

KEY STATISTICS

Academic Performance/Schools

- In 2009-10 school year, the racial "achievement gap" among MPS 8th graders was 20.7 percentage points in reading and 27.2 percentage points in math (this is the difference between whites and blacks in terms of the percentage scoring "proficient" or "advanced" on the WKCE tests).
- In 2009-10 school year, only 40.4% of MPS 10th graders scored "proficient" or "advanced" on the WKCE reading portion, and only 29.0% did so on the math portion (this compares to statewide averages of 75.5% and 69.1%, respectively)
- In the 2009-10 school year, 62 MPS schools – about 1/3 of all MPS schools – were labeled as "schools in need of improvement" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. MPS schools accounted for over 2/3 of all schools in Wisconsin on this list (total of 89 in state).
- 2008-09 ACT composite score of 17.2 for MPS, versus 22.8 for all of Southeastern Wisconsin.
- 2008-09 high school completion rate for MPS: 67.2%. For Wisconsin as a whole, the comparable figure is 89.4%.
- Truancy rate for MPS, 2008-09 school year: 47.3% (statewide, the rate was 9.4%).
- Pupil-teacher ratio of 17.5, versus 14.7 statewide (2008-09).
- Despite the low academic performance, MPS spends 17% more per student than the state average: \$13,790 vs. \$11,816 (2008-09).

Please note: for all of the above statistics, the statewide figures include MPS. If MPS were excluded, the performance of MPS students would look even worse when compared to their non-MPS Wisconsin peers.

Poverty

- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Milwaukee was the 4th-poorest major U.S. city in 2009 – an estimated 27% of Milwaukeeans lived in poverty that year.
- In the 2009-10 school year, 80.7% of MPS students received free or reduced-price lunches. The comparable statewide figure was 39.4%.

Unemployment

- In 2010, black males in Milwaukee between 16 and 64 years of age had an estimated unemployment rate of 27.7%.
- According to a 2010 study by UWM professor Marc Levine, the “real” unemployment rate for black males in Milwaukee (counting men who are incarcerated, on probation or parole, or have given up looking for work) is 53% -- more than double the 22.3% unemployment rate for white males.

Out-of-Wedlock Births

- In 2009, 86% of all births to black mothers in Wisconsin were out-of-wedlock, compared to “only” 29% of white births. Please note that while statistics for the City of Milwaukee are not readily available, Milwaukee accounts for the bulk of Wisconsin’s black population, so the statewide figure is an accurate portrayal of conditions in the city.
- Wisconsin’s 86% black illegitimacy rate is substantially higher than the national average of 73%.
- In fact, Wisconsin ranks #1 in the nation for black illegitimacy: in 2003 (the most recent year for which I could find data for other states), Wisconsin’s 84.2% black out-of-wedlock birth rate was highest in the nation – neighboring Iowa was a somewhat distant second, at 80.6%.

Teen Births

- In 2009, Milwaukee had 78.6 births per 1,000 teenagers ages 15 through 19. This was more than double the national teen birth rate of 39 per 1,000.
- In 2009, teen births accounted for 21.0% of all black births in Wisconsin, compared to only 5.4% of white births. The teen birth rate among black girls ages 15 to 17 was almost 4 times the rate among white girls in that age range (62.0 per 1,000 vs. 16.9 per 1,000).

Infant Mortality

- From 2005 through 2008, Milwaukee's infant mortality rate was 11 per 1,000 babies born – higher than the rate in such developing countries as Cuba, Costa Rica and Chile.
- Over this 4-year period, the black infant mortality rate in Milwaukee was 15.7 per 1,000, or almost 2.5 times the white rate of 6.4.
- Milwaukee's infant mortality rate is higher than the rates of Minneapolis, New York City, St. Louis and Chicago.

HIV/AIDS

- In Milwaukee, HIV infection rates for black gay and bisexual men approach the rates found in sub-Saharan Africa.
- In 2009, the Center for Disease Control reported that more than 42% of young black men who have sex with other men in Milwaukee carry the virus that causes AIDS.
- Black women in Milwaukee are 15 times more likely to be affected by HIV than white women.
- The number of new HIV cases in Milwaukee increased 36% between 2003 and 2009.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

While individual schools may be successful, the Milwaukee Public Schools system overall, in its existing configuration and with its current governance and financial operations, is an utter failure. This failing system continues to harm the community -- socially, economically and financially. The district needs to be dismantled and reorganized in a manner that guarantees a sustainable financial future while also dramatically improving the academic achievement of its students.

