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New school reform for Wisconsin a model for nation?

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A new initiative to reform how Wisconsin schools are held accountable could lead to the development of a national model, similar to welfare reform in the 1990s, according to a leading UW-Madison education researcher.

But the effort, announced over the weekend by Gov. Scott Walker and State Superintendent Tony Evers, could be hampered by an intensely partisan political climate in which school funding has been slashed by hundreds of millions of dollars, education advocates said Monday.

“What I find hypocritical is it’s always about student and teacher accountability, but never about resource accountability,” said Tom Beebe, executive director of the Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, a school funding reform advocacy group.



Walker and Evers have proposed a collaborative effort to design a new system for holding schools that receive public funding accountable. The system would take into account multiple factors, including how much student performance grows year to year. It would be designed by next spring by a coalition of legislators, education associations, teachers, parents, and business and academic leaders, and would offer support to failing schools while rewarding high-achieving schools.

“We have the chance to create a world-class accountability system,” Evers said Monday during a press conference held with the governor. “I’m jazzed about it.”

Rep. Sondy Pope-Roberts, D-Middleton, ranking Democrat on the Assembly education committee, said though Evers’ support lends credibility to the initiative, she’s skeptical about Walker’s motives, particularly because she didn’t hear anything about it until a reporter contacted her Saturday.

“I see this as Scott Walker recognizing that the state of Wisconsin is really unhappy with what he’s done with public education,” Pope-Roberts said. “I’m extremely skeptical. It’s a very disingenuous thing that they’re offering.”

Walker said the proposal was not hidden from anyone. He also said that as the proposal moves forward, it will be “an inclusive process.”

Where Democrats and Republicans tend to agree is that the current method for evaluating schools, under the 10-year-old federal No Child Left Behind law, is fatally flawed.

The federal law has been maligned for imposing sanctions on schools without funding to help them improve and focusing on test scores in a single year rather than individual student improvement over time.

It also requires all students to reach certain proficiency levels in math and reading by 2014, a goal widely considered to be impossible to meet. Meanwhile, more and more schools and districts — including Madison this year — are labeled as failing and are required to make changes.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has proposed allowing states to receive waivers from the federal requirements as Congress works to reauthorize the education law, an effort stalled since 2007.

Adam Gamoran, director of the Wisconsin Education Research Center at UW-Madison, said Wisconsin could become a national leader in developing a new approach, just as it did with its W-2 program under Gov. Tommy Thompson.

“Wisconsin is one of the first out of the gate in taking Duncan up on his offer,” Gamoran said. “The fact that the governor and

superintendent are collaborating is a very important and positive sign.”

Wisconsin also has the advantage of a model developed at UW-Madison for evaluating how student achievement grows over time, which Gamoran said is far better than the current method of judging schools based on a snapshot of student performance.

Madison Superintendent Dan Nerad said he was encouraged by Walker and Evers voicing support for evaluating schools based on student growth. But he acknowledged that the political environment could make the outcome more difficult.

“It certainly creates some tension within that conversation,” Nerad said. “But it’s an exceedingly important conversation.”

State Journal reporter Clay Barbour contributed to this report.