Big Labor’s Last Gasp

Why Wisconsin Embraced Right-to-Work

BY MIKE NICHOLS
Rightward, ho!

In 2011, it was Act 10.
In 2015, right-to-work.

In our cover story, WPRI President Mike Nichols explains the shift in both the economy and public opinion that led us to this point. He notes that union membership has steadily declined in recent decades, even as public support for right-to-work has risen. In a poll by WPRI in January, nearly twice as many Wisconsinites say they would vote for right-to-work as against it (62% to 32%).

Also in this issue, we have a provocative Q&A with Ray Cross, the president of the University of Wisconsin System. Those of you who have followed the debate over Gov. Scott Walker’s proposed budget cuts may notice that Cross seems to strike a very different note here (one more open to reform) than he has in other public forums. Rick Esenberg takes a decidedly more skeptical view of the UW in his Culture Con column. As do I in Dispatches.

Speaking of a skeptical view, columnist Sunny Schubert interviews Eloise Anderson, the secretary of Gov. Walker’s Department of Children and Families, who explains her decades-old opposition to Great Society social programs.

And, Dave Daley brings us a provocative look at new policies that limit suspensions in the Madison, Milwaukee and Racine public school systems. The result, says one teacher who talked with Daley about his experiences: “Utter chaos…. It feels like the inmates are running the institution.”

Another example of the law of unintended consequences.
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Cover photo by Al Frederickson
UW uncorks a fine whine

While we somehow missed the biblically awesome blizzards that afflicted the East Coast, winter here nonetheless seemed endlessly prolonged when the Green Bay Packers inexplicably snatched defeat from the jaws of victory in the last 40 seconds of the NFC title game in Seattle. Even so, our string of Cheeshead domination was extended when Aaron Rodgers was named NFL MVP. But as spring approached, we girded ourselves for debates on right-to-work, state support for a Milwaukee basketball arena, school accountability, and a presidential campaign that could not wait until spring.

A target on his back

No sooner had Scott Walker been elected governor for the third time in four years than the presidential buzz began.

Who are we kidding? It was a presidential roar, and Walker catapulted to the top of polls in states like Iowa and New Hampshire and quickly found out what it meant to be a front-runner: He became a target for the right and the left. This meant being asked questions about his future Syrian policy and his views on evolution, which led to his famous London “punt.”

Since our crystal ball is fuzzy about these things, we don’t know if Walker’s surge will last, but it is again a reminder of the central place that Wisconsin now inhabits in the nation’s politics. We also eagerly await Hillary Rodham Clinton’s detailed views on the Cambrian explosion and whether she leans toward unpunctuated equilibrium or phyletic gradualism in evolutionary theory. Because we need to know.

The John Doe is deceased

The final entombment may have to wait for a decision from the Wisconsin Supreme Court, but the long-running John Doe investigation targeting conservatives is done. The secret probe that included pre-dawn raids and sweeping subpoenas of dozens of independent conservative groups has been battered by a series of court rulings that make it increasingly clear that the conduct being investigated is not at a crime at all… that the Doe was actually seeking to punish constitutionally protected free speech.

Still, Milwaukee District Attorney John Chisholm refuses to formally shut it down, and the titular special prosecutor, Francis Schmitz, continues to file legal motions. But despite Chisholm and Schmitz’s best efforts, it is clear that the John Doe is not simply resting, much less pining for the fjords.

With apologies to Monty Python, we suggest that the state high court make it crystal clear to Chisholm, Schmitz & Co. that the Doe is demised. It has passed on, is no more and has ceased to be. The John Doe is bereft of life, rests in peace and is expired. It has kicked the bucket, shuffled off its mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the choir invisible.

It is, in short, an ex-John Doe.

Would you like Brie with that whine?

Madison has once again become a veil of tears, as academics reacted with dismay to a proposed cut of 2.5% of the UW’s annual budget. The academics waxed especially indignant after Walker suggested, “Maybe it’s time for faculty and staff to start thinking about teaching more classes and doing more work.”

L’horreur!

UW President Ray Cross has led the chorus of indignation, saying that he was “frustrated” by the talk of having professors teach more. “I think it’s a shame that people don’t understand what faculty really do.”

Journalism professor Jo Ellen Fair explained: “Most faculty members I know are working 60, 70 hours a week. I’m not sure what else they can do.” But this
onerous workload apparently does not including teaching for professor Fair, who is not entertaining a single class this semester.

She wasn’t alone. As our friends at Media Trackers reported, many of the faculty members who were most vocally critical of Walker’s suggestion themselves spent little or no time in the classroom with undergraduates. Media Trackers looked at seven of the governor’s fiercest critics:

• Combined, the seven profs make $812,222 a year and teach a total of just five classes this semester.
• Only three teach any classes at all this semester.
• The three professors who actually darken the door of a classroom averaged just 1.66 classes per week, with an average of 3.97 hours per week in the classroom.

They included the political science professor who argued that light teaching loads keep UW “competitive with other two-tier colleges” and who makes $140,199 a year and taught zero hours this semester. There was the food science professor who said that Walker’s comments showed “a total lack of understanding of how a university functions.” Walker, for instance probably does not know how this professor manages to make nearly $118,000 a year without teaching a single student this semester. Ditto for the professor who told The College Fix, “If you increase the teaching requirements, faculty who can get jobs at schools with lower teaching requirements will move.” He may be an expert on the subject inasmuch as he makes $125,000 a year without teaching one class.

UW Chancellor Rebecca Blank also took up the anti-Walker chorus, saying that Walker’s suggestion that professors actually teach once in a while reflected a “serious misunderstanding of how the school works.” But Blank also tipped her hand a bit when she told The Wall Street Journal that she used lighter teaching loads as a bargaining chip to attract professors to Madison. In other words: avoiding students has become a perk.

This is known as the “ratchet effect,” and it always works to lower the teaching loads of academics. Former Harvard President Derek Bok explained: “When we go to recruit a star professor, the bargaining chip is always a reduced teaching load — never a reduced research load.”

No wonder that so many UW professors now teach fewer than two courses a semester — and that so many teach nothing at all.

**Never mind**

In substantially better news, we learned that 40 years of government warnings about eating foods rich in cholesterol — eggs, milk, cheese, bacon — were wrong. That settled science turns out not to have been settled after all. At the same time we learned that bisphenol-A is not after all (to use Patrick McIlheran’s phrase) “Satan’s own saliva.” It turns out that despite dozens (or was it hundreds?) of stories about the dangers of the chemical, BPA has been exonerated by actual scientific studies. So never mind about that, either.

Our government experts, nevertheless, remain quite certain that they know precisely what the average temperature will be a century from now. They do not, however, know whether it will rain next week.

Wisconsin Interest editor Charles J. Sykes is the founder of the Right Wisconsin website and a talk show host on AM-620 WTMJ in Milwaukee.
Richard T. Ely taught economics at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1800s. Ely is strongly associated with the university’s role in the Progressive Movement and the development of what is called the Wisconsin Idea — the now commonplace belief that the university should try to improve people’s lives outside the classroom.

In 1894, there was an attempt to remove Ely as chair of the economics department for teaching “socialistic” doctrines. In rejecting the charges, the Board of Regents passionately defended academic freedom, observing, “Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.”

This ringing passage has been repeatedly invoked,
most recently in opposition to proposed cuts in the university’s budget and a stillborn effort to amend its mission statement to focus more specifically on work force and economic development. We are, the university says, about an untrammeled and open search for knowledge. Indeed, the “sifting and winnowing” passage can be found on a plaque outside Bascom Hall.

But the search for truth is not particularly robust inside the building. If it were, the UW might enjoy more political support than it does today. But it, like many universities, has allowed itself to become ideologically homogenous and increasingly intolerant of views thought to be inconsistent with the shibboleths of modern progressivism. At UW-Madison — and many universities — there are many orthodoxies that apparently no longer need to be sifted and winnowed.

We read about the easily ridiculed political correctness and intolerance rooted in highly politicized — and increasingly odder — grievances. The UW is not immune from that, but the larger problem is its lack of a commitment to intellectual diversity. An enormous percentage of professors share the same presuppositions. They may not believe that knowledge has reached its final goal, but they are awfully secure in their parochial worldview.

The UW is riddled with academic centers and programs — for example, the Havens Center for Social Justice and the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (both in Madison) and the Center for Economic Development (at the Milwaukee campus) — that are essentially left-wing think tanks. The problem is not that their work is bad (although it sometimes is) or that research centers with a point of view are inappropriate at a public university (they are not). It is that the UW would never countenance research centers with a conservative or libertarian perspective.

Can you imagine the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute housed in Vilas Hall? Of course, you can’t. This is a problem — the university’s increasing homogeneity and conformity — that it can’t even see. As a law professor at another school once told me, the modern academic’s idea of diversity is to hire people who went to the same schools, had the same jobs and think the same way, but look different. Thus academia becomes an insular and conformist place where like-minded faculties replicate themselves. When everyone assumes the same things, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to see what has been missed.

This is not just a problem for conservatives, but for the UW itself. When the university comes to be seen as the exclusive domain of an ideology, it can no longer expect support from those who do not share that ideology. If, in fact, Republicans have declared war on the university, it is because the university has declared war on Republicans.

“If, in fact, Republicans have declared war on the UW, it is because the UW has declared war on Republicans.”

In fact, we should not even be disturbed. The problem is not, as with Richard Ely, that the university teaches doctrines disfavored by the public. It is that it won’t tolerate challenges to its own parochial perspectives.

Academic freedom is now invoked, not to protect the iconoclast, but to exclude her. Chemists and physicists may suffer for the sins of sociologists and law professors. But if “sifting and winnowing” are not honestly followed and if the research that might benefit us all is circumscribed by ideological suppositions, the case for state funding becomes considerably weaker.

As we discuss its future, the UW is correct to remind us of the larger mission of a research university and the importance of academic freedom. But it needs to learn to walk the talk.

Richard Esenberg is president of the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty. He blogs at sharkandshepherd.blogspot.com.
Today’s lesson

Classroom disorder increases in Milwaukee and Madison after school administrators unveil a new discipline policy

By Dave Daley

Lunch break over, students at a Madison high school file into class. The bell rings. Only a little more than half the students are in their seats, but the teacher starts anyway, ticking off homework assignments.

Two students trickle in, one carrying a bag from a fast-food chain, the other a basketball under his arm. “Hey, man — gimme some fries,” calls out a student. The kid with the fast-food bag saunters over, bag open, warning his hungry classmate not to take too many. More students join in, begging for fries, too.

At the front of the room, the teacher struggles to stay on topic and get his students’ focus back on the lesson. The student with the fries is making his way to his seat, kids reaching into his bag as he passes, snatching fries, joshing him — “Wow, you are old!” — about his generosity.

