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Doyle signs law giving superintendent power to intervene in schools

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Gov. Jim Doyle signed into law Thursday new authority for the state schools superintendent to intervene in failing districts and schools, a political compromise that the Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent derided as "a bit racist."

In criticizing the new law, MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos said it doesn't go far enough in holding the system's teachers accountable for poor student performance in their schools.

"There's a section in there that gives the teacher a million excuses for not performing," he said, referring to a section that requires school boards to consider "mitigating factors" in evaluating teacher and principal performance at struggling schools. Some of the mitigating factors include things such as resources and planning time for teachers, he said.

Andrekopoulos said he didn't think the Legislature would be as lenient if the law were aimed at failing suburban schools.

"I don't think this would be in the bill if these were white kids," he said.

Doyle, however, called the new bill an important first step toward giving the state superintendent of public instruction more authority in dealing with chronically failing schools. He rebuffed Andrekopoulos' argument that the bill was watered down because of the students' race.

"I was really supporting strongly to have more change in the governance of the schools," he said, noting his failed attempt to allow Milwaukee's mayor to choose the next superintendent of the city's school system. "I think this is a good bill. I think it moves us forward."

Under the new law, state schools Superintendent Tony Evers will have the power to direct school boards in districts that have been identified for improvement for four consecutive years to change their curricula, implement academic interventions for struggling students and extend the school days. He also can direct the school boards for those districts to change teacher and principal evaluation systems, consider staffing alterations and institute professional development programs in any schools ranked among the bottom 5% in the state.

All of the schools now ranked in the bottom 5% in the state are Milwaukee Public Schools.

In addition to giving the superintendent greater intervention authority, the new law also strips MPS principals of tenure - the only public school principals in the state who have such job protection - and has a number of initiatives directly aimed at Milwaukee schools.

Evers said the new law will give him more leverage to spur reform at MPS. Now, his only recourse is to threaten to withhold federal funds from the school system as a way to compel the school board to enact components of a corrective action plan imposed on the district because of its failure to meet standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

With the new law, Evers said, the state will have weight to put behind any legal action it might take against the school district.

He also defended the law's consideration of "mitigating factors" in evaluations - one of the elements Andrekopoulos criticized.

"Everybody has to be accountable for performance," Evers said. "It can't just be dumped on the teachers."

Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association President Mike Langyel said the new law makes sure that teachers in struggling schools are provided the proper support they need to do their jobs.

"I think what this bill does, it moves us beyond the blame-the-teacher mentality that is prevalent in the administration of Milwaukee Public Schools," he said.

Doyle also took aim at the new law's detractors, criticizing legislators who voted against the bill because he said they only like half of what is in it.

But state Rep. Brett Davis (R-Oregon), who voted against the bill, said the law is hampered by requirements that the superintendent negotiate with the district's teachers union for critical changes.

"We missed a golden opportunity of actual and real reform, and this bill isn't it," he said. "This bill, in my opinion, will not lead to increased student achievement in the classroom because there isn't anything in this bill that, to my understanding, the Milwaukee Public Schools can't actually do already."

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