

Dan Benson: Local schools deserve local control

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Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers is promising to give more latitude to local schools.

But the plan he recently submitted to the U.S. Department of Education would do little to help the Badger State's local school officials escape the federal strictures they say prevent them from giving our children the educations they deserve.

Over 80 percent of superintendents, school board members and business managers say their schools would be more likely to "implement innovations that would improve educational outcomes for students" if spending of federal funds of schools wasn't so restrictive, according to a recent Wisconsin Policy Research Institute survey.

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Most officials also state that federal funding restrictions "harmfully distort the decisions that they make on behalf of students."

"There is no room for thinking outside the box," Susan Jarvis, business manager for the Salem School District in Kenosha County, told WPRI. "We would like some autonomy to determine the best way to educate our students according to their needs and their individual personalities so they can receive the best possible education."

"I can guarantee that if restrictions were shifted, we would be much more innovative and be able to have those discussions," said Matt Spets, assistant

superintendent of operations at the Howard-Suamico School District in Green Bay.

Jarvis and Spets were two of 450 superintendents, business managers and school board members who responded to the survey conducted in July and August.

Other survey findings include:

- Almost 60 percent said federal paperwork takes teachers and staff away from students and the classroom.
- Two-thirds rated federal reporting requirements imposed on their districts as “extremely” or “very” time-consuming.
- About a third said their districts had hired staff specifically to manage federal grants or that they would if they could afford to do so. Others said completing paperwork related to federal funding often causes staff to work overtime.
- More than 75 percent of superintendents said federal regulations “do very little to support the necessary oversight and accountability of public schools.”

Giving states and local districts the flexibility they crave is one of the primary goals of the Every Student Succeeds Act, or ESSA. Almost every state, including Wisconsin, has now submitted its plan to the Department of Education.

“Allowing states more flexibility in how they deliver education to students is at the core of ESSA,” says Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Kristen Amundson, the president and CEO of the National Association of State Boards of Education on Sept 18 called ESSA “a tectonic shift in education governance” that gives states and districts more leeway in how they plan to educate.

But it’s unclear whether that will happen in Wisconsin.

Evers’ plan doesn’t spell out how local districts are going to take “control” of efforts to improve education in Wisconsin – especially those schools who have been underperforming for years under his watch – only that state officials will hold their hand as they try to do so.

While local officials appreciate much of the work the state Department of Public Instruction does for them, increased handholding doesn’t appear to be at the top of their wish list. Devolution of control to local educators, parents and teachers is, however.

“The local district is very capable of managing federal funds,” a school board member in rural northeastern Wisconsin said. “Many of the regulations restrict the effectiveness of the dollars spent.”

Walker refused to sign Evers’ plan, saying it was “bureaucratic” and lacked a rigorous enough intervention plan for low-performing schools.

But approval of the plan rests with DeVos, not with Walker, and she is likely to do so, observers say.

Fortunately, that’s not the end of the story. Implementation of the plan will likely be a long and somewhat winding road, as well as a political football between Walker and Evers, who hopes to earn the Democratic nomination to run against the governor.

“(Submission is) the beginning—not the end,” said Amundson, pointing out that of the plans submitted under the even more restrictive No Child Left Behind, which ESSA replaces, 17 state plans were revised within the first 18 months; after two years, all had been modified.

“The plans are going to continue to be evolving documents as states get a better sense of how things work,” Amundson said.

One can only hope that legislators and other Madison officials listen to local educators and parents and provide them with greater responsibility to educate Wisconsin’s children.

— *Benson is editor for 21st Century Federalism at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. Find more survey results and stories at www.wpri.org.*