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Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

Evers gains some clouts in Wisconsin schools

State superintendent sees ways to set, meet goals

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In 49 states, some kind of political body is deciding whether to join in adopting a "common core" of standards for what children should learn when it comes to literacy and math. It's been controversial in some states, with about half deciding so far to sign on.

In Wisconsin, it took only one person to decide to join. He says he didn't think twice about it.

With that action a few weeks ago, Tony Evers, the state superintendent of public instruction, may have launched steps that will drive higher achievement statewide for years to come. That's one of those time-will-tell things.

But the decision underscored two you-can-tell-right-now things: Being state superintendent is no longer the rather powerless and colorless job it has been in the past. And Evers is taking advantage of the more powerful cards he has been dealt to become a substantial force in shaping the course of education across the state, with the emphasis on Milwaukee.

Wisconsin is an odd duck when it comes to state education policy. Just about every other state has a board of education for kindergarten through 12th grade, sort of like the Board of Regents for the University of Wisconsin system. Wisconsin is the only state that has a statewide elected superintendent, but no state board (which is why Evers decided whether to join in the "common core" standards solo).

Historically, the state superintendent and the Department of Public Instruction that he heads have had pretty restricted powers. Local school boards and administrators have had a lot of latitude - more than in most states - to decide what goes on in schools.

However, the landscape of power in education has changed dramatically. For one thing, the flow of power has been toward Washington since the No Child Left Behind federal law went into effect in 2002. Add on the current Race to the Top and the "common core" standards campaign (which is spearheaded by governors and state school chiefs, not the federal government), and you have power moving to the national stage.

That also has made state officials more powerful. For one thing, there's more federal money to pass out, much of it routed through state education departments. And state education chiefs have been given a lot of the power to enforce changes pushed by federal law.

There are more reasons why Evers has clout these days. The Legislature passed a law in April that, among other things, gave him broad power to order changes in the lowest performing schools in the state (which is to say, the bottom tiers of MPS schools). A federal judge's rulings in a decade-old lawsuit against MPS have given Evers and the DPI additional levers to push changes not only in behavior-related matters, but reading and math programs.

So, one year into his first term as superintendent, what's Evers accomplishing?

"It's been a productive year," he said. He was directly involved in what proved to be a lengthy dance between MPS and DPI officials that led to approval of a new reading and language arts program for MPS two weeks ago. He has ordered development of new state standardized tests, although it will be maybe another couple of years before the widely disrespected current testing system is gone. And he recently floated a set of ideas for changing the state's school funding system.

Standards more focused

But signing Wisconsin on to the nationwide standards campaign may trump all of those. Wisconsin's current standards for what children should learn have been criticized in several national analyses as weak, compared with what other states have. The common core is regarded as more specific and more focused on what students really should master.

Chester E. Finn Jr., president of the generally conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute in Washington, is a big backer of the new standards. "There is no doubt whatsoever in Wisconsin's case that the state would be better off with the common core standards than what it has today," he said in a phone interview.

But standards are one thing. Making them mean something is another. Evers said that will be a major focus for him ahead.

"How are we going to make this happen in the classrooms of Wisconsin?" he asked.

The answer hinges on making the coming state testing system a meaningful way of measuring whether students have learned what they are supposed to learn. And that means teaching them the skills and abilities in the standards.

Does that mean Wisconsin will, despite its history, end up with statewide curricula in reading and math? Probably not, if you mean something the state orders local schools to do. But probably yes in terms of making recommendations that many schools are likely to accept.

"We will have a model curriculum, no question," Evers said. He said more school districts are looking to DPI already for answers because, with the financial crunches they are in, they don't have the capacity to research good curriculum choices.

Ultimately, it's about raising the bar for students statewide. What it takes to be regarded as proficient in Wisconsin is expected to go up.

Evers acknowledged that one result may be fewer local standards being rated as proficient, at least at first. "I think our teachers and kids are up to the challenge," he said. "I believe it's an absolute step in the right direction."

Evers bounced back from a formidable problem with cancer of the esophagus a couple years ago. He said that colors his thoughts on what he wants to get done as state superintendent.

"I just feel an immense obligation to accomplish things," he said. He said he has appointed no task forces or study commissions, the kind of steps that so often produce reports but no real action.

"Accomplishing things - that's what people want," he said.

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