

Skeptics should get behind education reform

Janesville Gazette Editorial, 7/21/11

Politically, Gov. Scott Walker and state education Superintendent Tony Evers are polar opposites. That means they score extra credit for pledging to work together and develop a new system that will hold all of Wisconsin's publicly funded schools accountable for success.

Naturally, teachers, their unions and likely many parents are skeptical of our Republican governor's motives. After all, they reason, Walker forged budget measures that all but erased collective bargaining rights for teachers, leaving them angry and disillusioned, and that cut deeply into education funding, leaving districts scrambling to balance budgets and lay off employees.

"The governor has a record with us of saying or campaigning on one thing and implementing something that is even more disrespectful than we thought it was," said Mary Bell, president of WEAC, the statewide teachers union.

Why should teachers trust Walker and support this proposal now? First, reform is critical to improving our educational system and always has been part of the Republican agenda. Second, while Evers and teachers unions have criticized the state's expansion of the private school voucher program, it's significant to note that, for the first time, those schools would be scrutinized under this reform.

Besides, educators across the state and nation have long criticized the federal No Child Left Behind law as ineffective. They argue that the decade-old law is unrealistic and offers little or no federal money to support its goals. By 2014, for example, the law requires 100 percent of students to test proficient in math and reading. No one expects schools to meet that target. Wisconsin would be among a handful of states hoping to develop reforms and earn waivers from the federal law. While U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan hasn't promised waivers, he did signal that he would be open to them if Congress continues to dillydally on federal reform.

"We want an assessment system that lets everybody know exactly what's happening, both those schools that are achieving well and those that have more challenges," Walker said in a joint interview with Evers.

Added Evers: "As leaders, we have to find common ground."

The two want to convene a team of educational leaders to develop a new accountability system that would be ready by spring. They would seek input from educators, parents, taxpayers and businesses. The system would use a variety of measures, including a new statewide test, to better measure progress over time and identify high- and low-performing schools. Schools that fail to meet the standards would face penalties. While the proposal is short on details, Walker critics should line up behind Evers. They should help make sure the plan is fair and funnels innovations to schools needing improvements. They should ensure that it rewards those already offering great education and includes realistic and sensible measures that could help Wisconsin again serve as a model and national leader in reform. In this global economy, we cannot afford to let our children slip further behind when other nations are turning out better-educated students.