

Educators skeptical of plans for statewide reform

By McLean Bennett Leader-Telegram staff | Posted: Monday, July 11, 2011 11:45 pm

A school whose eighth-grade students improve from a fourth-grade to a seventh-grade reading level in one year may have reason to pat itself on the back, but under federal No Child Left Behind benchmarks, it still would be a "failing" school.

That's something Gov. Scott Walker and state Superintendent Tony Evers hope to fix. The pair recently announced plans to work this year with other state lawmakers and education officials to establish new ways to measure school performance in Wisconsin.

"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," Walker, Evers and other state lawmakers and education officials recently said in a joint statement. "On the contrary, if something doesn't change, every public school here and nationwide will soon be labeled as 'failing' and forced to implement ineffective sanctions."

Officials hope the new school accountability system, which is still being drafted, will be an improvement over current standards imposed under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

"I am jazzed about it," Evers, who heads the state Department of Public Instruction, said of the new accountability measures.

But thorny relations between Walker and educators across the state have school officials in Eau Claire and Altoona a bit less confident talks of reform will be fruitful.

"Right now it's really hard to be optimistic about things coming out of Madison in terms of public education because so much of it has been negative," Altoona schools Superintendent Greg Fahrman said.

"I'm a little skeptical at this point," said Eau Claire schools Superintendent Ron Heilmann, noting cuts in education funding in the 2011-13 state budget make him wary of Walker's intentions when it comes to supporting public schools.

Heilmann and Fahrman said school assessment standards under No Child Left Behind need tweaking, and applauded efforts by Walker and Evers to fix them - even if they're uncertain where those talks will lead.

"My opinion is that there tends to be more punishment for schools that aren't performing rather than helping them take corrective measures to make improvements," Heilmann said of No Child Left Behind requirements.

That law established nationwide school performance standards, but critics say its benchmarks are

unrealistic.

By the 2013-14 school year, for example, all students must be "proficient" in math and reading sections of their state's standardized tests. Schools that don't meet those benchmarks could face federal funding sanctions through No Child Left Behind.

DPI spokesman Patrick Gasper said the state ultimately wants to seek a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education, which administers the No Child Left Behind Act, allowing it to look at factors besides test scores when measuring schools' performance.

Officials have said the new system would measure schools in part according to whether students' performance improves from year to year. Officials also say they want to measure progress schools make in preparing students for college by considering advanced coursework offerings and college credit or industry certifications students earn in high school. Improvements in dropout and graduation rates also might be considered.

Measuring schools according to growth - not just test performance - is something local school officials say is an important step in the right direction.

"We need an overall accountability system that looks at growth over time," Menomonie schools Superintendent Chris Stratton said.

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