

MPS Control Struggle: A Merry Compromise Proposal

Statement of Alderman Jim Bohl December 21, 2009

With competing plans for governing the Milwaukee Public Schools now petering out in Madison, I'm suggesting a modest compromise that gives each side something it wants.

First, give the mayor of Milwaukee the ability to appoint the MPS superintendent. The superintendent would need to be confirmed by the Common Council, and after confirmation, would serve at the pleasure of the mayor.

As executive of MPS, the superintendent would prepare an executive budget and would propose and push forth larger district-wide school policy.

Second, in order to ensure hearing the vox populi – the voice of the people – keep the elected school board as it is. What's more, move the school board elections to coincide with the spring elections of the mayor, the Common Council, and the elected officials of Milwaukee County. Raising the profile of board elections will ensure far greater participation in the democratic process, as many more voters would be selecting their school board representatives (no more single-digit school board election turnouts).

The school board would serve as a legislative body, voting on legislation and initiatives affecting the schools and the district, and it would also vote on the superintendent's budget. Just like Congress or the Common Council, the board would have the ability to amend or change the budget if it includes terms or priorities it doesn't agree with. The superintendent could veto amendments, and the board could then vote to override such vetoes.

The appealing part of the proposal for Milwaukeeans in general, in my opinion, should be the greater role of the mayor and Common Council in MPS matters. The Council and mayor would and should have a greater stake in MPS accountability, and in the very future of our city and its children (and taxpayers). I argue that this greater level of involvement is a critical need if we are going to truly change MPS for the better.

My compromise also calls on the school board to focus exclusively on education and academics, and not on maintaining buildings, fleets and grounds, or running knitting classes. Areas such as recreation, and buildings and fleet services could and should be rolled into city government. The board has a heavy responsibility of making sure our students receive a top notch education; they should focus entirely on making sure that happens! The city would be better equipped and could more efficiently operate these non-academic functions.

Sure, my compromise requires some "give" on each side, but any compromise worth anything always does. I think my compromise has a realistic chance of garnering discussion and support, and perhaps it can help bring about the positive change we are all hoping for.

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