



## A School System Focused on Improvement

School accountability legislation, once deemed a key priority of the current Legislature, seems now to be mired in the same sorts of policy debates that kept the issue from being resolved in the previous Legislature.

Without a doubt, one of the biggest challenges facing public education is improving and supporting struggling schools. Often, these schools and their students face additional barriers to learning, which merit our attention and support. Yet, funding for schools (and nearly everything else) is tight and likely to remain that way.

For better or worse, the accountability schemes being debated in Madison (and Washington DC, too, for that matter) are based almost entirely on students' standardized test scores for reading and mathematics. Lost in the focus on test scores is an emphasis on critical thinking, an appreciation of the arts, citizenship and social skills, and the acquisition of occupational and technical skills that will allow students to succeed beyond high school.

Many school leaders readily grasp how an accountability framework focused primarily on reading and math scores can result in inaccurately identifying certain schools as good or bad, narrowing the curriculum by creating incentives for schools to ignore many of the important purposes schools serve beyond boosting reading and math scores, and causing teachers to focus their attention on some students rather than others.

Some policymakers who hear such criticisms of narrow, test-based accountability react by throwing

back questions such as: Do you mean to tell me that schools should not be held accountable? Why should taxpayers continue to tolerate "failing" schools? If you don't like testing, what is your alternative?

These are hard questions for school boards to address, especially when the implicit message is that school boards have lost sight of their obligation to hold their schools accountable for the outcomes the public has set and that intervention from a higher level of authority is needed. However, labeling schools as failing is not the type of help that we need.

Some school accountability measures being considered in the state Legislature seem to prioritize punishment rather than appropriately addressing the underlying issues and providing the resources necessary for improvement. There have been discussions regarding future additional resources but thus far, they have been vague and unspecific.

Top-down "sanctions" from the state are unlikely to address the myriad of challenges that schools face or recognize that each school district and each school must overcome a unique set of issues.

What is needed instead is flexibility to deploy constructive interventions based upon sharing of best practices and professional development.

Evidence also suggests schools can be aided in helping children to overcome the barriers they face and improve outcomes if they are part of an integrated network of youth development and family support services that includes high-quality early childhood care, health services and after-school and summer programs, to name a few.

We have recently seen some signs of progress in Wisconsin with respect to creating such networks. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have put forth community schools proposals or proposals that would allow school districts the flexibility to use funds for similar purposes.

The community schools model aims to proactively address a complex range of factors that can lead to underachievement. It seeks to empower students, parents and other adult role models to overcome these factors and, ultimately, to boost student success in the classroom. This model has been implemented successfully in many communities, including Sun Prairie and Milwaukee.

We know that differences in the performance of schools on existing school report cards reflect the differences in the social and economic conditions of those communities or school attendance areas. Many children struggle with issues that many other children don't face and have fewer enrichment opportunities outside of school.

Nevertheless, our focus must be on improving the achievement of *every* student regardless of the barriers they face at home. As we emphasized at the State Education Convention in January, public schools educate "every child, every day."

Too often, lawmakers are quick to throw aside one education initiative for another. Turning schools around doesn't happen overnight and efforts need to be given a chance to make a difference. Overall, we need to focus less on pointing fingers and more on offering support to our low-performing schools. ■