The student is the center of attention. The teacher stares at him as he finally slides into his seat. The teacher picks up the lesson, just as three more late students trickle in, one eating a bag of Cheetos, a second munching a candy bar.

More calls ring out. “C’mon — some chips, dude, bring ’em over here.” The teacher stops. No one is listening anyway. Everyone’s attention is on still more late-arriving kids, half a dozen this time, the students laughing and calling out to one another as they saunter to their seats.

One of the late students sees the hard look on the teacher’s face. “Sorry, I’ll be quiet now,” he offers as he sits down.

Hunched over their desks, the top performing students — the good kids — are reading their books or doing homework, trying to concentrate as the hubbub swirls around them. Finally, 15 minutes after the bell rang, everyone is seated, and the teacher can pick up the lesson.

No one is disciplined for tardiness. Or for bringing food into the classroom. Or for disrupting class. The teacher does not bother writing up the late students — repeat offenders — even though habitual tardiness is an infraction of the school’s discipline code. There is no point filling out an office referral form; the teacher knows administrators will just ignore it.

Referrals lead to suspensions, a big no-no at district headquarters, where the emphasis is
on holding suspension numbers down. Meanwhile, down in the trenches, in the classrooms, the teachers are pretty much on their own.

Welcome to the new world of Madison schools. This is a peek into the classroom of a Madison teacher who detailed the events of his typical day for Wisconsin Interest. The teacher, a 10-year veteran, asked that his name not be used. (Other teachers interviewed for this story had the same wariness.) “I like my job,” he explained.

The Madison Metropolitan School District, the state’s second largest with more than 27,000 students, is in its second semester of a kid-friendly discipline policy aimed at keeping rule-breaking students in school. But some are questioning it.

“Utter chaos,” says the teacher who struggles every day to get his students seated after the bell rings. “It feels like the inmates are running the institution.”

Madison’s new suspend-as-a-last-resort discipline policy mirrors a shift by schools across the country from tough zero-tolerance to a far less punitive approach that tries to keep kids in school under the mantra that children don’t have a chance of learning if they’re not in the classroom.

That more relaxed approach, which emphasizes teaching kids positive behaviors, is already in place in the Milwaukee and Racine school districts, where it is dramatically cutting suspension rates. Like many schools across the country, Milwaukee is using the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports concept, which emphasizes teaching students what behavior is expected rather than meting out punishment after bad behavior.

Teachers tell students the rules — be respectful, be responsible — and what kind of behavior is expected, then reward positive behavior with praise. The training begins in pre-kindergarten, where the lessons seem to imprint better, and continues on up the grade levels.

In Milwaukee Public Schools, the state’s largest school district with 77,000 students, the drop in suspensions is nothing less than spectacular: nearly 50% over five years. Underscoring the importance of MPS’ drop: 55% of MPS students are African American — the group hit hardest by suspensions, not only in Milwaukee but nationally, where three black students are suspended for every white kid.

Those three-to-one numbers are behind a major push by the Obama administration to bring suspensions down. In 2008, Milwaukee earned the dubious distinction of posting the highest suspension rate of any large urban school district, according to an advocacy group called the Council of Great City Schools. That was the year that nearly half of all ninth-graders in MPS were suspended at least once.

But over the next five years, operating under the positive-behavior framework, MPS slashed its suspensions 48%, from 26,309 in the 2007-08 school year to 13,641 in 2012-13.

The Racine Unified School District slashed its suspensions 30% between 2008 and 2013, not the big numbers Milwaukee posted but still significant gains.

That’s the good news. The not-so-good news? Critics say the intervention-not-suspension approach is not changing students’ behavior all that much, and when problem students are allowed to stay in the classroom, too often the students who are trying to learn suffer.

Madison teachers hit that point hard when they crowded into a Madison School Board meeting last October in what was, in effect, a mini-revolt against the policy. Teachers gave the board an earful, ticking off major problems, including:

• Students cursing, punching, kicking and even biting teachers daily, making classrooms unsafe.
• Aggressive students constantly disrupting classes, then allowed back in without the corrective discipline needed to show that bad behavior has consequences.
• Lack of staff or training to handle the sharp uptick in student disturbances, even with two-dozen new hires and $1.6 million allocated to implement the new policy.
Teachers were blunt. “It’s not working — the theory does not match the reality,” David Wasserman, who teaches at Madison’s Sennett Middle School, told board members. Students “are smelling and sensing a lack of structure,” Wasserman said in a story reported by the Wisconsin State Journal.

Elvehjem Elementary School teacher Liz Donnelly echoed Wasserman. “It’s important that [suspended] students are brought back into the classroom as soon as possible,” said Donnelly, who also serves as an officer in the Madison teachers’ union. “But they also need to know there are consequences for their actions. And I think kids are figuring out that they’re not really going to get into trouble with this new policy.”

Teachers complained of a fall semester punctuated by daily fistfights, kids bringing weapons to school “for protection,” and security staff walking away from conflicts between students, unwilling to take any action that might push up suspension numbers.

Acknowledging the complaints, Madison Schools Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham said a “stabilization team” was being put together to address problems. But Madison seems determined to push ahead with the new approach.

School districts across the country adopted zero-tolerance discipline policies in the wake of the 1999 Columbine school massacre. Zero tolerance, predictably, led to dramatic hikes in suspensions, an uptick that hit black students the hardest. Black students also account for more than a third of the students expelled from school, federal data show.

Researchers struggle to explain that striking disparity. One emerging theory: a subconscious bias by teachers that stereotypes black males as “dangerous.” “There are ideas in our head, even if we don’t want them to be there,” says Mica Pollock, an education studies professor at the University of California-San Diego and co-author of a study that found that higher minority discipline rates cannot be explained by the theory that minorities misbehave more.

Hidden bias, though, does explain the disparities. A black student is “overdisciplined,” falling victim to implicit prejudices without the teacher even realizing what is happening, Pollock says. “You’re disciplined for minor behavior, the discretionary kinds of judgment calls that are open to bias, where white kids doing the same thing might get much less discipline,” she adds. “Like wearing a hat wrong — if a white kid did the same thing, for the teacher it might be sort of annoying but not deeply threatening.”

Getting kicked out of school can be catastrophic in its long-term consequences on a student’s grades and chances of graduating from high school. “Studies show a single suspension in ninth grade is correlated with a doubled chance of dropping out, and that suspended or expelled students are three times as likely to end up in the juvenile justice system,” Pollock says.

The study Pollock co-authored was published in December by the Discipline Disparities Research-to-Practice Collaborative, a group of 26 nationally recognized experts from the social science, education and legal fields who analyzed a huge body of recent research. In the end, the group issued a finding that it says “challenges virtually every notion behind the frequent use of disciplinary policies that remove students from the classroom.”

Pollock said one interesting finding in the research is that a majority of Americans of all races — not just whites — unconsciously associate danger and criminality with black men. “We’re not talking about bad people,” Pollock added. “We’re programmed this way because of several centuries of history.”

There is a suspicion that some schools across the country are jimmying numbers to make their suspension statistics look better, especially with the top-down push from the Obama administration. That push has led to eyebrow-raising initiatives:

• Last year, Baltimore started offering cash bonuses to principals and teachers who keep suspension numbers down. The Baltimore teachers’ union chief blasted the bonuses, warning that physical abuse incidents — an automatic suspension — were going unreported as a result, putting teachers in danger. With suspension numbers cut in half, undaunted school officials say they will keep paying out the cash.

• In Minneapolis, then-Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson announced in November that her office would personally review any suspension that involved a black, Hispanic or Native American student — setting off cries of reverse-discrimination.

MPS teachers say the high number of minority suspensions has always been a hot-button issue in Milwaukee. One longtime teacher tells how a colleague authorized 20 suspensions on a day school headquarters, and every suspension was promptly thrown out. MPS students say the high number of minority suspensions has always been a hot-button issue in Milwaukee. One longtime teacher tells how a colleague authorized 20 suspensions on a day when the principal was away. The paperwork went to district headquarters, and every suspension was promptly thrown out. Milwaukee School Board member Terry Falk, a retired MPS teacher who taught for more than 30 years, has heard similar stories over the years. “Suspension rates are always a little suspect,” Falk says. “We’ll send a kid home for the day — we won’t put it on the books. Everybody is under tremendous pressure to keep the numbers down.”

Falk says the sharp drop in suspensions at MPS is probably a combination of officials discouraging suspensions and the new positive behavior intervention approach. “There are fundamental changes happening in some schools — in others, no,” Falk says.
“Some schools will say, ‘We can’t suspend kids anymore because the administration won’t let us,’” Falk says.

Falk is an advocate of the new less punitive discipline approach. “We do have enough evidence to show that it works,” Falk says.

One longtime MPS teacher, who is white, sees the misbehavior of certain students as an understandable response to growing up in tumultuous and threatening circumstances. Too often, a black kid is coming from a one-parent home in a tough neighborhood with high crime and low incomes. “It’s more that the student lives in poverty and has a fragile home life,” the teacher says. The student is “not sure Mom is even going to come home tonight. On the bus to school, someone steals your lunch or makes fun of your shoes. You get to school. You’ve got a heightened adrenaline level. You come to school with this attitude, this disability. You don’t have the ‘soft skills’ to know how to behave appropriately.”

He says that such students feel “they have a lot less to lose by acting out.”

Kaleem Caire, former head of the Urban League of Greater Madison, makes the same point, saying that young black students endure multiple stresses in their daily lives. “The last thing our children need,” he wrote in a column for the The Capital Times in Madison, “is for the adults who should be showing them they are cared for to stand at a podium advocating policies that allow them to kick kids out of class.”

In an interview with Wisconsin Interest, Caire said that a huge problem for African American boys is the absence of male authority figures in their lives, including at school. Recounting a talk he gave at Hamilton Middle School in Madison last fall, he says he found himself “calling out” three black boys for refusing to follow the teacher’s instructions.

“When they came in, they were loud — the teacher was trying to get them to settle down,” he recalls. “They were clowning to get attention.

“I just lit into them,” Caire went on. “I told them, ‘It’s sad. If you have a 45-minute class period, and you lose 15 minutes because it takes you five to ten minutes to get you settled down, you’re robbing the rest of the kids in this classroom of an education.’ I said, ‘Do you think that’s right?’

Caire said at first the boys giggled, and he tore into them even harder, saying, “This is serious business. Sit up straight when I’m talking to you.” And they sat up. I said, ‘You guys have only so much time in a day to get an education.’”

Caire says he emphasized to the whole class the importance of an education and how teachers “put it on the line for you every day.” The civil rights leader, who is launching his own pre-school program in Madison, says one of the boys came up to him afterward and asked to give him a hug, saying, “I have never had anybody ever talk to me like that before.”

Racine schools have also seen a sharp drop in suspensions over the last five years — more than 30% overall. Implementing the same positive-behavior approach used in Milwaukee and Madison is partly responsible. There’s another reason, too — tough talk from the school district’s central office along with a suspension scorecard sent out each week to every school by the district’s top brass.

