

Given the density of Jonathan Narcisse's ideas and plans, he's smart to dispense the easy-to-grasp metaphor or example.

"Imagine you have a kid who hasn't cleaned his room for six months," Narcisse said in a phone interview last week. "And you can try to go in and you can try to clean the room. Or you can get some heavy-duty garbage bags and just go through that room and basically throw everything away, except the bed, the dresser, and a couple other things."

The 47-year-old Narcisse, a former member of the Des Moines school board, is running an independent candidacy for Iowa governor, appearing on the ballot under The Iowa Party banner. And he wants to approach Iowa state government with some heavy-duty garbage bags in hand. (Full disclosure: *River Cities' Reader* Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Cities' Reader</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Cities' Reader</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">Iowan story Colorada</a> Publisher Todd McGreevy is a co-chair of <a href="Iowan story Colorada">

, which is pushing for Narcisse to be included in gubernatorial debates.)

Narcisse's proposals are radical in the sense that they have no respect for the status quo. Narcisse thinks the two major-party candidates – Governor Chet Culver and former Governor Terry Branstad – are like parents who think a light cleaning is good enough. He disagrees: "We just literally wipe out the massive bureaucracy, because at the end of the day, we spend that money wiser."

In total, Narcisse is proposing cutting state and local taxes by \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion a year, with the caveat that equivalent spending reductions must precede tax cuts. For perspective, the lowa Revenue Estimating Conference in March put the state's Fiscal Year 2011 general-fund receipts at \$6.6 billion.

That type of bold plan has the potential to connect with voters who are dissatisfied with government and politicians.

But whether you agree with Narcisse's assessments or his ideas is beside the point. In a gubernatorial campaign featuring two people who've already held the office, Narcisse is an essential voice because he refuses to nibble around the edges or accept the way things have traditionally been done. He gives voters the opportunity to consider core questions of governance and talk about fundamentals.

He enlarges the discussion.

# **Governance Over Policy**

Although he considered running in the Democratic primary against Culver, Narcisse's politics are fundamentally conservative – in just about every sense. He's a small-government guy, he's pro-life on abortion and against gay marriage, and he supports the death penalty in theory.

But there's nuance there. Narcisse is cognizant of the separation of powers, and makes a distinction between governance and policy: The first is the purview of the governor – the state's chief executive – and the latter is the realm of the legislature.

"Where there's an issue of governance I feel 100 percent comfortable in acting," Narcisse said.

So while Narcisse opposes gay marriage, he believes that the issue should be voted on by the public. He also supports giving voters the opportunity to have a direct say on abortion, term limits, and the prohibition of marijuana.

The death penalty is instructive on Narcisse's perspective. While he supports it, that's first a policy issue. But on an administrative level, Narcisse said capital punishment is problematic, because of the potential for innocent people being executed: "I completely support the premise of the death penalty, but the fact of the matter is government simply isn't competent to have that power. ... The death penalty is not just simply an issue of policy; it's an issue of governance."

These subtleties arguably broaden Narcisse's appeal. His natural constituency is those who believe in the inherent value of the smallest, most-local government possible. But he adds to that a populist bent, arguing compellingly that state government is bloated and ineffective.

And on top of that there's a pragmatic side. He doesn't advocate blowing up state government on ideological grounds; he argues for orderly transitions to something leaner and more efficient.

"We don't cut irresponsibly," he said at one point in our 90-minute interview. He also claimed that cuts don't have to result in a loss of services: "If you change the way we do government, we can afford it [cuts]."

And he recognizes that "the governor also has to function within the limitations of his constitutional mandate."

Yet he said that as governor he could implement efficiency components of his agenda without legislative approval. For example, Narcisse supports zero-based budgeting, in which departments must present and justify an entirely new budget each year instead of working from previous allocations.

Furthermore, he said the governor has tremendous power as a check on the legislature, "like vetoing every single nonessential expenditure."

