

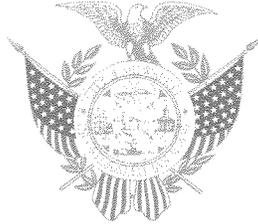
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ROBERT G. DONOVAN

Alderman, 8th District

January 25, 2013

Governor Scott Walker
115 East Capitol
Madison, WI 53702

Dear Governor Walker:

As you are aware, 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 school board's control, deteriorated into what is widely regarded as a failing school system. The problems of Milwaukee Public Schools ("MPS") are grave, numerous, far-reaching and well-documented, and include: poor academic performance, huge and enduring student achievement gaps, steady declines in district enrollment, sharply rising costs, high per-pupil expenditures, truancy and drop-out rates that are several times the state average, and an abysmal high-school graduation rate.

While education is critical to the prosperity, success and well-being of any community or society, Milwaukee has, for years, failed to meet its goals for improvement in this area and, if anything, has fallen further and further behind other cities. We are all aware that education is the ticket out of poverty; yet, in large part because of its ineffective public education system, Milwaukee has become one of the poorest cities in the nation.

The failing MPS system continues to profoundly harm the community – economically, socially and financially. I am particularly concerned about the way poorly-performing public schools impact Milwaukee neighborhoods. In a recent Wisconsin Policy Research Institute survey of 1,200 city residents, 70% gave Milwaukee's public schools a grade of "C" or lower. 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.

The numerous efforts to improve MPS over the years have met with little success, if any. Many have not produced the results that their creators and proponents anticipated (e.g., curriculum changes, specialty schools and the costly Neighborhood Schools Initiative). Others, such as a proposal to have the mayor appoint the superintendent and school board members, were not even given a fair chance for implementation and evaluation.

One initiative that has improved education in Milwaukee is the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (“School Choice”). While academics and politicians continue to debate whether the School Choice has actually improved the academic performance of Milwaukee’s children, the popularity of the program is not debatable. Enrollment in Choice schools has steadily grown. Low- and moderate-income Milwaukee parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the performance of the individual Choice schools in which they enroll their children, and appreciate the wide range of education options that School Choice affords them.

Recently, there has been discussion of altering or eliminating the residency requirement for MPS staff. In addition, City of Milwaukee public safety employees have for years sought to end the residency requirement. When MPS and City employees express dissatisfaction with the residency requirement, one of the major factors underlying that dissatisfaction is the state of public education in Milwaukee. These middle-class and upper-middle-class residents do not have the same options for their children as the lower-income parents who are currently eligible for School Choice: by and large, they must either send their children to MPS schools or pay hefty tuitions for them to attend parochial or other private schools.

For these reasons, I am asking you and the State Legislature to **expand School Choice by eliminating all income restrictions**. I believe that this is not only a very fair thing to do, but will also go a long way towards addressing the complaints about City and MPS residency requirements. In addition, making School Choice available to all families will set Milwaukee apart from other cities across the nation, making it a real trendsetter among its peers. Finally, the elimination of School Choice income restrictions will help Milwaukee retain and attract middle- and upper-middle-income households, thereby enabling the city to have the socioeconomic diversity that is essential for healthy urban centers.

Secondly, it is time for the State to, once and for all, **fix the School Choice “funding flaw”**. Under current law, School Choice voucher expenses are deducted from MPS state aid, even though no aid is granted to MPS for School Choice students. This means MPS loses revenue on a per-pupil basis. To offset this loss of revenue, MPS has been forced to raise property taxes to maintain per-pupil expenditures. These higher taxes again further reduce the attractiveness of Milwaukee to current and potential middle-class residents and homeowners.

I hope you will give serious consideration to both of these policy changes. By expanding eligibility for participation in School Choice to all families and correcting the School Choice "funding flaw," the State of Wisconsin can help to address the concerns of school and municipal employees subject to residency requirements while also contributing to the stabilization and economic growth of its largest city.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert G. Donovan". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Robert G. Donovan
Alderman, 8th District