“The overall awareness of the suspensions and what kids are being suspended for makes people a little more careful and more proactive versus reactive,” says Eric Gallien, who oversees schools and principals in the Racine district. His district also modified its discipline code, moving disruptive behavior off the list of suspendable offenses and reserving suspensions for what the district labeled “aggressive behavior,” The Racine Journal Times reported.

Liz Donnelly, the Madison elementary school teacher, acknowledges that schools needed to take action given “the huge overrepresentation of African Americans” in suspension numbers. “You have to give kids second and third chances,” Donnelly said. “But if that doesn’t work, then you need to suspend.”

Donnelly says some Madison parents are voicing fears that under the new relaxed discipline policy, their child might be injured.

One longtime MPS high school teacher agrees. “We’ve overcorrected the other way — the past school year is probably one of the worst I’ve been in.” One of the biggest disruptions is kids using their cell phones in class — on paper, a suspendable violation of the MPS discipline code. But the teacher has stopped writing misconduct referrals that only get tossed out at management level.

“There’s nothing going to happen, and the kids know it,” the teacher says. “It’s hard to keep order in a classroom when the kids know there is no consequence to misbehavior. It’s a license for the other kids.”

Principals won’t even confiscate phones because of liability issues, and the teacher says the best he can do is ask the student to turn the phone over to him until the class ends. “I’ll tell a kid, ‘I need you to put the phone away — let me hang onto the phone until the end of class.”

If the student is quietly texting or listening to music through ear buds, the teacher says he usually does not step in. “We have to pick our battles, and earbuds usually aren’t worth the fight.”

The teacher notes that cell phones are whipped out as soon as a disruption occurs, for example, a fight in the hallway. “The kids want to get a video of it,” the teacher says. “And that’s an infraction right there.”

In one case, administrators took the phones away just long enough to erase tapes of the fight, then returned the phones. No one was disciplined, according to the teacher.

“Suspensions are down because we’re under pressure to keep the numbers down,” the teacher says. “It’s very frustrating. You have to hit a teacher or draw blood with a kid to get suspended.
ally knows of two students who left Madison public schools this year because administrators took no action after the students complained of threats and intimidation. And two good teachers are retiring early rather than deal with classroom disruptions that school officials find acceptable, the teacher adds.

Even when a teacher tries to discipline an unruly student, he’ll find other kids in the classroom with their phones out, grinning as they record the incident, the teacher says. To get a problem student removed from his classroom, the teacher says he now has to document all interventions he has tried — including calls to the student’s parents and the results of those calls — before school administration will back him.

Concerns about school safety still dog MPS. Last fall, School Choice Wisconsin released a report showing that juvenile arrests at MPS schools were 27 times higher than at city voucher schools and eight times higher than at non-MPS public charter schools. MPS officials, though, questioned whether any meaningful conclusions could be drawn from a log of 911 calls. They also pointed out that School Choice Wisconsin’s voucher schools are competing with MPS for students.

For Milwaukee maintenance worker Dennis Koepke, there is no doubt about the problem. Milwaukee’s public schools lost the battle for his granddaughter, Jocelyn, the day she came home from school holding an icepack to her eye. MPS could not satisfactorily explain the injury — at first saying a boy in her pre-K class beat her up, then saying no, she fell down on the playground, he says.

Two years later, Jocelyn is attending the Shining Star Christian School, a voucher school at N. 66th Street and W. Fairview Avenue, just a block from her grandparents’ home in a working-class neighborhood. Jocelyn loves Shining Star and is enjoying the much smaller classes, where she gets more individual attention, says Koepke.

Michael Brickman, national director of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy think tank based in Washington, D.C., questions some of the suspension statistics provided by schools. “There is a gaming of the system and playing with numbers game, when in reality schools are no less disrupted and maybe even more disrupted because problems are not being addressed,” Brickman says.

Brickman also warns that schools pushing the new more-lenient approach risk out-of-control classrooms and potential harm to both teachers and students. Schools need to find a middle ground between zero-tolerance policies and the new almost-anything-goes approach, Brickman adds.

“The key here is to have a balanced approach so you don’t let one or two students ruin the chance of learning for the rest of the kids,” Brickman says. “It’s not fair if only one kid is causing a disturbance that causes the 25 other students to miss out on part of their education.”

The veteran Madison teacher who finds it a struggle every day to get students into their seats after the bell rings says he personally knows of two students who left Madison public schools these days.”

Staff cuts this year are hurting, too. At his school, a quarter of the safety aide positions were eliminated. “We need more safety aides and more counselors,” the teacher laments. “The nonteaching staff needs to be beefed up.”

Bottom line: “Good kids are leaving the district because they’re being bullied and mistreated. And teachers feel more demoralized, feel that they’re not being listened to.”

Concerns about school safety still dog MPS. Last fall, School Choice Wisconsin released a report showing that juvenile arrests at MPS schools were 27 times higher than at city voucher schools and eight times higher than at non-MPS public charter schools. MPS officials, though, questioned whether any meaningful conclusions could be drawn from a log of 911 calls. They also pointed out that School Choice Wisconsin’s voucher schools are competing with MPS for students.

For Milwaukee maintenance worker Dennis Koepke, there is no doubt about the problem. Milwaukee’s public schools lost the battle for his granddaughter, Jocelyn, the day she came home from school holding an icepack to her eye. MPS could not satisfactorily explain the injury — at first saying a boy in her pre-K class beat her up, then saying no, she fell down on the playground, he says.

Two years later, Jocelyn is attending the Shining Star Christian School, a voucher school at N. 66th Street and W. Fairview Avenue, just a block from her grandparents’ home in a working-class neighborhood. Jocelyn loves Shining Star and is enjoying the much smaller classes, where she gets more individual attention, says Koepke.

Michael Brickman, national director of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy think tank based in Washington, D.C., questions some of the suspension statistics provided by schools. “There is a gaming of the system and playing with numbers game, when in reality schools are no less disrupted and maybe even more disrupted because problems are not being addressed,” Brickman says.

Brickman also warns that schools pushing the new more-lenient approach risk out-of-control classrooms and potential harm to both teachers and students. Schools need to find a middle ground between zero-tolerance policies and the new almost-anything-goes approach, Brickman adds.

“The key here is to have a balanced approach so you don’t let one or two students ruin the chance of learning for the rest of the kids,” Brickman says. “It’s not fair if only one kid is causing a disturbance that causes the 25 other students to miss out on part of their education.”

The veteran Madison teacher who finds it a struggle every day to get students into their seats after the bell rings says he personally knows of two students who left Madison public schools this year because administrators took no action after the students complained of threats and intimidation. And two good teachers are retiring early rather than deal with classroom disruptions that school officials find acceptable, the teacher adds.

Even when a teacher tries to discipline an unruly student, he’ll find other kids in the classroom with their phones out, grinning as they record the incident, the teacher says. To get a problem student removed from his classroom, the teacher says he now has to document all interventions he has tried — including calls to the student’s parents and the results of those calls — before school administration will back him.

In one case, the teacher said he documented a student for a week, then sent him to the principal’s office, only to have the kid returned to class 10 minutes later. Nothing happened. “Why would I send anyone else out or waste my time documenting their behavior? For me, that means I don’t have time to grade a writing assignment, rework an average lesson plan or look for new material.”

Kids are learning to adapt to the chaos in the classroom, the teacher says, by enrolling in advanced placement and honors classes that the troublemakers avoid. But too many average students flooding into the advanced classes cannot meet the standards — so teachers begin dropping the standards, he says.

A colleague, the teacher adds, related this story: In the middle of a math class, the teacher is working out examples on the whiteboard, her back to the class, when a female student yells, “Stop taking pictures of me!”

The teacher turns around and sees two boys with their phones out and the girl zipping her sweatshirt up to her neck. Over the next five minutes, the boys deny taking pictures while the distraught girl insists they did. All teaching has stopped. The teacher writes a pass for the two boys to take their phones to the principal’s office.

The interruption lasts even longer as the teacher takes time to type up a behavior report on the two students. Five minutes later, the boys are back, big smiles on their faces, and a note from the principal that reads: “I made the boys delete the photos.”

Summing it up: no consequences for the boys, who are now fearless. The girl feels violated, and the teacher lost control of the classroom. Suspension numbers are down, but at what cost?

“I fear that we are driving the gifted and talented middle-of-the-road kids out of our schools and into neighboring districts or private schools,” the teacher says. “Schools where teachers can teach and send a disruptive student out of the class.”

Dave Daley has been a journalist for 30 years. He covered the Capitol for The Milwaukee Journal and legal affairs for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.
Education Reform

Common Core standards are hard to top, despite the complaints

By Michael J. Petrilli

Back in 2010, when Wisconsin chose to adopt the Common Core state standards, it wasn’t a difficult decision. While the Badger State has long led the nation on school choice, it has one of the worst records in the country on standards-based reform. Its reading and math standards were among the lowest in the country, and its tests among the easiest to pass — possibly explaining why Wisconsin’s student performance mostly flat-lined over the 2000s while other states made significant gains.

Common Core gave Wisconsin a chance to start fresh, aim higher and catch up to leading states like Massachusetts.

The standards haven’t changed over the past five years, but the political calculus certainly has. Opposition to the Common Core has become a cause célèbre of the Tea Party — both its organic grass roots and its more opportunistic fundraising factions. The main concern was the unfortunate role of the federal government in encouraging — some would say coercing — the states to adopt the Common Core via the $4 billion Race to the Top initiative.

So it’s not surprising that politicians — especially Republican governors — find themselves trying to triangulate between their anti-Common Core base and the business wing of the GOP, which sees these standards as important building blocks for stronger public schools and a more competitive economy.

Enter Gov. (and presumptive presidential candidate) Scott Walker. Walker has a history of successful triangulation, particularly around Obamacare. Rather than take the Medicaid money, as fellow Midwestern Gows, John Kasich and Rick Snyder did, he reformed Wisconsin’s BadgerCare

See Petrilli on page 14
Wisconsin can do better

By Leah Vukmir

I am no stranger to the debate over educational standards. My foray into politics began two decades ago as a mom who questioned standards and practices in my daughter’s elementary classroom. My grassroots efforts to educate other parents caught the eye of Gov. Tommy Thompson, who appointed me to the Model Academic Standards Board. Our board created Wisconsin’s first educational standards in 1997, and I learned a great deal about the standards-writing process. Believing our children deserved more rigor, I joined the minority and voted against the board’s English Language Arts standards. Today, I look at the Common Core standards and once again believe our children deserve better.

Not exceptional

For a set of standards billed as world-class and internationally benchmarked, Common Core lacks the rigor and clarity found in many exceptional standards around the country.

