

***Testimony Prepared for Presentation at the Wisconsin Legislative Black Caucus  
Hearing on the Reform of the Milwaukee Public Schools***

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**Introduction**

The quality of education provided by the Milwaukee Public Schools is of importance to the children and parents of Milwaukee and to all Wisconsin citizens. I am honored to have been asked by Wisconsin's Legislative Black Caucus to offer my views on how MPS can be improved.

There is little disagreement that MPS is a distressed school system. However, the reasons why Milwaukee's public school system is in trouble are a matter of considerable controversy. In my view, the difficulties of the Milwaukee Public Schools have been a long time in the making and have a number of causes. I have identified a few examples of how MPS and its students have been harmed.

***Hostile Political and Policy Environment***

- The City of Milwaukee government has done little to promote the interests of the Milwaukee Public Schools and the children they serve. The mayor's opposition to the 1993 building referendum coupled with his failure to provide leadership necessary to raise the funds for MPS capital improvements has helped insure that the Milwaukee students continue to attend older schools, with less adequate facilities, and larger classes than their suburban counterparts. In no other district in the state does city government so closely control school districts finances. To a large extent, Milwaukee's city government controls the

fiscal fate of MPS at the same time it is not held accountable for MPS problems.

- The current state school funding formula coupled with the revenue caps make it virtually impossible for MPS to raise the funds necessary to serve a student body whose level of poverty and need for exceptional education services has increased relentlessly for the past twenty years. State law prohibits MPS from incurring debt greater than two percent of the assessed valuation of property in the district and discourages the City of Milwaukee from using its long-term bonding authority to help address the capital needs of the Milwaukee Public Schools. In addition, the law governing short-term borrowing makes it impossible for Milwaukee to generate the sort of per-pupil revenue available to smaller districts.
- The fight over private school vouchers (and more recently charter schools) has, to a large extent, fueled the popular belief that the Milwaukee Public School system is a disastrous failure. In large measure, the justification for private school vouchers rests on claim that MPS' failures are so profound that the system can not be reformed internally. Thus the view that MPS is a failed school system has been widely expressed by voucher proponents and amplified by a well-financed, right wing policy apparatus in Milwaukee; Wisconsin; and throughout the U.S. The attention this view has received has had a demoralizing effect on the MPS staff and has made rational consideration of how to best improve Milwaukee's public schools more difficult.

### ***Poor Administrative Decision Making***

- The decision, in 1992, to end summer school except for English as a Second Language and Exceptional Education students means that MPS students in academic difficulty are now much less likely to receive the extra instruction they need. Such additional instruction may make the difference between starting the next school year at grade level in achievement and falling further behind. This decision especially harmed children living in poverty whose parents can not afford to pay privately for tutoring and other academic services. It is also puzzling because, at the time, the state reimbursed approximately 75 percent of the costs of summer school and there were no state revenue caps in place.

- The state would have picked up 56 percent (\$205 million) of the \$366 million cost of the bond issue put to referendum in 1993. However, this fact was not communicated to the public and few of even the most dedicated supporters of the referendum were aware that this was the case. As a result, the cost of the bond issue appeared much higher to Milwaukee taxpayers than it actually was. A factor which may have contributed to the failure of the referendum. In turn, the failure of the referendum has left MPS with overcrowded classrooms and deteriorating and expensive to maintain infrastructure.
- A poorly thought through decentralization plan has shifted responsibilities to the school level that could be more effectively be discharged centrally. Decentralizing responsibilities without providing adequate resources to discharge them serves no one well. Problems such as inadequate building maintenance may have become both more severe and less visible because hundreds of individual decisions taken at the school level will obscure the overall needs of the district. Further, many Milwaukee school principals are now asked to make decisions for which they have never been trained. Thus the public's ability to hold school authorities and elected officials accountable is diminished. In addition, as the role of the principal is shifted away from that of instructional leader to that of school manager the school's academic program will inevitably suffer.
- Currently, central administration costs approximately 5 cents out of every dollar spent by MPS. This is a figure that few, if any, private sector bureaucracies in Wisconsin could match. Indeed, the danger now is that the central administration of MPS has been reduced so much that it does not have the resources necessary for sound planning and decision making.

### ***The poverty of the Milwaukee Public School's student body***

- There is no doubt in my mind that children living in poverty can learn as well as more affluent children. However, there is also no doubt that, for a variety of reasons, children living in poverty require relatively more money to educate well. Over the past twenty years the poverty level of children in Milwaukee has increased alarmingly. Milwaukee now educates a student population that is more desperately poor and has more special needs than the students it served in the 1970's – and the situation continues to deteriorate. In 1994/95 the free lunch total for MPS (an indicator of poverty) was 69%, in 1995/96 it was 71%, and in 1996/97 it reached 75%. The fiscal constraints imposed on it have made

it impossible for MPS to respond adequately to the needs of its increasingly impoverished student body. Given these difficult circumstances it would be fair to ask how the Milwaukee public schools have performed as well as they have.

