

# Walker, education leaders seek new school evaluation system

## New standards would replace federally imposed system viewed as a failure

By Alan J. Borsuk, Journal Sentinel, Inc

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A system of clear, plentiful and sophisticated information for judging the quality of almost every school in Wisconsin, replacing a system that leaves a lot to be desired on those fronts - that is the goal of a collaboration that includes Gov. Scott Walker, state Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers and leaders of eight statewide education organizations.

Walker and Evers said Friday that they will seek approval from the U.S. Department of Education to allow the new school accountability system to replace the decade-old, federally imposed one they label as broken.

They want at least a first version of the new system to be ready by spring and to apply it to outcomes for schools in the 2011-'12 school year.

The new accountability program would include every school that accepts publicly funded students, which means that private schools in the state-funded voucher program would, for the first time, be subject to the same rules as public schools for making a wealth of data available to the public. Charter schools and virtual schools also would participate.

The drive to create a new reporting system is part of a broader array of initiatives on which Walker and Evers are cooperating and finding agreement, including development of a new system of standardized tests, a databank with information on every student in the state, and potentially far-reaching changes in how teachers are evaluated, paid, and, in some cases, fired.

With the end - at least for now - of the bitter battle over cutting school budgets and squelching collective bargaining for teachers, Walker is wading into the nonfinancial issues of school life. The results could go far to remake the way schools are run, the way children are taught, and what parents can know and can choose for their children's education.

Democrats and teachers union officials, none of whom signed on to the new collaboration, remain skeptical of Walker.

The degree to which Walker and Evers are collaborating seemed unlikely even a few weeks ago, when Evers, whose election in 2009 was backed by teachers unions, asserted himself as a leading opponent of

the conservative Republican governor's budget positions.

Walker said in an interview, "I think there's a strong bond we're building with Superintendent Evers, because there is a strong sense of wanting to have good outcomes."

Evers said in a separate interview: "Basically, I've taken the position I'll challenge and disagree with the governor when necessary, but I also think all of us, including him and me, owe it to the students of Wisconsin to find common ground in certain areas and work together. I think kind of that's where we're at right now."

## **Democrats, union wary**

Mary Bell, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, said that her group declined to sign on to the plan for now, because her teachers union hasn't been consulted about it and remains wary of Walker.

"It seems pretty basic that for the last six months the governor has been intent on defunding public schools, disrespecting teachers and busting unions," Bell said, adding her group needed trust to collaborate. "We don't have any right now."

Bell said her group agrees with some of the stated goals of the plan but despite Evers' involvement will need time to decide whether to get involved.

"The work is valuable. I don't know I trust the process," Bell said.

Rep. Sondy Pope-Roberts (D-Middleton), the ranking member of the Assembly Education Committee, said she deeply distrusted Walker's motives, adding that she had not "heard a peep" about the plan.

Pope-Roberts said that she believes the proposal is an attempt by Walker to win back voters after dealing with a budget shortfall by cutting state aid to education by nearly \$800 million over two years.

"He's just undermined public education, and he's just realized that doesn't sell real well," Pope-Roberts said. "This is a disingenuous effort to make him look like he cares about public education. I'm very skeptical."

Walker and Evers released a letter that they and the eight education leaders had signed on their goals for the accountability program, along with a memo on how they would proceed with the task.

"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," the letter says. "Over the coming weeks and months, we will work together to develop a model that is right for Wisconsin."

## **Key projects**

The context for the accountability plan is important. It includes several projects already under way, some items that drew almost no attention in the new state budget and planning efforts in early stages. A partial list:

The budget includes \$15 million to launch a student information system that would put in the state's

hands almost all the information now in the office of your typical school or school district, including every student's grades, what courses they took and attendance information. That would include students in charter schools and students using vouchers in private schools. Walker and Evers describe the data system as a key to getting better information on how students are doing and what is working in schools. Evers also said it would provide some "economies of scale" in record keeping that could save local schools money. He called the system "a real step in the right direction."

Wisconsin is working with more than 30 states to develop a new generation of standardized tests to measure student progress. New Wisconsin tests are intended for use beginning in the 2014-'15 school year. They would replace the widely disrespected Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination, which will be used for three more school years. The new tests are intended to offer better analysis of student performance, while providing results quickly. Walker is supportive of the work Evers and the state Department of Public Instruction have done.

Although some conservatives nationwide have criticized the "common core" school standards movement, Walker and Wisconsin Republicans appear to be holding steady in support of Wisconsin's participation. Wisconsin, at Evers' initiative, was one of the first states to join the initiative. Wisconsin is regarded widely as having inadequate standards for what students are expected to learn in major subjects. If the Common Core effort is successful, it will, in effect, raise the bar for what students are expected to achieve.

Walker launched and is actively chairing a "Read to Lead" task force with the goal of increasing the percentage of students who are proficient in reading, especially young, low income students. Evers is vice chair, and the two say proposals are expected by fall. Likely targets include improving college and university training for students who teach reading, and requiring reading teachers, as part of their licensing process, to show good skills.

The DPI is developing "educator effectiveness" proposals that could lead to a statewide system of evaluating principals and teachers, including using student progress data. The evaluations could play major roles in determining teacher pay, including better pay for those who are rated highly. They also could affect decisions such as whether to fire teachers or whom to let go in layoff situations.

## **Differences remain**

Walker and Evers are not in agreement on many matters, even related to these initiatives. Walker, for example, would like to see every school in Wisconsin given a grade as the result of the accountability process. That was done in Florida by then-Gov. Jeb Bush about a decade ago, and Walker is a fan of Bush's education ideas. Evers has not agreed to the idea of giving grades - and is not such a fan of Bush's thinking.

Charter schools across Wisconsin have been part of the state's accountability system, including publicly reporting WKCE results, but that has not been the case until now for voucher schools. In the past, voucher advocates have resisted public disclosure of a range of information.

This past year, the more than 100 private schools in Milwaukee that use state money to enroll more than 20,000 students were required to disclose how their students performed on the state tests. The answer: Not any better than Milwaukee Public Schools students.

Now, Walker says, he supports including in the accountability process "essentially any student who is

supported in any way by public funds."

Asked in an interview whether more needs to be done about voucher schools with poor results, Walker said, "Absolutely." He said he would do that by giving parents information from the new accountability system and letting them make their own decisions.

Jim Bender, incoming president of School Choice Wisconsin, said his voucher schools group was in favor of the basic principles of the plan, including requiring more accountability for private schools receiving public support. He said his group wants the state to have better data that will allow the best practices from all schools, public and private, to be shared and duplicated.

"This is a very good starting point," Bender said.

The letter announcing the school accountability effort was signed by leaders of the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, Wisconsin Charter Schools Association, Wisconsin Council of Religious and Independent Schools, Association of Wisconsin School Administrators, School Choice Wisconsin, Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services, Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, and Wisconsin Association of School Business.

It also was signed by the chairs of both education committees in the Legislature, Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon) and Rep. Steve Kestell (R-Elkhart Lake).

It was not signed by any Democratic legislators.

Pope-Roberts said she would participate in the effort and supported elements such as ensuring voucher school accountability. But she said measuring the results of schools and teachers wouldn't produce success if schools don't have enough resources.

"You can weigh your pig every day but if you don't feed it, it's not going to grow," she said.

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