See VUKMIR on page 15

Editor’s note: Few issues have divided Wisconsin conservatives as much as the Common Core state standards. These educational benchmarks were adopted in 2010 as the basis for curriculum and student assessment in Wisconsin. The state’s old standards “were not considered ‘college and career ready,’” as the Legislative Fiscal Bureau noted in 2013. The bureau described the new standards as rigorous and detailed. But are they rigorous enough? And is it right for the federal government to push the states to adopt them? We’ve asked a Common Core proponent, Michael J. Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and a Common Core opponent, state Sen. Leah Vukmir (R-Wauwatosa), to make their cases.
program to expand coverage to needy citizens without putting Wisconsin on the hook for budget-busting liabilities down the road.

He appears to be seeking a similar “third way” on Common Core. In his second inaugural address and in his State of the State address, Walker promised to push for the repeal of Common Core and replace it with even higher standards. In the meantime, he wants legislators to clarify that it’s up to school districts to decide what to teach.

In principle, Walker’s position is more than reasonable. Academic standards are the province of the states. And regardless of the standards — Common Core or something else — local control of curriculum remains sacrosanct.

But, in reality, there are three problems with his approach. The first is that it’s hard to “go higher” than Common Core because, while not perfect, its standards are quite good. The second is that the polarized nature of today’s debate makes the creation of new, better standards quite challenging, as other governors have learned. The third is that schools in Wisconsin have spent almost five years — and millions of dollars — implementing the Common Core. Throwing a wrench into their efforts now carries significant costs, in terms of dollars, disruption and morale.

Let’s take these issues in turn:

The standards are conservative

In 2010, we at the Fordham Institute reviewed the English and math standards of the 50 states and compared them to the Common Core. We’ve been doing similar reviews of state standards for 15 years. And the results? The Common Core standards were good enough to earn an A-minus in math and a B-plus in English, significantly better than the grades of three-quarters of the states, and on par with the rest. Meanwhile, Wisconsin’s English standards received a D from our expert reviewers, and its math standards received an F. They were among the worst standards in the country.

What makes the Common Core so strong? The math standards are solid on arithmetic, expecting students to know their math facts cold. The English standards bring back rigorous content in history, science, art and music. Hirsch Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge program and author of Cultural Literacy, is such a big fan. The standards ensure that students read great works of literature as well as solid nonfiction works, such as the nation’s founding documents.

Some Common Core opponents have thrown all sorts of accusations at the standards, most of which have been batted down by fact-checkers and educators. “They promote ‘fuzzy math.’” “They discourage Western literature.” “They weigh in on sex ed.” False, false, false.

That’s not to say that they are perfect. Some math standards have caused confusion in the classroom and among parents; there’s a legitimate debate about the level of math, reading and writing students need for college, and how to prepare students going to selective universities and/or into challenging science and math fields. But such blemishes call for tweaking, not a start-from-scratch overhaul.

Harder than it looks

But what about Walker’s desire to “repeal and replace” the Common Core with something higher? He might talk to a few of his fellow Republican governors about their experiences, which have not been pretty.

For all the hoopla, just a handful of states have proposed significant changes to Common Core, and none of them has written higher standards. South Carolina’s new draft standards have been widely panned, and they will probably need to go back to the drawing board. Oklahoma passed a bill that requires Common Core to be replaced with the state’s old standards while yet another set of standards is written. Missouri, which passed a bill to review and possibly replace the standards, seems unlikely to please both those who want high standards and those who evaluate standards only in terms of how different they are from Common Core. And in Indiana, modifications to Common Core were met with skepticism from supporters and detractors alike, giving Gov. Mike Pence little political benefit.

The basic problem is that it’s impossible to draft standards that prepare students for college and career and that look nothing like Common Core. That’s because Common Core represents a good-faith effort to incorporate what the current evidence indicates students need to know and do to succeed in college or to land a good-paying job — and the milestones younger students need to pass to reach those goals. That’s why...
and around the world. Common Core did improve upon the standards developed in 1997, and many Common Core proponents like to point to this as the sole reason for adopting these new standards in Wisconsin. However, arguing that Wisconsin had to improve its standards is not the same as justifying the adoption of Common Core.

The most vocal critic of Common Core’s English and Language Arts standards is Sandra Stotsky, a dissenting member of the Common Core Validation Committee. As a national expert on English standards, Stotsky has helped states write standards before and after the advent of Common Core. Her biggest concern is the Common Core’s emphasis on teaching methods over actual knowledge/content standards. The pro-Common Core Fordham Institute echoed this in its review of the standards, stating that true content standards “would be more helpful to teachers.”

Another major concern with the new English and Language Arts standards is their emphasis on teaching writing skills over reading skills. Stotsky believes this is backwards and flies in the face of established research. She contends, “The foundation for good writing is good reading.” Increasing the time a student reads is the only way to improve both reading and writing.

Experts have also complained that the English standards are developmentally inappropriate at lower grade levels. Child psychologist Megan Koschnick points out that having children under the age of 7 “explain, justify and apply principles that are abstract in nature” can lead to stress because children that young don’t have the emotional or intellectual capacity for such tasks. Stotsky echoed the sentiment, stating that it was unreasonable to expect elementary school students to make academic arguments.

The Common Core math standards are more worrisome. R. James Milgram, a math professor and another dissenting member of the Common Core Validation Committee, believes the Common Core math standards are a mixture of too much rigor in kindergarten and first grade and insufficient rigor through 12th grade. These standards, he believes, place children one to two years behind those of other countries and in no way make students “college ready,” as the standards claim.

Another particularly troubling fact is that Common Core does not introduce algebra until high school. Most high-performing countries include algebra in their eighth grade standards. Studies from California State University show that one of the best indicators of college success is the level of math that students complete in high school. Delaying algebra until high school will leave our students less prepared for college and lagging behind students in top-performing countries.

Jason Zimba, an author of the Common Core math standards, admitted that his group delivered “a minimal definition of college readiness.” Before the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Zimba said Common Core prepares students “for colleges that most kids go to, but not that most parents probably aspire to . . . not for selective colleges.”

With only 27% of Wisconsin public college students graduating in four years, we cannot afford to leave our children less prepared for post-secondary education.

Lack of local control

Until recently, public education in America was left to the discretion of the states. Unfortunately, Common Core represents the latest in a series of poorly executed federal interventions in education.

Defenders attempt to dismiss federal involvement by pointing to groups like the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association as the two state groups primarily charged with developing the standards. However, one cannot deny the federal government’s role. After Common Core’s development, the federal government provided two major incentives for states to adopt these new standards: Race to the Top funding and a waiver from the onerous requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act.

In a time of tight budgeting, many states were quick to grab the additional revenue. Adoption of Common Core became a silver bullet even for states that already had top-notch standards, including California, Indiana and Massachusetts.

The reach of federal involvement also extends into testing. Standards and tests go hand in hand. The federal government helped fund the development of the two tests aligned with the Common Core. According to Fordham’s president (and my debate opponent) Michael Petrilli, federal officials will also review the tests. According to the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, federal officials will also review the tests.

Proponents of Common Core may simply shrug this off as only minor federal involvement that is in no way as intrusive as the No Child Left Behind legislation. I see no difference. Both cede power to national and federal interests. I believe students are best served when accountability occurs closer to home. State and local elected officials are closer to the people.
states that are sincere about wanting to aim higher would be smart to start with Common Core as a base for additions or refinements — as Florida did when it added calculus standards several years ago. But that won’t be enough to please the Tea Party base.

**Flavor of the month?**

Starting from scratch also pulls the rug out from under educators who have spent almost five years implementing Common Core in their classrooms — and who see the standards as a big improvement over what the state required before. Several such educators spoke at a state Senate Education Committee hearing last March when legislators were contemplating creating a commission to replace the Common Core. Terry Kaldhusdal, Wisconsin’s teacher of the year in 2007, told lawmakers, “At this moment, my kids are using Common Core state standards to understand that the roots of our republic go back to ancient Rome.” Furthermore, he explained, “The curriculum was determined by the school board. The texts were determined by me.”

According to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Michelle Langenfeld, Green Bay’s superintendent of schools, asked, if the Common Core was to be scrapped, where were schools going to get the money to implement something else?

Education professor Jeanne Williams, meanwhile, argued that “the standards are not perfect, but they are far more specific, focused and demanding” than what Wisconsin had before. She was right to say that backing away now would demonstrate that the “winds of political opinion” drive education decisions in the Badger State.

Teachers are all too familiar with the fad du jour. Policymakers promised them that Common Core would be different, that it would have staying power. They are right to be angry that, because of politics, years of hard work might be thrown in the trash bin — to the detriment of their students.

**The way forward**

If the primary conservative criticism of the Common Core standards is not their content, but their entanglement with the federal government, the best solution is not to dump the standards but to break up with the feds. In other words, get Uncle Sam out of the Common Core business.

Thankfully, that’s exactly what Republicans in Congress are committed to doing. Both the House and Senate are working on reauthorizing the No Child Left Behind Act, and one major goal is to clarify that the Secretary of Education is to have no influence over state choice of academic standards. No “incentives,” no coercion. Nothing.

Wisconsin should give support to such efforts. Reining in the federal government is the right way to fix the legitimate concerns with the Common Core, while keeping its many benefits. Such measured, prudent action may not give satisfaction to the populist GOP base, but it would represent a truly conservative approach.

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Michael J. Petrilli is president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education policy think tank. He’s also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

**Leah Vukmir responds**

While I admire Mr. Petrilli’s unabashed determination to prop up the sinking S.S. Common Core, I disagree with a number of his points.

Dismissing the anti-Common Core movement as simply being Tea Party-led is incorrect and lazy. It echoes arguments by liberals in Wisconsin and nationally. Parents, teachers, school board members and elected officials from across the political spectrum have protested these standards. I find it hard to label the New York teachers union, the Washington Democratic Party and the National Education Association as members of the Tea Party.

Having poor standards is a reason to replace them, not a reason to adopt Common Core. We should strive to have true world-class standards that set us apart from other states. California, Massachusetts and Indiana already have standards that surpass Common Core. It can be done.

Failures by other states have no bearing on the success or failure in Wisconsin. We have been a leader in School Choice and welfare reform — areas where other states failed. Fear of failure has never stopped Wisconsin from doing what is right.

Schools districts that deviate from Common Core are at a disadvantage on state tests. That’s why we need to give school districts flexibility to adopt standards and tests that best meet their needs. Funds used for teacher development and computer system upgrades would be needed no matter what tests were taken. They are not wasted costs. Local school boards, teachers and parents — not the state or federal government — should decide how to best deliver educational results.

While I welcome any changes Congressional Republicans can make to No Child Left Behind, states were already co-opted into Common Core. Many states adopted Common Core simply for the increased federal funding and flexibility. Any changes at the federal level should make it easier to dump Common Core, not save it.
they serve.

The top-down approach to education ties the hands of local school districts and stifles innovation. While school districts are not required to adopt Common Core, any attempts to change these standards put the districts at a disadvantage.

