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EDITORIAL: Accountability goal is exciting

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Governor and state school chief put aside partisanship to seek educational excellence.

GIVEN HIS RECORD of incurring the wrath of Wisconsin's educational system, Gov. Scott Walker's teaming up with state School Superintendent Tony Evers in proposing a new way for the state to hold schools accountable is interesting, to say the least.

The concept — and that's all it is at this point — is intriguing. But the possibility that Wisconsin could find new and innovative ways to help some schools get better, while rewarding those already turning out topnotch students, is exciting.

In some ways, Walker and Evers are, indeed, strange bedfellows. Republican Walker pushed through legislation that takes away teachers' rights to bargain collectively for insurance and retirement benefits. Teachers and public employee unions stormed the state Capitol, protested in the streets, and still are demanding Walker's ouster at the earliest possible time.

MEANWHILE, DEMOCRAT Evers is a respected leader of Wisconsin's educational system, and made no bones about his displeasure with Walker's budget-balancing decision to slash state school aid to almost all districts. That move has most school boards scrambling to find ways to deal with big deficits. School closings, teacher and administrative staff layoffs are on the table in many districts, including Beloit. After all, making up for state aid cuts by raising local school taxes isn't an alternative. Not in these economic times.

That being said, it wouldn't be surprising if the state school boss and the governor weren't on speaking terms. But, to their credit, they are.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY goal won't be easy to achieve. But the Walker-Evers approach replaces the 10-year-old George W. Bush "No Child Left Behind" plan for evaluating schools which hasn't worked. It imposed sanctions on failing schools without providing funding to help them improve, and focused overmuch on single-year test scores rather than measuring student improvement over time.

While Congress dithers over trying to come up with a new plan to improve the U.S. educational system, our country falls further and further behind the schools in many other countries, China being an example of effective education. Finding a better way for the U.S. to teach our young people is almost as urgent as finding a way to get the country out of debt.

The Walker-Evers idea involves creating a coalition of legislators, education associations, teachers, parents and business and academic leaders. The group would devise ways to help failing schools while rewarding those with high achievement. The devil will be in the details, of course, but it's important that all schools receiving public funding, including charter schools and those whose students are on vouchers, will participate and be held accountable for such things as fairness of testing programs, effectiveness of teachers, and student progress.

IT'S NO SURPRISE that some Democrats in the legislature, and most notably the state teachers union, are skeptical. Mary Bell, president of the union, says her people aren't "clear or very trusting" of the governor's role, adding that Walker has a record of "saying or campaigning on one thing and implementing something even more disrespectful than we thought it was."

Such rhetoric shouldn't deter Walker and Evers, who say they want to set an example and motivate

others to mend their differences and get on board the effort. As John Ashley, head of the state association of school boards says, "We have to do things differently. We don't really have a choice."

There's an opportunity for Wisconsin to take a lead role in improving how schools perform, and how they're held accountable for failure to meet goals. It will be remembered that, years ago, the state's welfare reform became a model followed by many others. If the Walker-Evers initiative succeeds, Wisconsin can again be the leader in developing a new approach.

ONE BIG ADVANTAGE as the accountability effort proceeds, is a model developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for evaluating how student achievement grows over time. It's said to be far better than the current method of judging schools based on mere snapshots of student performance, as in the no-child-left-behind approach.

By working together to set standards of accountability for Wisconsin's education system, Republican Walker and Democrat Evers are rising above political differences to achieve a worthy goal. Would that this sort of collaboration could happen in Washington D.C.

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