But the line between policy and governance often gets fuzzy, and Narcisse's education plan in particular seems to have a foot on both sides of it. The efficiency elements of it are pitched as governance issues, but because the plan would fundamentally change the delivery of education in the state – from a public-school-district model to more of a free-market system that includes public-school districts – it would require legislation. Changes to the tax structure would also need action from the legislature. And some of his proposals would require changing the lowa Constitution.

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Narcisse's approach to this challenge is naïve in many ways, but it has an idealistic charm; the candidate believes that public outrage can force the legislature's hand, and he said he'll spend much of his time as governor traveling the state and talking to constituents. He'll be conducting a perpetual campaign for his ideas.

"Sometimes the recourse you have is the power of the bully pulpit," he said. "The governor has incredible power, and he's not just a politician; he's an institution. ... If I get elected, I'm not really concerned about being able to get things through."

He used as an example highlighting poor graduation rates in the Des Moines public schools. Instead of the normal gubernatorial model of defending state government, Narcisse suggested that he would emphasize problems as a way to push reform.

"A governor who stands up and starts exposing the truth is going to have an awful lot of support behind him ...," he said. "If you have a governor who stands up and releases those kind of numbers, legislators start jumping and diving like cockroaches with the lights on. So there is the ability of a governor to create a great deal."

Narcisse has also outlined a president/prime-minister model for his administration — an acknowledgment that as governor he would have a big-picture perspective and leave the details to others. "I'm not going to pretend I know how to run a vast, multi-billion-dollar bureaucracy like state government," he said. "But I know Culver and Branstad can't, either. The difference is [that] I know how to structure it so I compensate for my deficiencies."

Off the record, Narcisse offered three people that he could see running state government as his "prime minister." He also emphasized the need for strong administrators to lead state departments. "The heads of the departments are not policy wonks," he explained. "You don't put the mental-health expert in charge of DHS [the lowa Department of Human Services]. You put someone who can run a multi-billion-dollar bureaucracy in charge of DHS, and then you put the mental-health expert in charge of the division of mental health."

"Change the Rules of the System"

Narcisse's primary value in this campaign is demonstrating that starting with common sense exposes the problems of beginning with the status quo.

"Part of the challenge of redefining our education system is redefining the terms," he said. "If we begin with the premise that the way the system is set up now is reasonable, then we accept that there are classrooms in Des Moines and Davenport and Waterloo generating three- or four- or five-hundred-thousand dollars [in education funding] where the teacher has to buy supplies and the parents have to send markers and tissue. But if we begin with the premise that two- or three- or four-hundred thousand is more than enough to educate a child, then we can be really creative and innovative. We have to change the rules of the system in order to get to that innovation."

Narcisse is most effective in conversation. His 14-page education plan (which he released last week and can be downloaded at <a href="RCReader.com/y/education">RCReader.com/y/education</a>) is single-spaced, all-text, and begins: "Iowa's public and private education system evolved as a gift to our children. An agrarian state, the eldest son was most often named heir to our land and lifelong labor." It is not, in other words, a concise campaign document. His 16-page publication from 2009, "An Iowa Worth Fighting for: A 10-Step Vision Plan for 21st Century Governance" (which can downloaded at <a href="RCReader.com/y/fighting">RCReader.com/y/fighting</a>), is similarly overwhelming – chock-full of ideas and statistics and discussion, but not suited for quick and easy digestion.

Narcisse's education plan can be boiled down to a few key concepts. One is that the education bureaucracy needs to be collapsed – that there is too much duplication, and that the delivery of services can be improved.

Another is that the state's decision to chase federal dollars – through No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top – has hurt education in Iowa.

Narcisse supports opting out of No Child Left Behind and leaving behind the money associated with it. "It's a negligible financial consequence," he argued. More importantly, "the money we're taking from the feds in exchange for complying with No Child Left Behind is destroying education in our state," he said, because the program emphasizes standardized tests over engaging students and teachers individually.

But the centerpiece of Narcisse's education plan is allowing for greater competition among publicly funded educational institutions.

