



**ACLU of Wisconsin
Urges Senate Education Committee to Focus on Adequacy**

Submitted by:
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Thank you for this opportunity to address the urgent need to improve Milwaukee's public schools. On behalf of the ACLU's nearly 8,500 members in Wisconsin and all of Wisconsin's school children, we have worked for years to make real the state constitutional right all of our children have to an adequate public education. Our courts have recognized this right, especially as it applies to children living in poverty, those learning English, and those with special needs.

The ACLU of Wisconsin welcomes Mayor Barrett's interest in Milwaukee's public schools. In order to improve our schools our whole community needs to focus its support on MPS. The interest and support of legislators from across Wisconsin, such as you, is also welcome, because ultimately the State of Wisconsin is responsible for ensuring that every Wisconsin public school student receives an adequate education. Support does not require control, however.

Changing the governance of Milwaukee Public Schools will not remedy Wisconsin's failure to provide an adequate education to far too many of Milwaukee's children. Mayoral takeover will not narrow the racial achievement gap, which should deeply trouble all Wisconsinites. Schemes such as mayoral control and school vouchers that focus on control rather than education in the classroom are bound to fail our children.

Rather than spending time and effort to push through a controversial takeover program that will not provide resources for programs that work, the governor, mayor and state legislators need to comply with the state Constitutional obligation to ensure that all Milwaukee children have the opportunity to obtain a meaningful, adequate education.

Those genuinely concerned about student performance need to evaluate what programs and services - such as smaller class sizes - help students succeed. They must look at researched-based findings to ascertain what programs and services best educate students with disabilities, English language learners, and low income students. In light of the racial achievement gaps in our community, they must look at whether specific programs are needed to support and improve the achievement of children of color. They must implement programs and policies to deconcentrate poverty in our schools, because concentrated poverty - not just a student's low income status - is one of the most significant barriers to achievement.

Those concerned about student performance also must deal with the reality that MPS simply does not have adequate resources to provide the services and programs to help students succeed - and in fact, has suffered from decreasing state budget support in recent years. Then they must determine the cost of programs that MPS students need, and ensure that those

programs will be fairly and adequately funded. That is the kind of adequate education that all Milwaukee students deserve - but are too often denied.

Moreover, efforts to improve the education of Milwaukee children must address the needs of all students who attend taxpayer-supported schools, not just those who attend schools operated by MPS. Approximately 1/5 of Milwaukee students attend private voucher schools at taxpayers' expense. Most of those schools perform no better than MPS, and in some cases fall short of MPS' performance. Yet neither the takeover proposal nor any other plan has been offered to improve education for those 21,000 Milwaukee children.

Nor does the takeover plan deal with the negative impacts of voucher school turnover on MPS schools. As a recent audit shows, each year far more students leave voucher schools for MPS than transfer from MPS to voucher schools. Some voucher schools close during or after the school year, for reasons ranging from poor physical conditions to financial mismanagement. Voucher schools can and do expel students who present behavioral and other challenges. And research has also shown that voucher schools educate a far smaller percentage of students with disabilities and English language learners than MPS – requiring MPS to divert a far greater percentage of its scarce resources to educate these children.

The demonstrated poor outcomes of voucher schools are a clear indication that quick fixes will not meet the educational needs of Milwaukee children. Voucher schools were sold as a free market, competitive model that would succeed without regulation, oversight or public disclosure – but overall, the system has failed and should be phased out, starting with those voucher schools that are underperforming MPS.

Nor should there be a headlong rush for other quick fixes. Neighborhood schools, for example, were sold – and funded - as a way to provide a better education to Milwaukee children, and they too have failed. Charter schools operated by entities other than MPS – like the ones run by the city of Milwaukee – have also failed to provide the quick fix that proponents promised. There is no evidence that yet another quick fix – a mayoral takeover of the public schools – will have any more success in meeting students' needs.

The primary constitutional responsibility for the education of Milwaukee's children rests with the State of Wisconsin. The state needs to put adequate resources into the public school system to provide the educational services and supports those children need – including adequate supports for children living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, low income children, children with disabilities, English language learners, children of color, and other children with special needs. It needs to ensure that the per-pupil funding for Milwaukee Public Schools students is at least comparable to that of suburban districts. It needs to phase out voucher and charter schools that are not performing, and impose the same accountability requirements on any schools that remain. Those are the reforms that will help Milwaukee students succeed.

Thank you for your attention.

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