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Scott Walker's New Education Initiative Seeks To Revamp School Accountability -- With Or Without Union Help



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After [slashing education funding](#) and reducing teachers' collective bargaining rights earlier this year, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker (R) announced his latest schools initiative on Friday: the formation of a committee to produce a new rubric for school accountability.

Walker and state schools chief Tony Evers hope to have a new system that measures school performance in place by the 2011-2012 academic school year. The system would evaluate all schools that accept public funding, including private schools that take vouchers. Walker and Evers are working separately on overhauling teacher accountability.

"The primary motivation is the present accountability under No Child Left Behind doesn't work," Evers told The Huffington Post. "We needed to have something that was Wisconsin-based and something that was more than just one test result determining whether schools were good or bad."

Evers is referring to No Child Left Behind, the sweeping federal law that mandates that 100 percent of students be accountable by 2014.

"It didn't use multiple measures -- just one test," Evers said. "It's based on the static model instead of taking into account growth. It also doesn't do a good job of targeting the worst-performing schools. That's not good common sense."

NCLB's strictures have caused states like [Montana](#) to defy its mandates. While NCLB reauthorization in Congress [has stalled](#), U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said his office is working on a "Plan B" that would grant waivers for some NCLB requirements in exchange for Duncan-favored reforms.

"We hope Congress passes the reauthorization," Duncan told HuffPost on Monday. "We're going to work with states on a waiver package. We're not there yet."

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Evers and Walker hope to receive waivers for NCLB requirements once their accountability system is in place. Evers said that the timing of the panel coinciding with Duncan's waivers is fortuitous.

Jennifer Marten, a Gifted & Talented coordinator in Plymouth, said the announcement of the evaluation panel comes as school districts map out their futures without collective bargaining.

"In some places, the school board is not willing to work with the teachers, so you've got more of that management style that says, 'I tell you what to do,'" she said. "Before, it was more of a give and take."

Marten said she worries about Walker's stated admiration for the reforms Jeb Bush made as governor of Florida.

"I look at states like Florida and how they have ranked their students," she said. "You're comparing apples to oranges. You have districts with a high poverty rate versus others that don't. The results will obviously look different."

Evers' involvement in the schools accountability process, she said, gives her a "glimmer of hope."

But details on the plan are thin.

Walker's [announcement](#) notes that many parties will be invited to sit on the panel, including representatives of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state's largest teachers' union.

But WEAC isn't sure whether it will accept the invitation. Mary Bell, WEAC's president, said she first heard of Walker's interest in accountability about a month ago. Two weeks ago, the governor's office asked WEAC to sign onto an op-ed promoting the measure.

"Our advocacy for our members and public schools includes working with a lot of nontraditional partners," Bell told HuffPost. "But at this point, the governor going into accountability after slashing the budget, it was an odd bit of timing to us." She declined signing on.

Distrust has festered between Walker and WEAC: The union is taking the governor [to court](#) over a law that requires all state agencies -- including the Department of Public Instruction -- to run any new regulations by Walker for approval.

"For the last six months," Bell said, "all the state of Wisconsin has heard from the governor regarding the role of unions is that we ought not exist, we don't have a value, and we didn't speak for educators."

Still, she said she was weighing her participation on the evaluation panel.

"It is not unknown for our organization to participate with people with whom we have significant disagreements," Bell said. "Entering into these discussions, it would have to be really clear what the discussions entailed and what direction Walker was taking it to trust enough that this is an open process."

Bell said she doesn't know what the panel might look like in the end, and neither does Evers, who said he had no "preconceived notions of what it may look like."

Meanwhile, Bell is collaborating with Evers on a separate panel that seeks to create new teacher evaluation standards. She said it has been decided that standardized test scores will count, but how much has yet to be determined. More information will be available in August, she added.

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