

EDUCATION

Alan Borsuk: Keeping steady hands on the steering wheel for classrooms, schools and districts is becoming harder

Alan J. Borsuk Special to the Journal Sentinel

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A recent press release from School Choice Wisconsin carried the headline, “Wisconsin’s Parental Awakening.” Whatever your opinions are on school issues, there is clearly something to be said for that as a valid assessment of what is going on.

The climate around education statewide — and, it appears, nationwide — has heated up. Parents in many places, and especially in areas with more conservative majorities, have been asserting themselves. This is having a substantial impact on school board elections, the pressures on educators at every level, and the shape of what students do in classrooms.

Is this good or bad? I’m not here to answer that. But I am here to tell you it’s happening and it’s a signal of additional polarization in education.

It is generally making the work of school leaders and teachers harder. There is simply less trust and confidence being shown in educators overall. More middle of the road — not to mention milder — sentiments lend themselves to good school cultures, and there is a shortage of such sentiments. Keeping steady hands on the steering wheel for classrooms, schools and school districts is becoming harder.

Is the change due to the ways many schools responded to pandemic challenges and the feeling that kids have lost ground educationally? Is it due to parents (generally white parents) who think too many educators are too progressive in their views? Is it due to a broader dissatisfaction with what kids are experiencing in school, both in tangible and intangible ways?

My guess is that it’s all of the above and more.

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Here’s one interesting piece of evidence for saying the climate has changed:

The Marquette Law School Poll (Note: I work on the poll) added a new question to its latest survey of registered voters in Wisconsin. Voters were asked who should play the biggest role in choosing school curriculum.

In results released on Wednesday, the answers were divided. Thirty-five percent said parents should play the biggest role, 33% said teachers, 13% said school boards, 9% said superintendents and principals, and 5% said legislators.

If you separated the results by partisanship, the differences were striking. Among those who labeled themselves Democrats, 53% said teachers and 14% said superintendents and principals, which totals two-thirds of the sample. Among those who labeled themselves Republicans, 56% said parents, while 22% said teachers or school leaders. Independents were in between: 43% said parents and 37% said teachers or administrators.

The results were similar when looking at answers from people who said they were conservative, liberal or moderate. And the results based on where people live in Wisconsin lined up with the broader partisan divides in the state, with people in urban areas more likely to favor educators and people outside the larger cities more likely to favor parents.

Across the spectrum, there was little support for giving legislators the biggest role (6% or less among each grouping) and not much support for school boards (20% or less in each grouping).

That doesn't square well with the actual picture: Wisconsin is a "local control" state, and curriculum decisions generally rest on school boards, with strong input from superintendents. Furthermore, the Legislature in recent decades has been functioning as the statewide school board, including creation of school vouchers, the Act 10 legislation in 2011 that weakened teachers unions and reduced fringe benefits, tight controls on how much local schools can spend, and a range of curriculum-related laws.

The rise of parent activism can be seen in current school board races in many places, including several Milwaukee suburbs where conservative candidates are challenging incumbents. The dynamics also are showing up in debates about how to teach about issues involving race, gender and other matters.

And the surge can be seen in new pushes in the Legislature for making private school vouchers available to all parents in Wisconsin. (They are now limited generally by income.) Republicans in the Legislature are pushing for the idea, although whether it will actually happen almost certainly will pivot on who wins election to governor in November.

The Marquette poll, as well as several other recent polls (some funded by pro-voucher organizations, some not) have shown shifts toward support of private school vouchers, most likely fueled by unhappiness with public schools. The new Marquette poll found 59% of Wisconsin voters in favor of "allowing all students statewide to use publicly funded vouchers to attend private or religious schools," with 37% opposed. Historically, such questions have often found opinion close to evenly split.

In the Marquette poll, 55% of voters said they think public schools are in worse shape than a few years ago, and 47% said standards of education in Wisconsin schools are lower than they should be, with 31% saying they are about where they should be and 12% that they are higher than they should be.

While it's fair to point to more conservative voters behind much of the sentiment, concern about schools isn't limited to Republican areas. The City Forward Collective, an education nonprofit, polled city of Milwaukee residents recently and found that 22% think the education system in the city is working well, 35% gave neutral responses and 32% said it is not working well. More than 40% thought school quality in the city was getting worse and 19% thought it was getting better.

In the wider picture, "parent bills of rights" ideas have been gaining momentum across the country, including in Wisconsin. There is increased advocacy for giving parents broad rights to monitor what their children are being taught, even to the point of livestreaming classrooms.

How far ideas like these will go is unpredictable. But the fact they are being voiced loudly is important in itself. Call it an awakening, call it a troubling turn. Either way, parent activism is rising.

Will that mean school quality will also rise? Or will it turn out that there's more to be said for the way educators do their jobs than a lot of people now believe?

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