The problems of MPS are grave, numerous, far-reaching and widely-known. They include:

Unsustainable Budget

- Rising costs of health care and benefits have led to a \$67 million increase in the district's budget from 2009 to 2011.
- If property taxes are not increased, current trends may result in a budget gap as large as \$200 million by the 2012-2013 school year.
- MPS is faced with \$2.2 billion in unfunded post-retirement benefits for its employees.
- As a consequence of its current financial problems, MPS may have to cut up to 7.5% of its teaching positions for the next school year (especially art, music and gym teachers), as well as other specialists, such as librarians. Class sizes are projected to skyrocket – to as much as 50 students per classroom at the high school level.

Increasing Reliance on Property Tax Levy

- State aid revenue per student has been flat or declining. This fact, combined with rising district operating costs, has led to an increased reliance on property tax revenues to fund MPS.
- Over the past 3 years, while the Milwaukee community has been in the grips of a deep recession, the district's property tax rate increased 33%, from \$8.84 to \$10.66 per \$1,000 assessed valuation. In the past year alone, the increase was almost 9%.

High Employee Benefit Costs

- Generous and expensive employee benefits – particularly pension plans and health insurance – have been the driving force behind the district's financial crisis.
- Next year, MPS will provide \$0.77 in employee benefits for every dollar it spends on salaries.
- The district currently offers its employees two health insurance plans, one of which costs \$7,380 -- or 45% -- more per year (per employee, family plan) than the other. 80% of MPS employees have enrolled in the more expensive plan.
- MPS could save up to \$47.3 million per year if all of its employees used the less costly (but still generous) health plan – enough money to fund more than 450 teaching positions.

Declining Enrollment

- As a result of increased competition from Choice and charter schools, as well as demographic trends in the community, MPS enrollment continues to decline, and at an accelerating pace.
- Enrollment fell 12.3 % over the past 5 years and 3.8% in just the past year alone.
- Despite these enrollment declines, MPS has closed only a handful of school buildings over the past several years. In contrast, other big-city school districts have faced the harsh reality of declining enrollment by closing scores of schools: Kansas City will shutter 29 of its 61 school buildings next year and Detroit has just announced the closure of 45 schools.

Neighborhood Schools Initiative

- Even though enrollment has been declining, MPS spent \$102 million in the past decade on a building expansion/construction program aimed at enticing families to send their children to neighborhood MPS schools. As reported in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, many building additions now sit empty and enrollment at new schools is much lower than anticipated or has actually decreased. Test scores have also decreased at many of the new schools. Busing costs have actually increased as well. Only 31% of K-8 MPS students attend neighborhood schools.

Poor Academic Performance

- Standardized test scores for MPS students lag far behind scores for suburban districts and the statewide average. In the 2008-09 school year, 38.8% of MPS 4th graders had only minimal or basic performance on the WKCE/WAA tests, compared to a state average of 18.4%. For math, the results were no better: 39.8% for MPS compared to only 19.0% statewide.
- Despite -- or perhaps because of -- new schools, new programs and new teaching methods, there has been little if any improvement in MPS standardized test scores in recent years. For example, at the 10th grade level, 28.8% of MPS 10th graders had advanced or proficient scores on the math portion of the WKCE/WAA test in 2008. Five years earlier, the figure was 29.8%. Among 4th graders, 67.1% were advanced or proficient in reading in 2003, compared to 61.2% in 2008.
- In terms of college readiness, MPS high school students face considerable challenges. In the 2008-09 school year, MPS students who took the ACT exam had an average score of 17.5, compared to a statewide average of 22.5. The MPS average score has actually fallen in recent years: it was 19.3 ten years earlier and 18.4 five years earlier. Contrary to popular assertions, this was probably not the result of an alleged huge increase in the number of students taking the exam: in 1998, 39.3% of 12th graders had taken the exam, compared to 40.1% in 2003 and 49.0% in 2008.
- Instead of a back-to-basics approach (e.g., trade and technical education), which has been successful in other school districts, the MPS Board and administration continue to promote the creation of new schools and new programs (e.g., schools-within-a-school), most of which are short-lived and mediocre at best, glaringly unsuccessful at worst. For example, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's recently-released list of lowest-performing schools in the state includes several relatively new MPS schools, including the Milwaukee African-American Immersion High School, the W.E.B. DuBois High School and Foster and Williams Visual Communication Campus.

