

Humphries aims for conservatives' support as he targets Evers

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State superintendent candidate John Humphries says his turn-around on Act 10 could help him with conservatives as he heads into a primary next month.

Humphries, a former Dodgeville School District official who lives in Mt. Horeb, signed the recall petition against Gov. Scott Walker and also gave \$35 to his Dem opponent Tom Barrett, state campaign finance records show. But Humphries says he's since changed his mind on Act 10, saying he's used it to connect teacher evaluations to student performance "in a way that was never possible before."

"If there's anything that is compelling to conservatives about this opportunity is, here's a guy who didn't see the opportunity before and sees it now and is really running to help maximize outcomes," he said in a WisPolitics.com interview.

Humphries, 51, is largely setting his sights on incumbent Tony Evers, who's seeking a third term. But he first needs to move past the three-way primary on Feb. 21, in which he's also facing former Whitnall School District Superintendent Lowell Holtz.

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Holtz, who ran unsuccessfully in the 2009 primary, has largely given money to Republican candidates or the local party operations, which have gotten \$765 from him since 2010. But he also gave \$125 to Barrett on Oct. 4, 2010, according to state campaign finance records. Weeks later, in the final days of the 2010 gov election, he donated \$50 to Gov. Scott Walker's campaign. He also had given \$25 to Walker's GOP primary opponent, Mark Neumann, in April 2010.

Holtz said Friday that he grew up in the same neighborhood as Barrett. He also said that when he was a school principal, he got to meet with then-U.S. Rep. Barrett and the state's congressional delegation on a visit to Washington D.C. During that visit,

he said, he saw Barrett was “willing to work” with Republicans. So when the 2010 race came around, Holtz said he was asked to donate to Barrett’s campaign “based on our personal history” and decided to contribute.

Still, Holtz said he “certainly didn’t sign” the recall petition in 2012 and noted he’s given the bulk of his money to Republicans.

Evers, meanwhile, donated \$350 to Bethany Ordaz in her unsuccessful bid to win the Dem primary for the 48th AD and gave \$75 to Rep. Sody Pope, D-Madison. He also has given money twice to the state GOP — \$37.50 in January 2011 and \$75 in January 2015 — though those were for attending Walker’s inauguration events.

WisPolitics.com interviewed Holtz in August and is running an interview with Evers next week.

Humphries said he’s “confident we’ll be able to move through the primary,” adding he’s made connections with people from both parties and is “much more focused on school improvement” than his two rivals.

He also said he’s helped by his experience in a wide range of school districts, from rural La Farge to two districts where poverty rates are drastically different: Beloit and Middleton-Cross Plains. And he said he’ll bring a data-driven approach to the job, contending the Department of Public Instruction needs to show school districts what’s working elsewhere.

Humphries worked at DPI for seven years until 2011, with Evers working as deputy superintendent for the bulk of the time until he was elected superintendent in 2009.

Humphries, a certified school psychologist, co-led DPI efforts to cut youth suicide rates between 2004 and 2008 and saw youth suicide rates drop by about half. His work included holding trainings across the state to help teachers recognize kids who were at risk and how to respond.

“It was a powerful lesson,” Humphries said. “Because schools want to do better. Teachers want skills. They want knowledge. They want opportunities to improve outcomes for kids. DPI can be that agency that helps them see what’s really likely to work in their school without taking away local control.”

Humphries has faced criticism for entering into to a part-time consulting contract with the Dodgeville School District, which he resigned from last year. Scot Ross, the

executive director of the liberal group One Wisconsin Now, called the contract “sleazy” and said it ensures taxpayers keep paying him as he seeks public office.

Humphries said there’s a “clear demarcation” between his political and professional roles and that the move was to ensure an effective transition for his replacement.

“We didn’t want that person to just sink or swim,” he said.

He once again declined to take stances on three proposals that GOP lawmakers have floated: letting concealed carry permit holders bring guns into school boundaries, ensuring transgender students use the bathroom of their biological gender and imposing random drug tests on students in extracurricular activities.

The state superintendent, he said, needs to “understand the wide diversity of opinions” on any given issue, find middle ground, relay those positions to the Legislature and then work to ensure school districts implement lawmakers’ decisions in a way that “everybody’s safe and their values are respected and accounted for.”

Evers, he said, often takes a “his way or the highway” approach to dealing with lawmakers.

“That relationship is really broken there,” Humphries said. “There needs to be a more collaborative relationship.”

One sign of that, he said, is Evers “coming back time and again” to the Legislature asking for more money but not succeeding. For the upcoming biennial budget, Evers requested \$707 million more in state aid for schools.

But Humphries said DPI first needs to “do the hard work of being as efficient as possible,” arguing the agency needs to make sure it isn’t “wasting money on things that don’t have an impact.”

Critics have taken aim at Humphries’ support for school choice, including his statement saying he was “thrilled” by President Trump’s pick to lead the Department of Education. Betsy DeVos, who hasn’t yet been confirmed, has been head of the school choice lobbying group American Federation for Children.

Humphries, though, declined to say whether state lawmakers should seek a more rapid expansion of the state’s school choice program. Growth in the statewide

program is limited by district enrollment caps, which are rising steadily until 2026-27, when those caps will go away.

Humphries said he doesn't "intend to insert myself into legislative issues."

"School choice is growing at the direction of the Legislature, and that is a legislative issue," Humphries said. "What I would focus on is helping schools improve."

On that front, Humphries this week announced a proposal aimed at turning around the state's lowest performing schools. Under that plan, teams of charter, voucher or public schools could respond to a request for bids on how to improve a school with a new approach. Parents would then get to decide which option they prefer.

Ross, of One Wisconsin Now, called it yet another "scheme to help promote the political ambitions of John Humphries."

"It's no surprise that today we see another version of the same old plan to take more of our public tax dollars and send them to less accountable private schools," Ross said. "Not because the results for students are any better, but because he wants the money of the private voucher school industry for his campaign."

Humphries said it was similar to California's Parent Empowerment Act, in which parents can approve major restructurings of their children's schools.

Parents, he said, would only move away from the traditional public school system if they decide to. Or if parents split on the vote, they could find a compromise such as dividing the school in half.

"Parents don't have to make that choice," he said. "If they're satisfied with the status quo they can stick with it. But the whole point of parental choice is to give parents options."

[Listen to the interview](#)

[See the WisPolitics.com interview with Holtz](#)