All school districts will use the Smarter Balanced Assessment based on Common Core, a test whose price tag continues to rise. The more a district deviates from Common Core, the more it puts itself at risk on school-wide assessment scores. Teachers are in a similar predicament. There is no incentive for teachers to go beyond the Common Core standards because their own evaluation and pay are partially tied to how well students do on the test.

Common Core advocates may argue that these standards are the floor — the baseline — for acceptable knowledge, but we have to be prepared for the reverse: The incentives in play may make them the ceiling.

Lack of choice

Wisconsin has been a national leader in education reform. We empower parents to choose the best available education for their children. Through bold reforms like School Choice and Open Enrollment, we give parents the tools to chart brighter futures for their children.

The federal standardization of education through Common Core will negate the tremendous advantages conferred by School Choice and Open Enrollment. If proponents of Common Core succeed in full implementation, innovators at both the school district and classroom level will be reduced to assembly-line cogs.

Creating our own Wisconsin standards will not happen overnight, but we don’t have to start from scratch. We know what exceptional standards look like. States like California, Indiana and Massachusetts have universally regarded standards that surpass Common Core.

We can harness a wealth of educational expertise in this state to develop great Wisconsin-based standards. At the very least, by writing its own standards, Wisconsin would afford school districts a choice between Common Core and the new Wisconsin standards.

Wisconsin standards won’t solve every problem in education, but they would put Wisconsin back in the forefront of the education reform movement. We should also reform our testing requirement by giving schools more than one state testing option. This will allow both public and private schools the flexibility to choose the right test to fit local standards.

We cannot hesitate to do what is right for Wisconsin because we fear the federal government might rescind our waiver from the flawed No Child Left Behind requirements. The stakes are too high for our state and our students.

During our work of the Model Academic Standards Board almost 20 years ago, we grappled with the notion of whether to pursue Wisconsin standards or national standards. The answer then still rings true today: “While educational needs may be similar among states, values differ. Standards should reflect the collective values of the citizens and be tailored to prepare young people for economic opportunities that exist in Wisconsin, the nation and the world.”

As elected officials, our duty is to meet that goal and finish the work of creating world-class educational standards for Wisconsin.

Leah Vukmir is a Republican state senator representing the 5th District in southeastern Wisconsin. She lives in Wauwatosa.

Michael J. Petrilli responds

Sen. Vukmir makes a reasoned and reasonable argument against keeping the Common Core standards exactly as is. While I don’t agree with all of her critiques (for instance, the standards can’t be “developmentally inappropriate” because the whole notion of “development appropriateness” is bunk), I certainly agree that they could be improved. What Sen. Vukmir doesn’t do is make a compelling case for throwing out the Common Core, root and all.

For all the reasons explained in my essay, I believe that a sane, sober and, yes, conservative, approach would focus on improving the standards rather than starting from scratch. Sen. Vukmir, Gov. Walker and others could invite educators, parents, citizens and experts to suggest refinements to the Common Core. A public commission could work through the suggestions and vote on the ones that make sense — particularly if they are backed by strong research evidence.

The end product would almost surely represent an improvement over the current expectations, but would also maintain continuity that will be important to educators. Analysts could then determine whether the standards are so different from the Common Core as to necessitate a new set of assessments besides the Smarter Balanced tests to be used this year.

If that sounds like a reasonable compromise, beware: Hard line opponents will not be satisfied. That’s because the issue, sadly, has entered the domain of the culture wars, and those wars don’t tend to end in armistice.

The goal should be creating — and maintaining — great standards for Wisconsin’s schools. Burning Common Core at the stake is not a promising strategy for achieving that end.
Even Democrats favor a right-to-work law that will end compulsory union dues

By Mike Nichols

Back in the 1990s, Tiffany Koehler worked part time at a delivery service distribution center in Oak Creek making a modest hourly wage that shrank even further when somebody took a chunk out of her paycheck without asking and gave it to the union.

So she did something lots of workers have done over the years but that few, back in the old days, talked about. She started asking, “Well, what does the union do?” And why should she have to join?

The answer to the first question depends on whom you ask.
The Teamsters’ national website succinctly states its view: The union was organized more than 100 years ago for workers to “wrest their fair share from greedy corporations” and, today, “the union’s task is exactly the same.” Less polemical supporters say the union pushes for higher wages, better pensions and working conditions, and even provides invaluable training.

Koehler had another perspective. She thought the union protected slackers, doubted it really secured higher take-home pay and didn’t like the union’s political bent.

The answer to the second question — why she had to join — is cut-and-dried.

She had to join because this is Wisconsin, and Wisconsin — until legislators passed a right-to-work law the other day — was not a right-to-work state. If you worked at a company with a “union shop,” you had no choice but to give the union a percentage of your check and become subject to its contract. Or else lose your job.

For years, this was accepted as a fait accompli. Wisconsin has had labor unions since the bricklayers in Milwaukee organized themselves in 1847, and you don’t have to be a socialist (though many were) to acknowledge the benefits unions fought for and won: shorter workdays, workers’ compensation, higher wages.

By 1939 — just four years after President Franklin Roosevelt signed the union-empowering National Labor Relations Act — union membership had grown to almost 30% of all non-agricultural workers in America. In Wisconsin, membership was as common as German lager. But, of course, beers and union membership slowly evolved into something much less stout.

Union membership has plummeted everywhere for decades. By 2014, it had fallen to 11.1% of all public- and private-sector workers in the country. The rate is slightly higher in Wisconsin — about 11.7%, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics — but still just a fraction of what it once was. Skeptics note that the percentage is even lower in the private sector, less than 7% in Wisconsin, and ask why right-to-work legislation was even necessary.

Proponents counter that the numbers of workers and businesses impacted are still large. There were still 306,000 workers in Wisconsin’s public and private sectors who were union members, according to 2014 Bureau of Labor Statistics figures. And when you include workers who are not union members but are represented by a union contract — whether they want to be or not — that figure grows to 327,000 — 12.5% of the working population.

Almost 25 years ago, a Chicago labor lawyer by the name of Thomas Geoghegan wrote a trenchant book comically entitled, “Which Side Are You On? Trying To Be For Labor When It’s Flat On Its Back.”

Labor has been increasingly supine for a while but, a little north of Chicago, Wisconsinites are still largely for it, or at least sympathetic. Nearly six in 10 Wisconsinites (58%) still approve of labor unions, far more than disapprove (34%), according to a WPRI poll of 600 adults conducted by University of Chicago professor William Howell in January.

“Though there are important partisan disagreements, Wisconsinites on the whole are pro-labor and see value in unions,” says Howell. Support for unions is in Wisconsin’s genes, you might say.

“What’s interesting here is that, at the same time, most state residents — Republicans and Democrats alike — support right-to-work legislation,” he says. “The argument that workers should not be obligated to join a union in order to hold a job resonates broadly.”

They see the issue as a basic and simple one: No American should be required to join any private organization, like a labor union. More than three-quarters of Wisconsinites (77%) agree with that statement, while only 22% disagree — proof that many people who value the history of labor and are still supportive of unions are even more supportive of individual rights.

Indeed, even among Democrats — 85% of whom approve of unions — more than half (54%) say that they
Right-to-work protesters whip up the crowd during a futile outpouring at the Capitol.
would still vote for right-to-work legislation.

Support for right-to-work among independents and Republicans is even higher — resulting in widespread support in all ideological corners of the state. All told, nearly twice as many Wisconsinites say they would vote for such legislation as against it (62% to 32%).

That said, folks on the right are a little easier to figure out on the issue. They generally see little value in unions and lots of value in right-to-work. Democrats are more complex. They love unions. Yet they are largely supportive of a policy that union leaders fear could destroy their movement.

Geoghegan, the labor lawyer — without alluding to right-to-work — put his finger on the explanation for the apparent paradox.

“Yes, there is a certain macho appeal” to unions, he wrote. “I loved being a labor lawyer, all the little pieces of stage business. Yet this was never the true appeal. … No, it was the appeal of stepping into some black hole in American culture, with all the American values except one: individualism.

“Labor thinks of itself consciously as American as apple pie. But it is not. Go to any union hall, any union rally and listen to the speeches. It took me years to hear it but there is a silence, a deafening Niagara-type silence, on the subject of individualism. No one is against it, but it never comes up. Is that America? To me, it is like Spain.”

Confusion and split allegiances on the left — the internal tug-of-war between a belief in the power of collective action and the American individualistic spirit — is palpable in a way it is not in the center or on the right. Nearly seven of 10 Republicans (69%), most of whom aren’t particularly enamored of unions anyway, say they would vote for right-to-work legislation if given the chance.

Still, that leaves over 30% on the right who are opposed. And, before changing his tune and signing the new right-to-work legislation, the state’s top Republican of them all, Gov. Scott Walker, famously called the push for right-to-work a “distraction,” a stance that flummoxed supporters who watched him pass Act 10.

It’s impossible to talk about labor laws in Wisconsin without talking about Act 10, the budget-repair law that
The fight over right-to-work had lots of subplots, but a big one involved the role some unions play in training workers.

The International Union of Operating Engineers Local acts “almost like a staffing agency” for contractors and provides training at its Joseph J. Goetz Jr. Training Center in Coloma, Wis., says John Gard, a lobbyist for the union. The arrangement works for the more than 400 contractors in the state who oppose right-to-work legislation, Gard notes.

If younger workers in the future walk away from the union under right-to-work legislation, he argues, the training costs will be “dumped on the backs of taxpayers.” Finding skilled labor, he says, will become more difficult. The contractors themselves will not fund that sort of training because they don’t want to pay for programs that will be used by their competitors, he insists.

Scott Manley, vice president of government relations at Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, disputes that.

The International Union of Operating Engineers Local acts “almost like a staffing agency” for contractors and provides training at its Joseph J. Goetz Jr. Training Center in Coloma, Wis., says John Gard, a lobbyist for the union. The arrangement works for the more than 400 contractors in the state who oppose right-to-work legislation, Gard notes.

Act 10 ended that, and right-to-work legislation similarly protects private-sector workers from being forced to pay union dues. But that’s where the similarities end. Act 10 virtually eliminated public-sector collective bargaining. In the private sector, labor rights are guaranteed under federal law. Nothing Wisconsin has done or could do will alter that.

Private-sector workers in right-to-work states are free to negotiate everything they always have. The only difference: Rather than compelling workers to join, union leaders have to convince them to voluntarily pay dues — something business interests think will be difficult and something union leaders fear will exacerbate the ongoing decline of union membership.

There’s no question that over the last 150 years, unions have helped workers increase their wages substantially. That’s why the central argument of right-to-work opponents is that all workers in unionized workplaces should pay for the gains the union is responsible for. Otherwise, they say, non-joiners are just freeloaders.