"I support allowing parents to decide where the money goes," Narcisse explained. "And then where the child goes to school, the money follows. That means that we can effectively have the school board and traditional education bureaucracy taken out of the equation. I absolutely support education being very close to the community, but we take it one step further, where the power exists primarily in the hands of parents and in the hands of teachers, and then all other systems are subordinate to those two components of the education system."

This would be done by allowing Independent Academic Academies. Narcisse uses the hypothetical example of Mrs. Smith, a teacher in the Davenport school district with 20 years' experience, a class of 25 students, and a current salary of between \$40,000 and \$60,000. Her students might generate state and local education funding of \$10,000 apiece, Narcisse said.

"And the rest of the money is dissipated throughout the education system," he said. "What we're proposing is that Mrs. Smith would be able to say, 'You know what? I think I can do it better than the Davenport school district.' And now Mrs. Smith can compete directly for those dollars. Now we can't say Mrs. Smith isn't qualified to educate kids, because she's been doing it. So Mrs. Smith, who was hired by the superintendent, now gets to compete against the superintendent, the school board, the school district directly for those dollars.

"Now what would happen if she were able to get all \$250,000? Maybe she would pay herself \$100,000, or \$90,000, maybe she would hire a second adult [teacher] at \$50,000, or \$70,000. And [she would] still have significant resources left over to purchase technology, rent quality space, buy supplies, not have to buy them out of her own pocket. Would that system be better than the existing system? Remember: We start out with the very same person that the superintendent has said, 'This is the most qualified person to teach your kids.' The only difference is: She now has half the kids, makes twice the money, and has significant resources to be able to invest in things like technology and supplies for kids."

Mrs. Smith's Independent Academic Academy would be monitored by what Narcisse called the "education confederation." She would be required to file a core academic plan, as well as a plan to show how she planned to meet her academy's "unique academic mission" – for instance,

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language or science. Each academy would be held accountable for results and expenditures, Narcisse emphasized: "There is a mechanism in there that is dedicated to ensuring accountability. ... You have to demonstrate that kids are learning."

This would not necessarily be a dismantling of the public-school system, Narcisse said. Rather, it would foster competition and innovation without sacrificing accountability, he claims. "Districts would have certain advantages," he said. "For example, they'd still be able to get ... physical-plant- and equipment-levy money, they would have certain traditions, they have buildings, they have infrastructure. If school districts were to innovate – if they were to streamline their bureaucracies, if they were to invest in quality education – they should be able to compete."

He also said the 1-percent sales tax now dedicated to school infrastructure should be changed so districts can spend it however they choose.

While parents could vote with their feet under Narcisse's plan, the candidate also said that schools will have the opportunity to get rid of students who don't meet basic expectations in areas such as attendance. "Parents have to do their job," he said. "If parents do their job, kids will learn. If parents don't do their job, then it makes it a lot tougher for the rest of us."

## "Deal with It"

Narcisse has also sketched out proposals on tax cuts, and they're worth exploring because of how he envisions them working.

He wants to phase out the corporate income tax and eliminate business tax credits, shift the property tax to 1 or 1.5 percent of the last sale price, reduce the sales tax to 3 percent (from the current 6 percent) after four years, and make several changes to the personal income tax: reduce the top rate to 6 percent (from the present top rate of nearly 9 percent) and eliminate taxation beyond 40 hours of work in a week. (He also supports maintaining the deductibility of federal income taxes.)

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But Narcisse doesn't just want to cut taxes; he wants to encourage investment in Iowa in the process.

So a company could reduce its income tax to nothing through a rebate system; for every dollar a company puts into its lowa operation or spends with an lowa vendor, its income-tax liability is reduced by a dollar.

"We have to jump-start the free-market engine in Iowa," Narcisse said.

Tying property taxes to purchase price, he said, would encourage investment in that property, with the aim of "really allow[ing] the restoration of wealth and power to working lowans."

On personal income taxes, Narcisse said, "we'd like to get to 100-percent rebates within the next decade, and then shortly thereafter see the individual income tax eliminated in lowa."

Initially, however, Narcisse said he'd like to offer a 5-percent rebate for contributions to not-for-profits, meaning that tax liability up to 5 percent would be reduced dollar-for-dollar by donations.

Another 15-percent rebate would be available for investments in Iowa businesses. "You make every working Iowan a free-market investor," he said. Taxpayers can either give that money to state government through taxes, or they can invest it, making it essentially "zero risk for investing," Narcisse said.

In creating these incentives for investment, of course, Narcisse's proposals would reduce the amount of money going to state and local governments – to the tune of \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion annually by his estimate.

And Narcisse's plan would reverse the process of property taxation, whose rates are typically based on budgets approved by taxing authorities and on assessed valuation. Using a fixed

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property-tax rate statewide would necessitate changing the way that money is distributed.

Narcisse wants to take it further, saying that the patchwork of state and local government needs to be streamlined. "Local government as we know it, state government as we know it has to be restructured," Narcisse said. He said he's in favor of eliminating many taxing authorities that currently rely on the property tax and integrating their functions elsewhere. He also said that state resources alone might be adequate to fund education.

At the local level, Narcisse said, property-tax-dependent bodies will simply need to "deal with it."

At the state level, he said, "before we cut taxes, we cut spending."

Narcisse said he's identified where he would cut, and began talking about administration of the state's regents institutions: the University of Iowa, the University of Northern Iowa, and Iowa State University. His education plan states: "The Regents Universities would retain their unique identities and classic missions but they would be merged administratively and headed by a Chancellor of Regents who would replace the multiple presidents at our state universities and community colleges."

That gives some sense of the threat the Narcisse represents to people and organizations with a vested interest in the status quo of government.

## "I've Already Won"

That's also one reason that Narcisse believes that it's "in my best interest to be underestimated rather than to be taken seriously at an earlier stage." His ideas might be popular with angry and distrustful voters, but if he were seen as even a remotely plausible candidate by the political establishment, he'd be attacked from all sides.

Beyond his positions, his personal history would also be fair game. Narcisse has admitted

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having problems with sex and food in the past. "I will struggle with my personal challenges," he said. "That's not going to affect my governance. ... And if people want to use my past or my past sins against me, then don't vote for me."

His term on the Des Moines school board was also contentious by all accounts – which is hardly a surprise given that he likes to slaughter sacred cows, but it could still be used against him by opponents.

So Narcisse's low-profile campaign has been to a large degree necessary. But with less than two months until the November 2 election, time is running out.

"It could turn out to completely blow up in my face," Narcisse said of his strategy. "On the one hand, I really like where we're positioned. But there's a very real possibility we may have waited too late to make our move."

This is an issue of funding. In a July campaign-finance disclosure, Narcisse reported less than \$3.000 cash on hand.

"If we raise the money, I win," he said. "The question is: Can we raise the money? Because I've not typically been that kind of politician. ...

"If I raise a half-million dollars, I'm going to be lowa's next governor."

At \$250,000, "I really like my chances."

And at \$100,000, "I think we have a shot."

There's little evidence that Narcisse can marshal those kinds of financial resources. But he said

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he's convinced that the anti-incumbent atmosphere could catapult him, given Governor Culver and former Governor Branstad.

"We can't waste time. We can't waste money," Narcisse said. "But the fact of the matter is that there's a mathematical path to victory that exists for me that just simply doesn't exist for Chet Culver at this point."

And he thinks that Branstad's formidable lead in the polls also works in his favor: "If the media calls the election for Branstad, that actually helps me, because it means that people can just vote without worrying about voting for the lesser of two evils."

Narcisse insists that even if it loses, his campaign has been successful. He said he began his campaign with three objectives: "One: to advance an agenda. Two: to engage lowans in solution-oriented discourse. And three: to create a 99-county impact organization. At the end of this election, all three of those objectives will have been completed. ...

"I've already won in terms of what my original objectives are. [But] I'm going to work really, really hard, because I actually have a chance to pull this off. I actually have a chance to be lowa's next governor."

Jonathan Narcisse's campaign Web site can be found at <u>NarcisseForlowa.com</u>. The Web site of lowans for a Fair Debate is <u>Debatelowa.com</u>