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Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

What the next governor could do on education

Posted: May 1, 2010 | [\(10\) Comments](#)

Reading the information released Thursday about the Milwaukee Public Schools budget for next year, with its grim warnings about hundreds of job cuts and swelling benefit costs, my mind wandered.

I had a vision of the new governor of Wisconsin unveiling his budget proposals in February and deciding (this is the most fanciful part) that he was going to break with established positions of whichever political party he represents. He decided to give a speech to the Legislature like this:

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Folks, we need to stop posturing, and we all know that's one of our most striking talents here in the Capitol. Man, the legislators the last two years should have made commercials for Posturepedic. Lots of talk, little dealing with the real issues. No more, people. Things are too serious.

From Superior to Kenosha - and especially in Milwaukee - we've got a really deep education problem. That goes in some serious ways for just plain education. But it goes especially for paying for education. If the school system in your hometown isn't financially broken, it's under huge stress and it's going to be broken soon. Show me figures that say I'm wrong.

If anyone is going to solve this for Wisconsin, it is ultimately going to be us, the Legislature. Your local school board isn't going to figure it out. They can't or won't think big enough for that. Contract negotiations? An exercise in incrementalism when real change is needed.

We're the ones who can and must change the system. We're the ones who are picking up the tab for this broken system, anyway. Need I remind you that kindergarten through 12th aid is our largest single category of spending?

Every governor in recent years has stood here and told you we're in financial trouble. They were right. But I'm more right than them because we've got more trouble.

We've got all the usual problems - too little money, escalating costs, angry taxpayers, lots of demands to spend more.

Then we've got the special problems of this era - faltering tax revenue, lots of folks out of jobs or taking lower-paying jobs (which means lower tax collections for us), all the impacts of the toughest economy most of us have ever seen.

And then we've got one really special problem: In 2009, almost \$800 million in federal economic stimulus money was used to keep the pot of state school aid money in reasonably good shape for the two years that are now ending. What can you say? It seemed like a good idea at the time. But now there's no stimulus money - which means we've got to come up with the equivalent of about \$150 from each resident of Wisconsin over the next two years just to fill that hole. It's like being penalized 15 yards before we even kick off this budget.

So what are we going to do? We all know I didn't run on a detailed education platform. (Note: This is true, as of now, for all the major candidates.) At least I'm not locked into a lot of positions. And neither should you be.

We need to think and act as if we're creating a funding system from scratch.

We can't let school quality keep eroding. And we can't go on acting as if things aren't breaking down. There have got to be new ways.

We need to find ways to spend our money more effectively - to promote quality, to produce better results. There are teachers and schools around the state who are producing good results with high-needs kids and with no more (and sometimes less) money than other schools. Are we learning what we could from them? Are we doing what we can to get more schools to find such success? Why are education trends in other states better than in Wisconsin?

We need to deepen the respect we show teachers, and we need to keep teaching a decent way to make a living. This is a great and crucial profession, and we can't be shabby in how we treat the people who are shaping our future.

At the same time, teachers - which is to say, their unions - have to stop talking as if there's some huge gusher of money about to burst forth. Get real, this is Wisconsin in 2011. You expect me to face the public with big tax increases? You sure you don't want to talk about changing the benefit packages, given what you saw happen in places like Milwaukee when budgets were set in the spring of 2010? You talked to any of your non-teaching friends about what's going on in their workplaces?

We need to be creative. We need to be bold. We need to be smart. We need to treat education as if it is a nonpartisan pursuit aimed at putting the tools in the hands of our children that they will need to lead good lives, and not like it's a political football game played by and for adults.

We spend a lot of money on education in this state. But we need to have something that is as close as possible to an objective discussion on whether it's enough, given the things we see unfolding for our schools. On the other hand, it shouldn't be so easy for people to point to things that sure do look like unproductive staffing and spending.

And what about the finance system? Are we so gridlocked by partisanship that we can't make progress in finding a fairer, more understandable way to finance schools?

Let's can the tired thinking and the tired rhetoric. Sit up straight. Don't slouch. Other than that, I don't want to see any posturing.

I'm new in this job. I don't want to preside over an ugly future. I think Wisconsin can solve problems like this. I know it needs to. We're starting to work on a budget like none you've seen before. I am determined to do all I can to see that we end up saying that in a positive way and not as a complaint.

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It was just a day dream. Sort of like imagining the Brewers with an effective pitching staff, I fear.

Except, I suspect, whether it's a Democrat or a Republican, Tom Barrett or Scott Walker or Mark Neumann, the next governor is going to realize, when it comes to education, how few options he has, and how unattractive they are, unless there are core changes. Maybe he'll feel the need to give a speech like this. Then, what will he do?

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