But right-to-work proponents say we live in a markedly different world today. And not just because 25 states, including Michigan and Indiana and now Wisconsin, have right-to-work laws. And not just because America now has the federal Occupation and Safety Health Administration, anti-discrimination laws, Social Security, pension plans and IRAs — all protections that have nothing to do

Pewaukee-based 501(c)(3) that is funded largely by employer contributions. The group’s $90 tax filing, he points out, states that 95% of its $4.7 million in revenue comes from employers of union members.

“The idea that if they lose union dues that will impact training is nonsense,” says Manley, adding that, at any rate, there are many other types of worker training programs.

Terry McGowan, who serves as both the IUOE Local’s president and as chairman of the Improvement and Apprenticeship Fund, responds, in turn, that although the employers technically make the contribution, it actually comes from union members who could choose to take that money from employers in their paychecks instead.

“My members are the ones who fund that training and they do that voluntarily right now,” says McGowan. “If their wages start rolling back, they will take the [training] money back.”

Gard suggests that part of the tab would shift to technical colleges that are funded, at least in part, by tax dollars.

They are, of course, also funded by tuition.

— M.N.
with union membership.

Competition from cheap labor in other parts of the world, including right-to-work states in America, makes capital investment in non-right-to-work states less likely today than it once was, according to proponents.

Wisconsin has fallen behind in the global economy. Per capita personal income received from all sources in 2013 was $43,244, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis — $1,521 less than the national average of $44,765.

Richard Vedder, an Ohio University professor retained by WPRI to study potential impacts of right-to-work legislation, says that regression analysis suggests the state’s per capita income would be over $1,600 higher had Wisconsin adopted a right-to-work law back in 1983. The state, in other words, would be slightly over the national average.

There are some caveats that apply to all such analysis. Although the results are strong, the authors — as all good economists would — urge some caution in using the precise estimation. Comparing states with right-to-work to those without is a complex undertaking. Some possible determinants of economic growth are very difficult or impossible to measure.

That said, it is a fact that Wisconsin has fallen behind economically, and, according to Vedder, even if impacts are not as big in the future as they would have been in the past, the right-to-work law will help us catch up.

Not everybody on the right agrees. John Gard, the former Republican Assembly speaker, is now a lobbyist who represents the Operating Engineers Local 139. He says there are more than 400 contractors in the state — most of whom use union labor — who oppose right-to-work.

Gard argued before the bill passed that that hardly anyone in Wisconsin believes right-to-work legislation should be a “top priority,” says few think they will personally benefit, and argues that right-to-work could eventually erode unions to the point where they will no longer be able to supply trained workers for business.

Unions such as the Operating Engineers — which includes heavy equipment operators, mechanics and surveyors, among others — have a “very harmonious relationship” with the contractors they work for and “it is likely to be significantly disrupted” by right-to-work legislation, he argues.

Gard’s other main argument is that businesses should have the right to enter into contracts with employee groups, and that government has no business intruding.

Too late, says Scott Manley, vice president of government relations for Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. He points out that government intruded long ago by forcing companies to bargain with unions that were formed by virtue of a one-time vote requiring approval of only 50% of employees. Once businesses in unionized industries recognized union shops, he says, it became exceedingly difficult to ever reverse that.

“We are a membership organization as well,” Manley says of WMC, “and we have a recertification every year by members who decide if we are doing a good job and if they want to pay dues.” Right-to-work legislation, goes the argument, simply asks unions to demonstrate value instead of forcibly compelling membership.

While Gard says lots of construction and building trades contractors are opposed to right-to-work, WMC says 81% of its members support it, and the general populace — regardless of political affiliation — is solidly supportive as well.

The schism could have numerous explanations, but one in particular rings true. If you’re building a new home in Stevens Point or laying asphalt in Hudson, you don’t have to worry about a competitor in Mexico or India coming along the same way a manufacturer or a nonunionized tech-based business does. In a global economy, some folks have a little more motivation to control labor costs than others.

Union leaders like Terry McGowan, president of the Operating Engineers, worry that right-to-work will drive down wages and argue that’s not good for anyone. And

‘The argument that workers should not be obligated to join a union to hold a job resonates broadly,’ says a pollster.
Act 10, though it was a very different animal, proved that changes in labor law could indeed weaken union ranks.

Vedder, however, suggests that union supporters have an unnecessarily bleak view of the future. Counter-intuitive as it might sound, he thinks right-to-work laws might actually help labor in the long run.

Vedder points out that within the 19 states with right-to-work laws by 1980, the decline in union membership has been less pronounced than in the non-right-to-work jurisdictions. In two right-to-work states, Florida and Nevada, there was actually an increase from 515,000 union members in 1980 to 583,000 in 2013 — an 11% gain.

Clearly, population increases in those states are a factor in this growth. Moreover, dozens of factors impact differences in economic performance, including taxes, mix of industry, educational attainment, natural resources, regulatory policies, even climate. You don’t have to be an economist to know that people move to the Sunshine State because of, well, the sunshine.

But, Vedder points out, since goods and services are produced primarily from the use of labor, labor laws are important. And there can be economic benefits for everyone, including labor, from a union working harder to prove its worth. Vedder doesn’t believe that right-to-work laws should be considered “anti-union.” Rather, he sees them as pro-competition and pro-worker freedom.

Tiffany Koehler long ago left her unionized part-time job, and after a career working in the military and the nonprofit world, recently ran for the state Senate seat vacated by Congressman Glenn Grothman. Koehler didn’t win the February primary. But the guy who did, Duey Stroebel, is also fervently pro-right-to-work and was also willing to co-sponsor the bill.

Turns out Stroebel didn’t have to. Right-to-work supporters didn’t even need a full Senate in order to pass a bill that also moved quickly through the Assembly.

And distraction or not, there was never much doubt Scott Walker would sign a fundamentally conservative policy change that even most Wisconsin Democrats favor.

Mike Nichols is president of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.
Under fire as he looks to further campus innovation, the UW’s new leader talks of his challenges

By Mike Flaherty

Gov. Scott Walker proposed a $150-million-a-year budget cut and sweeping management changes at the University of Wisconsin System in February — an additional challenge for what had already been a challenging year for the system’s president, Ray Cross.

The former UW-Extension chancellor was appointed a year ago to lead the system’s 26 UW campuses, which came under fire from the Legislature for harboring large cash reserves while increasing tuition. Critics have also suggested that UW System faculty could be doing more to help bolster Wisconsin’s economic engine, especially at the 11 four-year statewide campuses, whose employees hold more doctorates than UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee combined.

With Wisconsin lagging well behind similar-sized states in new patents issued, new business startups and job growth, the UW Board of Regents and Cross had already been exploring ways to further engage those faculty in job creation and economic development. In a recent interview with WPRI, Cross talked about his vision to improve the UW System’s economic performance.
Gov. Walker has proposed a fairly steep cut in state funding along with creating a “public authority” to independently manage the UW System. The budget cut is being hotly debated. But what does the public-authority proposal mean for the system and for Wisconsin?

Cross: The authority [which would separate the system from state agency management by the Department of Administration] would allow us to manage operations more efficiently and with greater long-term certainty. It would offer an entire package of new flexibilities, including more efficient management of building projects, procurement and pay plans, which would provide long-term cost savings — let me repeat: long-term — and provide greater stability, predictability and, ultimately, certainty for our students as well as taxpayers. More and more states, by the way, have moved or are moving in this direction.

In my opinion, a public authority is the best model to govern and deliver a public university that is committed to the core principles of academic excellence, access, responsiveness and affordability for our students, parents and taxpayers.

Why is this needed?

Cross: [The current method of management] restrains our ability to be flexible partners. Say we had a company that came to us and wanted to put in a complete carbon fiber research facility that we would build out. I would have to go through the state Department of Administration and pay the state a portion of that money even though it’s all private money. Most donors would say, “Forget it. We’re not going to make that happen.”

Or let’s say we wanted to create a lab to research new types of polymers. I don’t want a new building, but I want a new lab and I want industry to participate. Because it would be built within a state facility, it would be really hard to do. A public authority would make it easier to partner with business on research and the application of that research to industries that want to partner with us. We have a lot of that sort of interest right now that could be very exciting.

The budget cut is controversial. How would a lower, “fixed level” of taxpayer support work?

Cross: Once our base is established, we would receive Consumer Price Index adjustments beginning in 2018-’19. This dedicated funding stream provides predictability, stability and consistency. We could look ahead and plan ahead for five to six years. Under this concept, we also could plan out tuition into the future, so students and families won’t have to guess as they prepare to invest in their education.

You had already announced that you would propose major reforms at the UW System this spring, but you offered few details. What are you planning?

Cross: At this time, I am focusing on three main areas where I believe we can find savings without jeopardizing our mission. They include reforming business practices, refocusing academic priorities, and redesigning the approval process for facility requests and segregated fees. Most important is improving our back-office efficiency… doing things more efficiently, such as streamlining our services. We have engaged an outside consultant to help us with this, and that analysis process has already started.

Another focus is to look at how efficiently we deliver our academic activities for our students. Are we making sure our low-enrollment courses are appropriate? Are there too many of them? Are the programs requiring more than 120 credits appropriate? We are taking these actions in collaboration with our faculty and staff and colleagues on every campus so we can assure that these reforms are done appropriately, effectively and responsibly.

You and the regents have been discussing ways to free up faculty — especially at the 11 nonresearch campuses — to allow university experts to become more involved in regional economic development and private-sector relationship building. Progress?
Cross: We are assessing what faculty do outside of the classroom. We spend a lot of time focusing on 12 credits or six credits [teaching loads]. But are we focusing on what they do outside the classroom? That’s the part that is connected to economic development. We have faculty doing a lot already. But are they rewarded for it? Is it perceived as part of their responsibility, or even appropriate? In many cases, when a faculty member works with businesses or in economic development, it is considered service, not research. So their work is not considered scholarly activity and it doesn’t help them in the promotion or tenure process.

Q Can that be changed?

Cross: It can be changed. But it’s something faculty has to lead and it must be student-focused. I’ll defend that part [of tenure] because we need input from colleagues who know their field. If you hire an engineering professor, you want engineering faculty input to determine whether that person is qualified. The other piece of that, however, is how you reward [nonresearch and nonteaching activity]. Does that get the same recognition as research? We need to press the issue [as a system]. But it has to be faculty driven.

Q A founding principle of the University of Wisconsin is the “Wisconsin Idea” — that the university was created for research, instruction and to help improve Wisconsin’s society and its economy. But from an outsider’s perspective, it would seem that many faculty members, especially at the 11 comprehensive universities, aren’t as vested in that “Idea.” Do you agree?

Cross: I think you would be surprised and impressed with the research and community outreach occurring at the comprehensive campuses. However, I think we could all be doing a lot more. The history and heritage of the 11 four-year colleges are drawn from the “normal school” foundation [as teacher-training colleges].

