

 madison.com

Odd couple shows courage to cooperate

State Journal editorial | Posted: Sunday, July 17, 2011 6:00 am

The left may not like state school chief Tony Evers cooperating with Gov. Scott Walker on new education accountability rules.

But Evers has a quick answer for his many liberal supporters who question the move.

“I never said I was going to be elected so I could throw grenades up King Street,” Evers said Thursday, referring to the short street that runs between Evers’ Department of Public Instruction and the Republican governor’s East Wing of the state Capitol.

Walker and Evers just announced their effort to work on higher standards, better testing and more meaningful ways to gauge school success.

The honest attempt to find common ground on the crucial issue of improving public education deserves wide support and participation from diverse interests, including the skeptical teachers union.

The bruising collective bargaining battle and difficult state budget have been decided, at least for now. A lot of people don’t like the results. But that’s no excuse for obstructionism when so much still needs to be done for Wisconsin school children.

Evers and Walker are showing courage by cooperating on crafting a package of reforms they hope to finalize by next year. Both men agree the federal No Child Left Behind law is ineffective and needs revision. They hope to draft — with input from parents, educators and taxpayers — a state model for better assessment of academic performance.

This should include a better statewide test that students complete online so results come back quickly and are easy to compare to other districts and states. Assessing student progress over time and intervening with struggling students early will be key. So will professional development for teachers.

Evers told the State Journal editorial board last week that higher state standards matching most states will “absolutely be a game changer.” So will a statewide information database. “That’s going to be a huge impetus for us to improve our system,” he said. Educators will have data that’s “much richer and much more useful.”

Evers also wants universal screening of children entering school, and more attention to reading instruction.

While Evers and the State Journal editorial board have opposed Walker’s expansion of the private school voucher program, those schools will finally be subject to the same accountability standards as public schools.

“This is a brand new world,” Evers said. “There are some good things going on.”

Yet success will require cooperation across the partisan divide. So far, Evers and Walker are projecting the right attitude and focus. Others should join the effort to design fair, broad and meaningful accountability standards to boost academic performance.

