

[Home](#) » [News](#) » [Education](#)

 [Education](#)

[E-mail](#)

Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

State education policy, like kudzu, is overgrown

Professor compares out-of-control system with weed

Posted: July 3, 2010 | [\(8\) Comments](#)

Kudzu? Who dares compare Wisconsin's education policies to kudzu?

Christopher Brown, a professor in curriculum and instruction at the University of Texas at Austin, that's who.

Kudzu is a plant that originated in Asia. Agriculture officials in the U.S. encouraged its use, starting in the 1930s, as a low cost way to stem soil erosion. But, especially in the South, it spread rapidly and far beyond intended areas. It became regarded as a weed.

Hmm. Launched with good intentions, appealing as an easy option, it grew rapidly and accomplished little. That sums up Brown's analysis of Wisconsin education policy from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. In his observations there lie major lessons for those who want to raise the expectations of students in Wisconsin and see more students meet those expectations.

Someone recently pointed me to [Brown's analysis](#), which started as a doctoral dissertation while he was at the University of Wisconsin-Madison a few years ago. Just the title of the version published in 2008 in the academic journal Educational Policy made me laugh - and wince:

"Keep It Cheap, Keep it Local, and Keep It Coming: Standards-Based Accountability Reform in Wisconsin."

The notion of standards-based reform is simple: Set strong goals for what students are supposed to learn in each subject each year, test the students to find out if they reached the goals, and, if they haven't, find ways to change that. Hold people - school leaders, teachers, kids - accountable, in both positive and negative ways.

Bar set low

There are places that did this well. There are places that didn't. Wisconsin is in the latter group. The

standards set here have been criticized as weak by just about every analysis that's been done. The bars set for defining whether students are proficient in various subjects, based on state test scores, are widely regarded as among the easiest in the nation, and we still don't have good trends in terms of how many kids jump those bars.

A key example: A high school graduation test, to require students to reach certain levels of performance in reading and math (generally, 10th-grade level) before getting a diploma, was approved by the Legislature in the late 1990s and then dropped when it became politically unpopular, with much of the opposition coming from well-to-do parents in communities with high-performing schools.

Compare that to Massachusetts, which approved a high school graduation test and implemented it over opposition similar to what arose here. Education leaders there point to the test as the central factor in rising academic performance, including first-in-the-nation scores for fourth and eighth grade in reading and math.

Brown points to Wisconsin's strong commitment to local control as a major reason state education policy has had so little impact. The Wisconsin way, for many years, was not to tell school systems much about what they ought to accomplish.

Wisconsin is one of the few states that does not have a statewide board of education for kindergarten through 12th-grade education, which means decisions are left largely to local school leaders - or to the Legislature, where things are, of course, highly politicized.

"In Wisconsin, education reform must be cheap and it must be local," Brown concluded. "Such principles make achieving any type of system-wide reform in Wisconsin difficult." (I interpret Brown's use of the word "cheap" to cover not only spending but the whole sense of taking easy, politically palatable paths.)

Even two initiatives that now carry substantial price tags - the SAGE class size reduction program for low-income kindergarten through third-grade classes and the private school voucher program in Milwaukee - started out cheap and have been sustained by their appeal in local communities, without much regard to whether they have actually driven better results.

As for the keep-it-coming part of his analysis, Brown writes, "In essence, these principles of cheap and local education reform created the need for policy churn in Wisconsin. Wisconsin's resistance to systemic changes forces policy-makers to reduce their agendas from dramatic changes to gentle nudges. Such reduction requires policy-makers and education stakeholders to propose further reforms to nudge the education system toward their goals."

Policy churn

So every time there's a legislative session, every time new people get into influential positions, there are new proposals, new orders, and most of them involve little steps.

(The [Education Commission of the States](#), a non-profit group, keeps state-by-state compilations of education initiatives on its website. For the last decade, [Wisconsin's list](#) runs 22 pages on the printer I use. The [list for Massachusetts](#), where trends have been much better, runs eight pages.)

"This environment of churn for change within education reform reveals the kudzu-like nature of the system-wide reform process in states such as Wisconsin," Brown writes. "The success of this reform

kudzu, both politically and symbolically, creates an overgrown policy environment that impairs the ability of education stakeholders to distinguish whether a reform idea is a tool for churn or change."

Brown adds, "These principles raise the question as to whether policy-makers can enact any type of system-wide reform in states such as Wisconsin."

In short, in states where there has been evidence of real change, a few traits are almost certain to be in evidence: A focus on a few strong goals. A steady, sometimes even muscular, commitment to those goals. Effective responses to falling short. And adequate resources.

Wisconsin is slowly moving to new standards and a new state testing and accountability system. This is likely to be a good thing. But the underlying message of Brown's analysis will remain important: Education improvement isn't cheap or easy.

And an urgent warning is right there in his text: "The question arises as to whether system-wide failure at the state level is necessary for stakeholders in states such as Wisconsin to surmount the principles of cheap and local reform and successfully implement sustainable statewide change."

Study on JSOnline Read Christopher Brown's study at www.jsonline.com/education. Alan J. Borsuk is senior fellow in law and public policy at Marquette University Law School. He can be reached at alan.borsuk@marquette.edu.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/education/97744709.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.