Historically they have not had to develop relationships with business, which is fundamental to helping a university understand economic development. Once institutions and their faculty have a relationship with businesses, they are exposed to economic development opportunities. Businesses are constantly trying to find ways to do things and meet new challenges — and they challenge us. It is fundamental for us to build closer relationships to business. That, in my mind, is Step 1.

Q System leaders are aware of this — and there’s a lot going on. Where does all this sit in terms of developing a fresh way to think about this concept?

Cross: We are all going to struggle with what exactly we need to do. There will be some starts and stops, redirections, constant evaluating, and assessing whether our efforts are appropriate. I would argue that a niche the university should be involved in — which it is not very involved in right now — is what I call Stage 2 economic development, that is, small companies with eight to 10 employees [and] up to as many as 100 to 150. Our university and government are infatuated with startups, and most states make an effort to help entrepreneurs create startups.

But what we do for startups isn’t very beneficial to Stage 2 companies, where the real job growth is. It’s sexy to do startups. It’s not sexy to do Stage 2 expansion. It’s also difficult for the state to figure out how to help Stage 2 companies because they don’t need tax breaks or tax incentives — things a startup would need. They need the equivalent of a consulting team: marketing and outsourcing advice, exploring new production efficiencies, managing debt ratios and growth. That’s economic development at its core.

Government has trouble with this because it’s difficult to do without looking like it’s giving an inappropriate advantage to a single company. We can, however, convene
consulting teams from the university and retired corporate community to help these companies.

**Q** What are the obstacles to success? Does the culture at the 11 comprehensive universities need changing?

**Cross:** You have to preserve the culture of teaching and research. Universities are typically not very good at developing new products for commercialization, and there is good reason for that. If you’re doing basic research in a unique field of physics or medicine, you’re focused on that. You’re not focused on how to turn your findings into a commercial product.

At the same time, there is an increased effort at commercialization — to work with businesses to help take those ideas and develop them into commercial products. We have done a lot here in Madison and around the state. But we have to do a lot more.

**Q** So what does that look like?

**Cross:** In many cases, startups don’t want our help. We have to be respectful of that. But that doesn’t mean we don’t need to reach out. With bigger companies, I’m attempting to reach out to business leaders throughout this state to demonstrate our interest in serving their needs, as well as helping us understand where their future needs are going to be. Too often they tell us what they need tomorrow in terms of talent, research and defining problems they face. We need to understand what they think they’re going to need in 10 years.

Where do they think their business is going to be in 10 years? What scares them? What excites them? What interests them? The university needs to prepare for these questions in order to be helpful.

**Q** What’s the role of Extension? Its core mission is to extend university expertise into society and the economy. Yet today, Extension doesn’t seem all that visible in economic development.

**Cross:** One of the challenges is that Extension is perceived as tightly connected with agriculture, not economic development. Yet each county has an agent who works on economic development. We’re also working with economic development specialists in Waukesha County and in the Fox Valley to get Extension more involved in working with Stage 2 companies. One of Extension’s strengths is that it is in all 72 counties. How do we leverage that to help connect with local folks?

In manufacturing, we pulled Extension away and created a separate entity to help manufacturers. I’m not sure that was the right approach. The role of the university in manufacturing almost disappeared. In health care, for example, many states have expanded the role of Extension.

**Q** What about the role of the chancellors? They know their faculties, their communities and their regions’ needs. They say they could do more for regional economic development if they had more flexibility. Will you be looking at this?

**Cross:** Yes. We have heard chancellors say that they are constrained in their ability to create new courses and programs. But that’s one of the challenges of the UW System. How does it balance the desires of one campus with the resources of the state or the needs of the whole state? One of the reasons the system was created was to prevent the proliferation of programs and schools all over the place.

At the same time, the system is a state agency confined by the laws and state regulations. To me, that is an issue because it does create barriers to being flexible.

**Q** Final thoughts?

**Cross:** The Legislature needs to understand that the university — at least a large portion of it — is an investment in the future, not an expense on the ledger. There is a hesitancy to give us funding to do some of the things we need to do because we’re a longer-term investment. If we don’t invest, revenues will go down, not up. We are a part of the solution, and we want to be a partner in moving forward to build a brighter future for Wisconsin.

Michael Flaherty is president of Flaherty & Associates, a public policy strategic communications firm in Madison. He also teaches a journalism class at UW-Madison’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.
The right way to modernize Wisconsin’s Interstates

By Robert W. Poole Jr.

The Interstate highways are Wisconsin’s most valuable transportation infrastructure. With less than 1% of route miles of pavement, they handle 18% of all vehicle miles traveled in the state, and 21% of all heavy truck miles. But this vital infrastructure is gradually wearing out.

Data from the Federal Highway Administration show that less than 1% of Wisconsin’s rural Interstates are in “poor” condition, but 3.5% of the state’s urban Interstates are rated “poor,” ranking Wisconsin 28th among the 50 states. The top 15 all have less than 1% of urban Interstates ranked poor.

Despite limited resources, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation has done a good job of patching and resurfacing its Interstates. But a large and growing fraction of the system is nearing the end of its original 50-year design life. When a highway reaches that point, it makes sense to reconstruct the pavement rather than just keep patching it.

So if Wisconsin wants to continue to reap the huge benefits for travel and shipping that a premium highway network offers, voters and legislators need to face the need to reconstruct this vital resource over the next several decades. In addition, since some corridors clearly don’t have enough lanes even for today’s travel demand, reconstruction is the best time to add lanes.

How much would all that cost?

In 2013, I led a major Reason Foundation research effort to determine that for each of the 50 states. Using detailed federal data, we estimated the cost of reconstruction and selective widening of each state’s entire set of Interstate highways. Wisconsin’s rural (long-distance) Interstates came in at just over $3 billion. For urban Interstates (i.e., most of the state’s expressways), the cost estimate was $4.7 billion, making the total cost (urban plus rural) $7.7 billion over several decades.

The Interstates were built largely with proceeds from federal gasoline and diesel taxes. But today, the revenues from those taxes cover only about 70% of the myriad things Congress has decided to fund via the Highway Trust Fund. And there is very little political will — in either party — for a significant increase in those federal taxes. Moreover, gas taxes are not indexed for inflation, so their purchasing power keeps declining. And an ever-larger share of cars will use little or no gasoline in coming decades. So how could Wisconsin come up with $7.7 billion to modernize its Interstates?

The second half of our study was aimed at seeing if moderate toll rates (collected electronically via E-ZPass tolling) could generate enough revenue over the next 30 years to create Wisconsin’s second-generation Interstate system. That replacement system could feature truck-only lanes in the most truck-intensive corridors, well-equipped service plazas on long-haul routes like I-94, express lanes on major urban segments, and no toll booths or toll plazas of any kind.

For the rural (long-haul) Interstates, the good news is that a baseline toll of 2.2 cents per mile for cars (and four times that for heavy trucks) could generate enough revenue to create the state’s new, modern second-generation Interstate system.
There is growing evidence that highway-user groups could support a carefully crafted policy of this kind, which we have dubbed “value-added tolling.” If that is the case, Congress might be persuaded to allow Wisconsin and any other state to engage in toll-financed Interstate reconstruction and modernization, as long as those conditions were part of the deal.

Congress’s permission is necessary, because the federal law that created the federal gas tax and the Highway Trust Fund back in 1956 forbids states from using tolls on any federally funded Interstate highway (no matter how worn out it gets and how little money the feds have available for Interstate reconstruction).

Therefore, a number of organizations are working to persuade Congress to give states “tolling flexibility” — an exemption from the tolling ban — as long as the state agrees to user-friendly provisions such as value-added tolling.

In 2012, a bipartisan tolling flexibility amendment almost made it into the Senate reauthorization bill. An updated version will likely be introduced this spring, as Congress begins work on the 2015 bill to reauthorize the federal highway and transit program.

This idea is especially timely now. Gov. Scott Walker and leading legislators seem unlikely to approve Wisconsin DOT’s proposal for increased highway taxes of $751 million, despite the need for major investment in reconstructing east-west I-94 in Milwaukee and widening I-90 between Madison and the Minnesota state line.

Those two mega-projects — one urban, the other rural — could be the first to be modernized using the revenues from all-electronic tolling. Having the users pay for them directly would free up existing gas tax money for other transportation needs without requiring a gas-tax increase. And the new tolls would not go into effect until after those Interstates were revamped and ready to go.

At the very least, Wisconsin’s congressional delegation should push hard in Washington to remove the long-standing ban on Interstate tolls. That would open the door for Wisconsin and other states to seriously consider this 21st century approach to better infrastructure.
Eloise Anderson is a conservative warrior in the struggle to lift people out of poverty.
Loise Anderson has spent most of her life swimming upstream, battling currents of prejudice and perception, as well as the onrush of “big government” programs she has always believed are wrong for America.

From a childhood spent in a blue-collar home in a blue-collar town, she rose to head the California Department of Social Services, the nation’s largest welfare program.

Now, at 73, heading Gov. Scott Walker’s Department of Children and Families, she is in the fight of her life: Trying to save low-income families by saving the men who have largely been forced out of them.

“The only way we do this is to give men some of the same things we give women,” says the woman who oversees the state’s welfare system.

“We need to give men the resources to step up and raise a family. We have to have a societal change of the notion of marriage. We need to support it, value it.”

It is yet another battle in her lifelong war against the 50-year-old Great Society campaign launched by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

As noted by the Heritage Foundation, the federal government has spent more than $22 trillion on Johnson’s War on Poverty — three times the cost of all military wars since the American Revolution — yet has not budged the needle on the U.S. poverty meter.

Or, as Anderson testified before a Congressional subcommittee two years ago: “The federal and state governments spend close to a trillion dollars a year on these benefit programs even before the costs of Social Security and Medicare are added.

“Based on Census Bureau poverty estimates, our current welfare spending totals four times more than what would be necessary to bring all of the poor above the poverty line if the taxpayers were to simply give them a cash payment.”

Putting it more bluntly, Anderson says: “Everything I know about what the federal government is trying to do, it’s doing wrong.”

Anderson started learning that lesson from history books she read while growing up in Toledo, Ohio. She was an only child. Her father was a tool-and-die maker; her mother worked as a “domestic.”

But both believed that, with a good education, their little girl could do anything.

“I come from a city that is very similar in culture to Milwaukee. I grew up around Germans, eastern Europeans, Russians, Czechs, Poles, Italians. I never met a WASP [white Anglo-Saxon Protestant] until I was in my 20s. Oh, I knew white people, and I knew Protestants — Lutherans, mostly — but I was thrilled to meet a real WASP,” she remembers, laughing.

Anderson, like many of her neighbors, was raised Catholic. Her faith remains strong and guides her principles. She is also a lifelong conservative, although she says she’s become more moderate as she grows older.