### **A Caution**

Clearly MPS confronts more problems than those identified above. It is equally clear that the Milwaukee Public Schools can be improved. However, it is very important that the myth that MPS is in such a state of collapse and disarray that some form of state control of the district is justified. The worst thing to do at this point would be to cast about for reform proposals based on this erroneous negative assessment that single out Milwaukee. As members of Wisconsin's Legislative Black Caucus you are well aware that:

- MPS is perhaps the largest employer of African-Americans in the state.
- Almost half of Milwaukee's public schools have African-American principals.
- An African-American woman now leads the MTEA.
- The potential negative educational and economic consequences for Milwaukee's African-American community of ill-conceived reform proposals would be enormous.

***The level of academic achievement of its low-income and minority students does not make MPS unique.***

I have reviewed the latest available Wisconsin Third Grade Reading Comprehension and Fourth, Eighth, and Tenth Grade Knowledge and Concepts test results in reading and in math reported for the school districts of Beloit, Green Bay, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee, and Racine. I report the results by the economic circumstance and by the ethnicity of the students tested. Tables summarizing the data are contained in the Appendix.

The view that emerges from statewide test results is not one of unique failure in Milwaukee. The picture is much more complex. The summary page that appears before each set of test results contained in the Appendix reveals that all of the urban districts whose performance was reviewed had difficulty educating poor and/or minority children well.

One of the more disturbing findings in my review of the test results was the percentage of low income and minority children not taking state tests in districts

other than Milwaukee. For example, 58% of Hispanic students in Green Bay did not take the tenth grade reading test as opposed to 15% in Milwaukee. 19% of economically disadvantaged students in Madison did not take the fourth grade math test as compared to 9% in Milwaukee. 26% of Black students in Beloit did not take the eighth grade math test while in Milwaukee only 12% did not take the test. These percentages suggest that other urban school districts are, for whatever reason, not testing significant numbers of their poor and/or minority students. Given the performance of those low-income and minority children who are tested it is my conclusion that the percentage of children scoring “minimal” on statewide tests is artificially suppressed in these districts. If this is the case, it would have the effect of making the performance of other urban districts appear better than it actually is in relation to MPS because Milwaukee, for the most part, tests a higher percentage of its poor and its minority students than the other districts studied.

The results of statewide tests suggest that the achievement of poor and/or minority children is a statewide problem that merits statewide attention. The most important first question for the Wisconsin Legislative Black Caucus and other groups interested in MPS reform to ask may not be: “How can the Milwaukee Public Schools be reformed?” A more useful first question might be: “What policies need to be adopted in Wisconsin to insure that poor and/or minority children succeed in Wisconsin’s public schools?” I believe if this question is addressed, so will the question of how best to reform the Milwaukee Public Schools. However, the reverse is not true. A focus on Milwaukee based on erroneous negative assumptions is likely to stand in the way of a serious state level review of the problems faced by poor and/or minority children in public schools. Many state and local policy makers will continue to pretend that these problems are unique to Milwaukee. And, we run the risk of hampering those things that MPS does very well.

### **What is to be done?**

A first step in reforming schools so that they better serve children living in poverty and minority children would be to address the structural inequalities that systematically disadvantage these students. In Milwaukee this would mean, for example, changing the fiscal relationship between the city government and MPS.

Next it would be helpful if policy makers focused on reforms that have some educational content. Neither private school vouchers nor charter schools (to cite the reforms given the most attention during the nineties) represent a commitment

to do anything in particular educationally. However, a good deal is known about the elements that would be present in an educationally sensible reform intended to increase the academic performance of children living in poverty. I recommend the following for your consideration. Its elements have strong research support and there are important roles for state and local government, MPS, the MTEA, and the private sector.

***Small schools, small classes, and the integration of pre-school through third grade education***

Using its power of eminent domain the City of Milwaukee, in consultation with MPS, should acquire control over vacant land in neighborhoods all over the city. Small (no more than 150 children) pre-school through third grade learning centers would be built on these properties. The centers could be built inexpensively using one of several common plans, designed to be cost and energy efficient, developed in collaboration with UWM School of Architecture and Urban Planning. The centers would have classrooms designed for student enrollments of approximately 15 for grades K-3. In addition the centers would house day care facilities for neighborhood children.

To the greatest extent possible staffing for these schools should be drawn from among adults in the neighborhood in which the schools are located. It would make a good deal of sense to utilize the, childcare, training and employment provisions of the W-2 program to help facilitate this process and support the program of these schools. For jobs such as teacher aide, and teacher the UWM School of Education can play a useful role. The MMTEP program, for example, has been designed to help facilitate the training of paraprofessionals for teaching positions. A modified and expanded version of this program could help train teacher aides and help move them into the ranks of certified teachers who could teach at these schools.

The curriculum would be based on developmental principles instead of grade level divisions and individual students will be given numerous opportunities for project work and activities that are developmentally appropriate for them.

Each of the elements described above has solid research support. Taken together there is little question that the positive impact of a program such as the one I have outlined would be dramatic. The fact is we know a good deal about how to

improve the academic achievement of poor minority children. What is necessary is the political will to put such a program in place. \*

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\* This testimony and the appendix will soon be available on the Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation (CERAI) web page (<http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CERAI/>).