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Education reform spurring inner-city economic growth

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Guest Opinion

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Recent columns calling for increased investment in Milwaukee's inner city and improvement in education are on target ("Inner city has great potential for economic growth," Jan. 27, and "Inner city needs underpinning to produce economic growth," Feb. 10).

But the implication that education reform is languishing misses the mark.

Milwaukee deservedly has earned national attention for its approach to education reform. Through a wide range of programs, Milwaukee offers parents a greater array of options than exist in any urban area.

In this environment of rapidly expanding educational choices, Milwaukee Public Schools have responded positively.

There remains great need for improvement, but MPS enrollment and test scores are up and the dropout rate is down. Harvard Economist Caroline Hoxby says the improvements to the public schools in Milwaukee most affected by school choice are "phenomenal by any national standards - it's really an exciting change."

Further, programs that expand parent options are a major reason behind nearly \$100 million in completed and planned investments to build and renovate schools in Milwaukee's poorest neighborhoods, according to a recent report by the American Education Reform Council.

The report, "Schools that Choice Built," identifies 65 schools, enrolling 16,748 students, where investments of \$76 million are completed and an additional \$23 million in spending is planned.

The report is based on the council's survey of 133 schools participating in three programs - vouchers, charters, and partnership schools - that the Wisconsin Legislature created to expand educational options for Milwaukee parents.

More than 90% of these funds are privately invested to build new schools and expand existing ones.

The funds have come from foundation grants, fund-raising drives, and bank loans, among other sources, in order to create, expand and renovate spaces where children in Milwaukee can learn.

The programs have encouraged major private investment in several of the city's high poverty areas.

Most projects are in Milwaukee neighborhoods where, according to 2000 census data, half or more of the residents have an income below 175% of the federal poverty level. These projects help stabilize and renew such neighborhoods as Metcalf Park, Parklawn and Walker's Point. (For the full report and a map, go to SchoolChoiceWi.org.)

One example of such an investment is the United Community Center Middle School, a charter school that serves Latino youth primarily from nearby south side neighborhoods.

The United Community Center raised \$5.5 million in private grants to build its new school in the Walker's Point neighborhood in April 2002. The three-story school houses 15 classrooms, a computer lab, a gym, a library and an auditorium, and has the capacity to enroll 300 students.

St. Marcus Lutheran School, located in the Brewers Hill neighborhood, provides another example.

As a result of expansion through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, St. Marcus Lutheran Church is raising \$5 million in private funds to build a new school that will open for the 2003-'04 school year. The 56,000-square-foot, three-story, red brick building will have a capacity for 250 students, compared to 110 in the old school.

Such school construction and renovation efforts take tremendous fiscal pressure off MPS and its taxpayers, providing benefits beyond the actual school site. Higher taxes would be needed if voucher, charter and partnership students instead attended MPS.

For example, last year MPS said that \$70 million in new capital spending would be needed if the MPCP ended. The same MPS analysis also forecast an operating deficit of up to \$40 million if the program ended.

Those who are interested in improving education and revitalizing Milwaukee's poorest neighborhoods will find that the expansion of educational choices helps their cause.

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