Huge Achievement Gaps

- The Milwaukee Public Schools continue to be characterized by a large and intractable achievement gap between white and non-white students. In 2008, 80% of white MPS 8th graders had proficient or advanced scores on the reading portion of the WKCE/WAA exam. Only 59% of black students and 66% of Hispanic students scored at the proficient or advanced level. For 8th grade math, the figures were 69% for white students versus 41% of black students and 55% of Hispanic students.
- Over time, MPS has made only modest improvements in these achievement disparities. For example, at the 8th grade level, the achievement gap between black and white students on the WKCE/WAA math exam fell from 32 points to 27 points between 2003 and 2008. Over the same five-year period, the test score differential between Hispanic and white students fell from 17 points to 14 points.

Student Behavior/Discipline Issues

- Teachers who are constantly interrupted by disruptive students may spend more time trying to maintain control in the classroom than presenting lessons. This is an all-too-familiar problem in MPS, one that reduces teacher effectiveness and harms the educational progress of students who do want to learn.
- In the 2007-08 school year, 30.7% of MPS pupils were suspended or expelled. This compares to a statewide average of only 6.8%.
- The percentage of MPS students suspended or expelled increased from 20.0% in 2002-2003 to 30.7% in 2007-2008. While this suggests that MPS teachers and administrators are taking a tougher stance against disruptive students, it also indicates that unruly behavior remains a serious problem in Milwaukee's public schools.

Low Attendance/Graduation Rates

- Students who are not present in school simply cannot learn. In Milwaukee public schools, both truancy and "dropping out" are serious and persistent problems.
- During the 2008-09 school year, 47.3% of MPS students were habitually truant (i.e., they had 5 or more unexcused absences in a semester. This compares to a statewide average of 9.4%. Also, the MPS truancy rate has been trending upward, increasing from 32.3% ten years ago and 45.4% five years ago.
- A 2008 report by America's Promise Alliance found that Milwaukee Public Schools had a graduation rate of 46.1%, ranking MPS 38th out of the 50 largest school districts in the nation. The report also indicated that Milwaukee had the 10th largest city-suburban gap in graduation rates among the 50 cities.

Incompetent Leadership

- The Board of School Directors has failed miserably to respond to the convergence of all these trends – huge benefit costs, unfunded liabilities, declining enrollment, overcapacity, low and languishing student achievement – in any sort of coherent, effective manner. Whether it is because of incompetence, lack of will or apathy, the Board and MPS administration have been utterly incapable of making the types of broad, drastic reforms needed to address the district's problems.
- District leaders have failed to sit down with MPS union leaders to negotiate a more realistic teacher compensation package that reigns in health and pension benefit costs. Nor does the union appear willing to make the necessary changes – it would rather lose positions than give up even a small part of the benefit package. As a result, teaching positions are now being cut and children will suffer from larger class sizes and fewer specialists.
- The leadership crisis in Milwaukee public education recently came to the fore when it was announced that Wisconsin's application for a share of the \$4.35 billion in federal "Race to the Top" education dollars failed to make it past the first cut. The Milwaukee Public Schools lack a track record of making the type of broad, swift and meaningful reforms the Obama Administration is looking for when awarding these funds. The Wisconsin Legislature's inability to make a decision on mayoral control of MPS or to impose other significant changes on the district show that it is nearly as incapable as the MPS Board in bringing about educational reform.
- MPS was recently made aware that it could receive up to \$45 million in federal funding to help turn around its poorest-performing schools. However, to get this money, MPS would have to implement a combination of various turnaround models endorsed by the federal government, one of which is to fire a school's principal and teachers and hire back not more than 50% of its staff. MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos said that he does not support this approach because the fired teachers would just wind up in different schools (if MPS operated in a more professional, business-like manner, it would not rehire fired workers!).

