

Beyond the budget: Evers says proposed reforms have big potential

By [Erin Richards](#) of the Journal Sentinel

July 13, 2011 | [\(39\) Comments](#)

State Schools Superintendent Tony Evers offered more details Wednesday about potential changes in store for the day-to-day educational landscape in Wisconsin - including a new school accountability system that he and the governor both believe is necessary.

He also said that he thought the Wisconsin Education Association Council, the state's largest teachers' union, will soon come around to support their proposals. As of last weekend WEAC officials had declined to sign on to the new plan to create a state-based system for judging the quality of schools.

Part of the urgency for a new system, Evers said, is that Wisconsin plans to apply for a waiver from the federal government this fall from some of the regulations around the No Child Left Behind law. In exchange, the state will propose using its own system to assess schools and address the needs of ones that aren't performing well enough.

Wisconsin isn't the only state [considering asking for a waiver](#) from the NCLB regulations in exchange for offering a homegrown accountability system. Evers said Wednesday he could see all 50 states going that route if the NCLB law remains as written

The NCLB is often criticized because it sets up an unrealistic requirement that all children be 100% proficient in math and reading by 2014. Also, many critics say it does not take into account student growth in test scores to determine which schools are high-quality and which are not.

"We have an opportunity to (put together a state school assessment system) now and I feel that we can pull it off," Evers said.

As [reported in Sunday's front-page story](#), Evers and Walker are collaborating on - or at least in general agreement about the need for - a number of educational initiatives, including:

- **A new state test.** The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination will be replaced in a few years with an online exam based on a commonly agreed upon set of standards. Shorter, interim assessments will be given throughout the year, something that has never been systematically done in the state before, Evers said.
- **A reading task force.** One element could include requiring that every public 4-year-old or 5-year-old kindergartner in the state take an early reading test, called a screener, to provide better data about their experience level before first grade. Evers also said Wednesday that the state will likely propose changing and strengthening the test that would-be elementary and special-education teachers have to take to become licensed educators. He said that present test for new teachers does not adequately assess their ability to teach reading to children.

- **A statewide student information system.** Evers said he hopes that the \$15 million set aside in the budget for a comprehensive student data system would be developed within 18 months to two years. He also envisions that this system, in addition to tracking grades and attendance and test scores, would also track students' health-care issues.
- **A new evaluation system for educators.** Evers had less to say about this area, which is sensitive because it could be involved in hiring and firing decisions. But Evers said that with the addition of new educational data from other areas, Wisconsin could move to a place "where all these pieces would be connected."

Evers also said Wednesday he'd like to start expanding - or at least specifying - the notion of what a high-school diploma means. For example, diplomas should perhaps highlight a student's industrial certifications, he said. Right now, he added, diplomas are a mish-mash and may not accurately represent what a student knows and can do.

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