



Accountability for schools

Diverse group promises to work together to forge a new system

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Wisconsin is pursuing needed educational reforms focused on improving student achievement and graduating students prepared for future success. And we're working to implement rigorous new academic standards in line with high-performing countries.

We're also reforming and modernizing student assessments, investing in comprehensive and groundbreaking statewide data systems that will improve teaching and are working together to create fair, meaningful educator evaluation systems that will foster effectiveness. Most recently, we've joined together to improve early reading outcomes for all Wisconsin children.

As Wisconsin embraces these critical reforms, one of the most important components remains unchanged: how we hold schools and districts accountable for the performance of their students. For the past decade, the federal No Child Left Behind law has forced one-size-fits-all mandates and labels that are not improving our schools.

On the contrary, if something doesn't change, every public school here and nationwide soon will be labeled as "failing" and forced to implement ineffective sanctions. While there are certainly schools in need of improvement, the current accountability system is clearly broken.

For example, consider a high-poverty school that moves its eighth-graders, who were previously reading at a fourth-grade level, to a seventh-grade reading level in one year - a tremendous achievement. That school and those teachers should be held up as exemplary. Our current federally mandated accountability system, which doesn't recognize growth as an important factor in school success, would actually label that school as failing.

Further, imagine a high school collaborating with local colleges to offer rigorous college preparatory coursework and opportunities for students to earn college credit, as well as extensive partnerships with local employers for student apprenticeships and industry certifications. That school's students are truly being prepared for college and career success, but our current accountability system ignores this critical goal and restricts innovation.

As Congress debates NCLB reauthorization and U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan signals a new willingness to provide states flexibility to advance reform, education and political leaders from across Wisconsin are joining together to reform this broken system.

Starting this summer, we have agreed to work collaboratively to develop a new accountability system

focused on graduating every child ready for college or career. Over the coming weeks and months, we will work together to develop a model that is right for Wisconsin.

This system will hold schools accountable not just for whether students are performing at grade level, but also for how much student performance is growing from year to year. We also will consider other valid indicators - beyond test scores - that measure progress to college and career readiness, such as advanced coursework, college credit or industry certifications earned while in high school and improved dropout and graduation rates, for example. By considering multiple measures of student success, we can provide accurate, transparent and comprehensive information that promotes improvement in every school.

Parents and community members deserve to know which schools are succeeding and which are not. Most important, we can use this information to provide appropriate support to low-performing schools and ensure all students and schools are continuously collaborating and improving.

We believe that every school enrolling publicly funded students - traditional public schools, charter schools or private schools in choice programs - should be part of this new accountability system. Too often, Wisconsin's education reform conversation has centered around which type of school is better, instead of how to ensure a world-class education for all Wisconsin children, regardless of which school they attend. Ultimately, nothing is more important than student learning, and we believe all schools should be held accountable for this above all else.

We also know that we can't improve education in our state without listening to the parents and students who depend on our schools, the educators who work in our classrooms, the administrators and board members who drive local decisions and the community members who support strong schools. We will create multiple opportunities for participation and feedback, and we hope that you, the people of Wisconsin, will contribute to this effort.

On some issues, there are many differing views on how to move Wisconsin forward. As we strive to make our state a better place for future generations, we can and must find a way to work together to advance our shared priorities. We all believe that each and every Wisconsin child deserves a world-class education.

By working together to create an accurate, fair and innovative accountability system for schools that drives instructional improvement and greater levels of college and career readiness, we will help all Wisconsin children thrive.

This op-ed was submitted by Gov. Scott Walker; state school Superintendent Tony Evers; state Sen. Luther Olsen, Senate Education Committee chairman; state Rep. Steve Kestell, chairman of the Assembly Education Committee; John Ashley, Wisconsin Association of School Boards; John Gee, Wisconsin Charter Schools Association; Matt Kussow, Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools; Jim Lynch, Association of Wisconsin School Administrators; James Bender, School Choice Wisconsin; Gary Myrah, Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services; Miles Turner, Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators; and Woody Wiedenhoef, Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials.

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