Anderson attended Ohio’s Central State University. She toyed with a history major: “I was fascinated by the Civil War — by the notion that all these Northerners were willing to fight and die for people they had no relationship with. But I couldn’t figure out what I would do with a history degree, so I ended up in anthropology.”

From there, she moved to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in planning and urban affairs — and to the ministry.
“I wanted to be a Jesuit priest,” she says, “but my priest said I had a ‘plumbing problem.’” She grins broadly. “I could be a Lutheran minister — I have the credentials. But I’m a Roman.

“It takes those old guys a long time to change,” she adds with another smile. “In 1962, when they had Vatican II [the conclave famous for modernizing Catholic rituals], that was their response to Martin Luther,” who had launched the Protestant Reformation nearly 450 years earlier.

After grad school, Anderson got a job in Milwaukee working for the state. Republican Warren Knowles was governor, “and I was a mouthy woman who said the Great Society was going to kill us, and we shouldn’t be going down that road.” Then Democrat Patrick Lucey became governor, “and my supervisor said if I wanted to move up I had to move to Madison.

“I really wasn’t interested,” she says. She and her husband, Patrick, had two children by then. “I liked Milwaukee, and I didn’t understand Madison. But then my boss said, ‘We want you to be here.’ So we packed up and moved.”

To this day, she doesn’t much care for Madison. “Milwaukee is ethnic. Madison is prejudiced, and they don’t understand how prejudiced they are,” she says, adding that the Madison mindset is not so much prejudiced against people of color as against people who defy the liberal orthodoxy.

“In Milwaukee, you can actually disagree with someone and remain friends. You’re not put down, you’re not dismissed, just because you happen to have another point of view.”

But her first job in Madison gave her plenty of reasons to get out of town: She was in charge of moving government employees throughout the state to a merit-based personnel system.

“I visited every county in the state. I got to know Wisconsin very, very well.” It was the 1970s, and her travels occasionally took her to towns where black people were warned to get out by sunset.

“But I was never afraid,” she says, adding “There have been many positive changes since then throughout Wisconsin.”

She got her introduction to the welfare system when Dane County Executive George Reinke asked her to serve on the county welfare committee. One day on the street, she ran into Jonathan Barry, a former Democratic legislator who was the newly elected Dane County Executive.

Barry, who would become a lifelong friend, asked her to come to work for him. Her job was to build political support for operating regional services on a metropolitan basis.

Most people thought that because Anderson is black, she would work with urban communities. But because of her experience bringing counties into the merit system, she again defied the stereotype.

The metropolitan government plan succeeded in moving the Henry Vilas Zoo, the Dane County Regional Airport, social services and 911 from the city’s purview to county government.

Then things got complicated, mostly by Barry’s ambition.

“Jonathan wanted to be governor,” she says, so he switched his party affiliation from Democrat to Republican. But he wound up losing the 1986 Republican primary to the Assembly’s GOP leader, Tommy Thompson. Thompson went on to hold the governor’s office and dominate Wisconsin politics for the next 14 years.

It meant another shift for Anderson. She ended up in the state Department of Health and Human Services under Secretary Gerald Whitburn. They laid the groundwork for one of Thompson’s seminal achievements: Wisconsin Works, known as W-2, an attempt to reform welfare and turn it into more of a job-training program.

The goal then, as now, was to shorten the time low-income people spend on the government tab by helping them transition to the work force.

Anderson’s efforts to reform welfare caught the eye of a prominent Republican: California Gov. Pete Wilson, and in 1992 he lured her to Sacramento.

“I thought California would be way ahead of Wisconsin, and wondered why they were bringing in ‘the yokel,’” she says. “But it turned out California was not ahead of Wisconsin at all — it was just bigger.” Way bigger. Anderson oversaw 4,200 employees and a budget of $128 billion. Her duties included child-support enforcement, foster care, adoptions, child-abuse prevention, child care, refugee support, emergency assistance, and services to the elderly, blind and deaf.

She enjoyed some success.

As the Claremont Institute, where she later served as a fellow, noted: “As head of the nation’s largest welfare system, [Anderson] had to cope with a system that consumes one quarter of all the
money spent nationwide on welfare, a soaring out-of-wedlock birthrate, and a teen pregnancy rate higher than any other state.

“She demanded that parents be accountable to their children by ensuring that kids attend school and be immunized as a condition of receiving aid. …”

“Her view that the state’s 58 counties be empowered to design what is best for their local communities is now a centerpiece of the Golden State’s innovative approach to welfare delivery.”

Anderson enjoyed living in California, particularly the mountains. She also enjoyed the state’s diversity. “It’s not like when you get off a plane in Wisconsin and it’s all … vanilla. There are communities of people from all over the world there,” she says.

That diversity just underscored what she has always believed about the U.S. federal government: One size does not fit all.

“One of the reasons our welfare programs don’t work as well as they should is because our programs are driven by federal thinking, not state thinking,” she says.

“We were not founded to have a national government. We were founded to have state governments within a federal system,” she says. “Our founders had a vision in mind, and we’ve got to get that back.”

After 18 years in California, she came back to Wisconsin to work for Gov. Scott Walker.

She finds herself fighting the same battles — including the stereotype that poverty and welfare dependency are strictly a black problem.

“Take color out of the equation,” she commands. “It’s not valid. The truth is, where you have poverty, you have teen pregnancy. Black people are ghettoized, so we stand out, but color has nothing to do with it.

“Here’s what the War on Poverty did under AFDC: In the olden days, when a girl got pregnant, daddy had a shotgun and she was walking down the aisle. But under AFDC, she’d get a grant to help support her and the baby.

‘And the girl would say, ‘Well, I’m not getting along with my mother these days’ — of course not, she’s pregnant! — and under AFDC, she’d get an apartment of her own.

“We created these communities of 16-year-olds with no idea of how to parent. And every time they had another baby, we’d give them more money. It can be anywhere from $20,000 to $40,000 a year these girls are getting.

“What poor man can compete with that?” she demands. “We set up a system to kill the family! We need to figure out how to get men back in the family.

“What we see in Milwaukee and most inner cities is the result of the Great Society programs. The only way we can solve this is to give men some of the same things we give women: the resources to step up and raise a family.”

**Job training for low-income men is a huge component,** Anderson says. “Women don’t like men who don’t have jobs. We have to get low-income men working. We need to give men the ability to compete.”

That means getting the correctional system on board as well, Anderson says, because too many of the fathers of low-income children are behind bars. “We have to be ‘second chance’ people. Anybody can make a mistake; we need to help them not make the same mistake again.

“People go to prison, and when they get out, they can’t get a job. We’ve got to help them get skills so they can get jobs. It costs us, what, $30,000 a year per prisoner? Without job training, that’s just a waste.”

She also believes in discouraging teen pregnancy, but says providing contraceptives is not part of her job description. “I’m old-fashioned on this. I’m old enough that when I was hitting puberty, there was no birth control. The nuns told me, and my parents told me, ‘You’ve got to be careful about who you give yourself to.’ Girls need to hear that today.”

But when babies are born to low-income mothers, the state can still help, Anderson says, by improving child care. The state subsidizes child care, she says, but too many providers in the low-income community are just looking to be babysitters.

“We know how important early childhood education is. It’s absolutely critical to preparing a child to learn when he or she starts school.

“Financed by a three-year, $34 million federal Race to the Top grant, Anderson’s department is requiring some child care providers to receive training in early childhood development. “But too many of them have to be dragged kicking and screaming,” she adds.

It’s one more battle to be fought, but worth it, Anderson says, because studies show that every dollar spent on early childhood education in the low-income community returns $8 to $16 in the long run.

She remains hopeful that, with innovative thinking at the state and local levels, the long-term damage caused by federal anti-poverty programs can eventually be reversed.

“Those programs,” she adds, “were well-intentioned — but you know what they say about roads that are paved with good intentions?”

And she laughs again — ruefully.
Take this money or else
Uncle Sam’s ‘economic dragooning’ of the states has to stop

Unless you read from back to front — the sort of bass-ackwards approach anti-Common Core zealots probably fear if the federal government gains more power over how we educate our kids — you’ve already seen Michael J. Petrilli’s piece on page 12 of this magazine. The main concern of most opponents, the president of the Fordham Institute and Common Core supporter rightly points out, is “the unfortunate role of the federal government in encouraging — some would say coercing — the states to adopt the Common Core via the $4 billion Race to the Top initiative.”

Most conservatives would be just fine with the standards, in other words, if they didn’t think they were somehow forced upon the states and local schools by a federal “gun to the head.” Yeah, I know, that’s a jarring image that surely simplifies a complicated issue down to the level of pulp fiction. Except that the author of those words was hardly Raymond Chandler. It was John Roberts. The U.S. Supreme Court chief justice used the same language in National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius, the Obamacare case, when he concluded that the Affordable Care Act’s attempt to financially coerce states into expanding Medicaid violated the Constitution’s Spending Clause.

“In this case, the financial ‘inducement’ that Congress has chosen is much more than ‘relatively mild encouragement’ — it is a gun to the head,” wrote Roberts. Using only slightly less colorful language, the court also called the Obama administration’s approach an “economic dragooning.”

Get your hands up — er, out — or else!

The Supreme Court found Obamacare’s attempt to force Medicaid expansion unconstitutional — a good thing for anyone concerned about state independence. States should at least have a choice in this stuff. Federal dragooning isn’t confined to Medicaid expansion, though. Total federal grants to state and local governments grew from just $7 billion in 1960 prior to Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society to $641 billion today and now make up about one-sixth of the federal budget.

Lots of people love this. Federal money is “free” after all, isn’t it? Our beneficent federal politicians shower it all over the folks back home and are paid back in votes. And why would we locals turn down manna from federal heaven when we know the feds will just use it somewhere else?

Federal grants-in-aid are anything but free. Many serve a valid purpose. But they can also drive up federal and state spending, taxes and debt. They often “come freighted with detailed federal directives that deprive state and local officials of the ability to meet their own responsibilities in their own ways,” to borrow the words of James Buckley in his recent book, Saving Congress from Itself: Emancipating the States & Empowering Their People. They often make it impossible to hold anyone accountable. Growing numbers of conservatives are increasingly wary of federal money for all those reasons — even when the money is for something like Common Core, the sort of national standard that is necessary for a state that has fallen badly behind. Opponents of Common Core concerned about federal usurpation of local flexibility have latched onto the right argument, in other words, but the wrong issue.

As Petrilli puts it, “If the primary conservative criticism of the Common Core is not their content, but their entanglement with the federal government, the best solution is not to dump the standards but to break up with the feds.”

And then, I would add, examine all the other instances where the federal government is sending far too much money — attached to far too many strings — out to states that were long ago envisioned as taking precedence over a centralized authority.

The truth is that nowadays the states are too often merely an extension of the federal government. And that — no matter what you think about Common Core — really is bass-ackwards.

Mike Nichols is the president of WPRI.