

This Design Team was broadly diverse and politically bipartisan. I believe that members of this statewide Design Team came together with a sense of optimism that we were participating in a process that would create a new statewide report card that would fairly and accurately measure the quality of both public and private schools in Wisconsin. Governor Walker and the other co-chairs of this Design Team attended all of the meetings. There were multiple presentations by university professors and Departments of Education from other states; i.e., Florida and Massachusetts. Viewpoints of all groups were freely expressed.

After extensive review and many pointed discussions, the Design Team concluded its work on December 20, 2011. All decisions were reached by consensus except for one major sticking point. The Design Team was split on whether to use letter grades, A through F, or categories of performance in the final report to the public. One group believed that an A through F grading system, as is used in Florida and Mississippi, would be easier for the public to understand. The other group supported a reporting system used in Massachusetts that categorized schools by how well they met clearly defined expectations.

A vote was finally taken on this contentious issue and by a margin of two to one, the Design Team voted to reject the use of letter grades believing that labeling schools as “D or F” or “failing schools” was an inaccurate measure of how well they were performing.

There was never any discussion of using the report card to create a broad policy mandate that would send taxpayer money to private schools. Unfortunately, we set out to create a reporting system and wound up creating a political tool to serve a hidden agenda. It was widely recognized by Design Team members that this initial report card was largely based on one test, the WKCE, which will be phased out in the next few years and, therefore, could not accurately be used as a definitive measure of school performance. Three of the four co-chairs of the Design Team and the vast majority of members I have talked to from the Design Team, including some who voted for grades, have indicated they do not support using the report card to classify schools as “failing” or assign letter grades.

It is unfortunate that the Governor, contrary to the wishes of the majority of the Design Team and the other co-chairs of the committee, is saying there are “D and F” schools and characterizing them as “failing.” Many of us feel betrayed that our good faith effort to create a fair and balanced accountability system that would help schools improve has been used to implement a statewide policy of school vouchers that will hurt public education in our state. All taxpayers in Wisconsin will be paying for the expansion of private school vouchers to schools that have virtually no accountability. The citizens of Wisconsin need to realize that their local school districts will suffer a loss of funding by this expansion of private school vouchers. What could have been a valid report card system, capable of evolving into an accurate measure of performance and used to improve schools, has become a political tool to expand a voucher system, robbing public schools of vital support. Nowhere in statute, policy, rule or regulation will you find the words, “failing schools” or the letter grades “D and F,” except in the rhetoric of the politicians who want to advance private school vouchers.

Submitted By:
Dr. Miles Turner
Executive Director
Wisconsin Association of School
District Administrators