

Evers battles with Holtz over state's achievement gap

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In his last face-off with Tony Evers before Tuesday's election, Lowell Holtz slammed the state superintendent for the Wisconsin's achievement gaps, saying it's "not acceptable to be the worst" in the country.

Holtz said one of the main reasons why it exists is because schools aren't safe.

"We're turning our back on generations of minority kids and saying, 'Sorry, we didn't fix the problem,'" he said at a Wisconsin Public Television and Wisconsin Public Radio debate in Madison.

Holtz asked Evers why he let the achievement gap widen during his nearly eight years as state superintendent.

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Evers countered the achievement gap is tied to poverty, which he's not responsible for, but refuted Holtz's claims that he's done nothing on the issue. The state has "spent a lot of time, effort and money" to help address the issue and noted there's significant collaborations with other state agencies happening to provide mental health treatment, services for parents and developing job centers.

Evers also said Common Core was carefully developed with local leaders and gives school districts flexibility to set more rigorous curriculum if they'd like. The standards, he said, have let teachers "go deeper and work on application of content" they teach.

"It's not about memorizing facts. ... It's about taking those facts and applying them," he said.

But Holtz said he's "adamantly opposed to Common Core." He noted concerns from some teachers unions who say it turns teachers into "data collectors" and said local school districts should have the flexibility to set their own standards.

"Everyone is a little bit different," he said. "You can't group them like that."

Four days ahead of the election, the two sparred on a wide range of issues, including on school choice, allowing parents to have a gun in their car while dropping off their children and whether schools should get a chunk of the K-12 funding increase only if they comply with Act 10.

Holtz also defended his email use at the Whitnall School District, insisting there was "nothing illegal" about it. The Whitnall School Board wrote a letter to district families this week saying it had contacted the Milwaukee County DA's office over Holtz's possible "misuse of district resources" while he was superintendent.

Emails released by the liberal One Wisconsin Now show Holtz sent an email with his district account to his wife relating to his possible campaign, as well as an email to former GOP state Rep. Don Pridemore, who ran for superintendent in 2013 and then looked to recruit a conservative candidate for this year's race.

But Holtz said those were before he announced his campaign. He said he reviewed state election laws and "there's nothing illegal about personal conversations" and that he'd only be violating laws if he was asking for campaign funds.

"That's pretty much it — nothing illegal because what they're talking about is illegal campaign fundraising," Holtz said.

Holtz also alluded to Evers paying a \$250 settlement in 2009 after sending an email to an education official's work account asking him to plan a fundraiser.

Evers, though, said he thinks Holtz's email use while at Whitnall is banned by state election law.

He also slammed Holtz for his pre-primary discussions with then-candidate John Humphries, including a document promising a six-figure job at the Department of Public Instruction and a driver if one of them dropped out of the primary and the other won the April election. The document also included the possibility of Holtz taking over four of the state's largest school districts.

Holtz said he “didn’t craft the document” and that taking over schools is “the last thing I would do.”

Evers said the discussions around a driver and the DPI job are “kind of baloney.” The more significant concern, he said, is the district takeover portion because “that’s just not how we make public policy in the state.”

They also split on whether parents should be allowed to have a gun in their car while dropping their kids off at school, as a bill from GOP Sen. Dave Craig and Rep. Mary Felzkowski proposes.

Holtz said he doesn’t have a problem with that, pointing to an example of a parent forgetting that they had a gun in their car and “now they’re lawbreakers.”

But Evers said he opposes the measure, saying having more guns around schools “is not going to increase safety.”

On school choice, Evers said Milwaukee voucher schools haven’t performed differently than the city’s public schools since the voucher program there began. But the expansion of school choice statewide, he said, has limited the amount of money available for public schools, though he said he’s “glad I’m working with the governor” on getting more K-12 funding in his budget.

“If we support two systems, that makes it more difficult for all schools,” he said.

Holtz, meanwhile, said he likes parents having choices of where to send their kids to school and said he “was never afraid of competition” when he was a public school leader.

“It made us better,” he said.