

Wisconsin Legislative Spat Signals Slow Down for Privatized Public Schools

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This week Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the bills related to school accountability pending before the Senate and Assembly Education Committees. The Senate just acted on a watered down version of a bill because Senators did not “have the appetite” to pass a more comprehensive change. The Assembly continued to advance their version calling for closure or takeover of public schools designated as “failing”.

MADISON - “There’s ‘no appetite’ for passing a bill this year that imposes sanctions against poorly performing public or private voucher schools” reported the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in an Associate Press story.

“No appetite” was code for “we don’t have the votes”.

The “sanctions” for public schools included forcing the closure of a school or forcing its takeover by a privately operated charter company – both options took away local school district control.

Meanwhile the Senate Education Committee met for the third time in as many weeks to take up a much-watered down version of “school accountability”.

As we read through the seventh version of the bill, lawmakers quizzed the nonpartisan Legislative Council attorney. She confirmed the primary change the bill now made was to move up the date by which private schools receiving public money are required to send their publically

funded students' information to the state.

This was a far cry away from the previous versions that required the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to label a group of failing public schools every year that could be converted to charter schools operated by a "private charter management company" – completely taking away local control through the democratically elected local school board.

As we were briefed by the attorney on what the seventh version of the bill did, the Assembly Education Committee was meeting on their version of the bill that did take away local control and allow private companies to take over the public school – albeit without the required 5% of schools assigned to the "failing" category every year.

Confused? So were we.

It seemed the only clear explanation was that a majority of Senators had "no appetite" for the steady drumbeat of privatizing public schools.

The consequence was the current law on school accountability would stay pretty much the way it was – with the reporting of student information for voucher students a few years sooner than now required.

"You can't call this an accountability bill, it only changes a date," Senator Lehman told the Republican members of the Senate Education Committee. "Oh, yes we can", shot back one of the members.

Finding common ground among Republicans and creating enough policy change to go home and take credit for change seemed two impossible goals to reconcile among Senate members.

So a bill to change the date private schools must send to DPI the information about their voucher –publically paid for – students seemed like the best compromise. It appeared any other

version of the bill didn't have the votes to pass in the Senate. But that didn't stop the Assembly from rushing a public hearing on their version of the bill.

The tension between the two houses of the Legislature has been growing as the two-year Legislative session draws to a close. The friction appeared as members were told when they would finish up Legislative business. Assembly members tell me they expect the Legislature to adjourn by the end of February, while Senators were told to stay available for floor periods as late as April.

Tensions between the Assembly and Senate boiled over in a recent public meeting reported on by the Wisconsin State Journal. The public argument between the leaders of the Senate and the Assembly focused on whether the two leaders were meeting regularly enough – but the real issue was a lack of agreement on several major initiatives including whether the Senate had the appetite to move forward the school accountability bill and the governor's spending plan for the estimated surplus at the end of this budget.

The Senate leader cut to the heart of the matter in the State Journal story: "We've got a real tight majority in the Senate and with him [Assembly Speaker Vos] having a 10-seat majority, it's much easier to develop compromise over there. It's really that simple."

It was the moderate members of the tight Senate that delayed the increase in the state's structural deficit by delaying a vote on the governor's plan, and it was those moderate members who forced a compromise on the plan to steadily turn "failing" public schools into schools operated by private charter management companies.

Kudos goes to those moderate members.

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