August 28, 2009

Governor James Doyle
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Madison, WI 53707

Mayor Tom Barrett
City Hall, Room 201
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Mr. Tony Evers
Superintendent of Public Instruction
P.O. Box 7841
Madison, WI 53707

Dear Gentlemen:

First, let me applaud your efforts to reform the governance of Milwaukee Public Schools by proposing that school board members be appointed by the mayor, not elected, and that the MPS superintendent also be selected by the mayor. I know the decision to put forth this proposal must have been a difficult one. School governance is a contentious issue in this city, as evidenced by the strong opinions on the proposal that have already been voiced by both sides. However, I share your view that a board appointed by the mayor -- a position elected by many more Milwaukeeans than individual school board members, and whose actions are much more visible to the community -- will ultimately be far more accountable to the community and responsive to its needs and wishes than a board that is "democratically elected" at low-turnout elections.

Despite the best efforts of the elected MPS board, Milwaukee's once-great public schools have, through a combination of poor decisions, neglect, indifference and outright mismanagement by administrators, as well as social and economic forces beyond the board's control, deteriorated into what is widely regarded as a failing school system. The problems of MPS are grave, numerous, far-reaching and well-documented. These problems, many of which were highlighted in the independent evaluation of MPS finances and non-instructional operations that you commissioned earlier this year ("Toward a Stronger Milwaukee Public Schools"), include:

- Poor academic performance, with huge and enduring student achievement gaps between MPS and state averages, as well as between racial groups within MPS.
- Steady declines in district enrollment, in part as a result of more Milwaukee children being enrolled in Milwaukee Parent Choice Program schools, which results in less state equalization aid to MPS.
- Sharply rising costs, primarily attributable to rising employee and retiree health benefit costs, which, when combined with decreasing state aid, will result in substantial budget gaps.
- Increasing reliance on the property tax levy to fund the MPS budget, with the MPS tax rate increasing faster than other Milwaukee taxing jurisdictions as the district struggles to close the gap between rising costs and falling state enrollment-based aid.
- The unsuccessful Neighborhood Schools Initiative, in which MPS, in an effort to reduce busing and associated costs, spent \$102 million to construct new school buildings and additions, many of which still sit empty or drastically underutilized.
- Truancy and drop-out rates that are several times the state average.
- Only about half of students who start 9th grade in MPS ultimately graduate from high school.

The failing MPS system continues to profoundly harm the community – economically, socially and financially. To compete in a global economy, Milwaukee employers need a labor force that is

highly skilled, trained and literate. Yet, MPS graduates – and certainly MPS drop-outs – often lack the most basic math and reading skills. Unable to secure gainful employment, this poorly educated population frequently resorts to criminal activity and is responsible for terrorizing many Milwaukee neighborhoods. The resulting public safety crisis not only makes Milwaukee residents afraid to leave their homes, but depresses the values of their homes as well.

I am also concerned about another way the failing MPS system impacts Milwaukee neighborhoods. I have heard countless first-hand accounts of parents who, because they feel there is no future for their children in the city's public schools, decide to leave Milwaukee when their children reach school age. Similarly, many parents with the option of settling in either Milwaukee or its suburbs will simply stay clear of Milwaukee in the first place because they wish to avoid its failing school system. In either case, the city is losing hundreds, if not thousands, of decent, tax-paying families to other jurisdictions primarily because of the poor quality of its schools.

I raise these points because I believe -- and hope you will agree -- that merely changing the governance of Milwaukee Public Schools is not enough to solve the problems of this failing educational system. What is needed is a comprehensive strategy and plan to improve MPS in the areas of administration, finance, personnel policies, curriculum, pedagogy and student discipline, among others.

The City of Milwaukee, its property taxpayers, businesses, residents and -- especially -- parents and children all need a public school system they can have faith in. **Without development and implementation of a comprehensive MPS reform plan, it will be difficult for the community to have faith in the future of Milwaukee Public Schools, even with a revised system of MPS governance.**

I hope that the state legislation necessary to restructure the governance of Milwaukee Public Schools is introduced and passed in a timely manner. I will do everything in my power to encourage its passage. But absent a comprehensive plan for improving MPS, nothing will be accomplished. **Therefore, I implore you to develop an MPS reform strategy that is as broad as possible, encompassing not only governance of the district but academics, finance, administration, etc., as well.**

I stand ready and committed to assisting you in improving Milwaukee Public Schools in any and every way possible.

Best Regards,

Robert G. Donovan
Alderman, 8th District

cc: all Milwaukee representatives in the Wisconsin Legislature