

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, have more tax-supported educational choices than parents in other U.S. cities. Most of these programs were enacted during the 1990s.

Opponents believed these programs would harm the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), the nation's twelfth largest public school system. They predicted enrollment declines, less state education aid to MPS, budget reductions, and lower academic performance for remaining MPS students.

None of these predictions has come true. In fact, eleven years of data show opposite trends. MPS enrollment has increased by 4,576 students since 1990. The MPS market share has grown to 80 percent from 78 percent of K-12 Milwaukee students. Real spending per pupil has grown 24 percent. State support for MPS – adjusted for inflation – has risen 61 percent. As a result, the state share of spending for MPS has grown to 67 percent from 54 percent.

MPS remains a district where overall academic achievement is unacceptably low. The percent of MPS freshmen who get diplomas is among the nation's lowest, especially among African American and Hispanic students. Nothing in this report should be construed to suggest anything but that much progress is still needed.

Nevertheless, the evidence is increasingly clear that MPS students have made significant academic gains between 1997 and 2001, the period of the most rapid expansion of school choice. On independent standardized exams, MPS students improved on eleven of fifteen tests where their performance was compared to a national sample. The percent of MPS students demonstrating proficiency on all fifteen tests has increased. The too-high dropout rate is declining. These developments have occurred at the same time that the number of MPS students from low-income families was growing, a trend some observers associate with the likelihood of lower achievement.

The learning gains coincide with and reflect important, system-wide changes within MPS. Expanded school choice has prompted a positive response from many MPS schools, a response accompanied by internal pressure for changes that have proven nearly impossible to implement in most other major urban districts. For example:

- Dollars follow students to schools they choose, so that schools must recruit to strengthen their budgets. Individual schools control 95 percent of district operating funds.

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The positive results in Milwaukee have both caused and coincided with a dramatic change in how citizens view public education.

- Teachers – once assigned almost strictly by seniority – are now often hired by school selection committees.
- MPS has expanded dramatically the full-day four-year-old kindergarten programs in high demand by parents.
- Working with private and charter schools, MPS has expanded facilities in central city neighborhoods, once neglected in favor of school construction in predominantly white areas and suburbs.

The impact of these changes is particularly strong on low-income children in racial and ethnic minority groups. These are children who were often left behind in earlier reform efforts.

The positive results in Milwaukee have both caused and coincided with a dramatic change in how citizens view public education. Indeed, Milwaukee has redefined the concept and has shown that competitive, multi-sector delivery strengthens, rather than threatens, public education, the Milwaukee Public Schools, and democratic civic culture.

FOREWORD

Since the mid-1990s, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) has required that all high school students study algebra. In 1995, MPS began requiring that high school students take a demanding mathematics proficiency test. District officials did not sugarcoat the grim initial results, which the national media widely disseminated. After only 12 percent passed the math test when it was first administered, then-U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich said the results signaled nothing less than a “decline in civilization.”

Now, several years later, the fanfare has died down and MPS student performance has improved. In math, for example, more than 90 percent of MPS seniors now pass the proficiency test, part of a comprehensive set of exams that must be passed in order to graduate.

Math is one of many areas where MPS students are learning more and performing better. Their performance, described in this report, illustrates the response by Milwaukee educators to the city’s new environment for public education. Milwaukee parents now have a broader range of educational options than exist in any other American city, as well as increased grounds for confidence in Milwaukee Public Schools. MPS still has a long way to go – its graduation rate for African Americans and Hispanics is among the country’s lowest – but the evidence is clear that the district is on a course of real improvement.

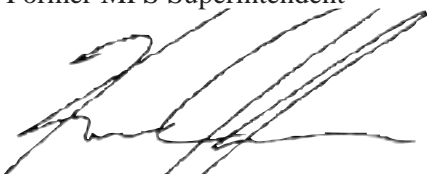
Like John Gardner, each of us has devoted a great deal of our personal and professional energy to strengthening the educational achievement of urban students. That goal cannot be achieved without a strong system of public education. Milwaukee is on track to meet that goal. We all feel accountable to ourselves and our community for actually achieving it. We hope our experience encourages those in other cities who also are working so hard to raise the achievement of urban students.



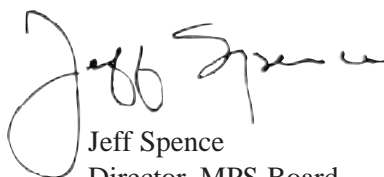
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