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**ROBERT G. DONOVAN**

Alderman, 8th District

August 31, 2009

Governor James Doyle  
P.O. Box 7863  
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 9<sup>th</sup> 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.**

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Enclosed you will find a copy of my plan, first proposed last year, for improving MPS. I hope you will consider these ideas as a starting point for future changes to the structure and governance of MPS. 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, 8<sup>th</sup> District

Enclosure

cc: All members of the State Legislature  
MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos