



## Challenges Facing the Milwaukee Public Schools

### Student Achievement

#### Introduction

One of the most urgent challenges facing the Milwaukee Public Schools is the need to improve the academic achievement of its students. Since the early 1990's, MPS administration and the school board have faced growing criticism for low graduation rates and faltering student progress compared to districts around the state and in other parts of the country. To boost academic performance, elected officials and community leaders have suggested measures that range from transferring control of MPS to the mayor or the governor to restructuring the system into several smaller districts.

Currently, MPS is under state-imposed corrective actions under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). For decades, a worrying achievement gap between white and black students has persisted. Although there are some recent signs of improvement, parents, elected officials, local businesses, and community partners continue to be concerned that MPS is not adequately preparing students for post-secondary education opportunities, work, and citizenship.

The aim of this report is to provide a high-level overview of the current position of MPS in regards to student achievement.

## MPS Status as a District In Need of Improvement

Each year, state governments are required to evaluate the performance of both schools and districts under the NCLB. This evaluation is in four areas and must include achievement in reading, achievement in math, and overall test participation. NCLB requires that high schools are evaluated on graduation rates, and gives the states latitude in selecting the fourth area for elementary and middle schools. In Wisconsin, that fourth area is attendance rates.

Federal mandates require that states establish targets to ensure that 100% of students are proficient in reading and math. These targets are called Annual Measurable Objectives, or AMOs.

Wisconsin's AMOs are aimed at achieving proficiency by 2013-2014, and has established AMO benchmarks to achieve that goal. The AMO for the 2007-2008 school year was 74% for reading and 58% for math.

### Adequate Yearly Progress

When districts fail to meet state-established targets, they miss what is referred to as Adequate Yearly Progress under guidelines established under the NCLB, and face a series of escalating corrective actions. MPS has missed these targets in each of the last four years. Working with state officials, MPS is required to implement a comprehensive plan that includes state-mandated instructional targets in reading and math.

## Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination

Wisconsin students are tested using the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE). The 2007 results for MPS students in reading and math for 4<sup>th</sup> graders, 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, as gathered by the Department of Public Instruction, appear below.

### Reading

Grade	Minimum	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
4	12%	26%	42%	16%
8	17%	20%	43%	15%
10	27%	27%	20%	7%

### Math

Grade	Minimum	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
4	35%	14%	34%	14%
8	36%	23%	31%	5%
10	46%	19%	23%	3%

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

## Gaps in Achievement Between Black and White Students

A persistent and troubling feature of education in Wisconsin has been the gap in performance between black students and white students, as measured by test scores in reading and math. While the data collected in this area applies to the state as a whole, the results clearly indicate a need for urgency in Milwaukee, which has the largest concentration of African American students.

A 2005 analysis by the Journal Sentinel of The National Assessment of Educational Progress, a report commonly known as the Nation's

Report Card, pointed to a large gap between the performance of blacks and whites in both reading and math in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. The gap, the paper reported, was the highest in the nation. A reproduction of the Journal Sentinel analysis appears below:

**Fourth Grade Math Scores**

Whites	Blacks	Gap
247	210	37

**Eighth Grade Math Scores**

Whites	Blacks	Gap
291	246	45

**Fourth Grade Reading Scores**

Whites	Blacks	Gap
227	194	33

**Eighth Grade Reading Scores**

Whites	Blacks	Gap
271	236	35

Note: Scores are based on a 500-point scale.

In April 2008, The National Assessment of Educational Progress showed continuing gaps in achievement between white and black students, this time in writing proficiency. Wisconsin ranked worst in the nation in this area. Scores by white students exceeded scores by black students by 31 points.

**Community Concern and Reaction**

Difficulties in MPS play out in the community, affecting post-secondary educational institutions and the local economy. A group including Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce

President Tim Sheehy, former MPS Superintendent Howard Fuller, and Cory Nettles, a former Wisconsin Commerce Secretary, began meeting in August 2008 with community leaders and others concerned about the future of MPS. The group, The Milwaukee Quality Education Initiative, notes:

- In southeastern Wisconsin, 12.6% of adult residents do not have a high school degree. In the city of Milwaukee, 21% of residents do not have a high school diploma; among African Americans, the figure is 23.6% and for Hispanics 47%. The US average is 16%.
- In the region, 28% of adults have a four-year degree. In Milwaukee, only 19.7% of residents have a four-year degree; among African Americans, the figure is 10% and for Hispanics the number is 6.8%. The US average is 27%.
- 86% of MPS graduates entering the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee require remedial education programs.
- Enrollment in MPS schools are declining significantly, while enrollments in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and independent charter schools increased by 14% and 4% respectively from 1997 to 2007.

**Summary**

Of the two serious issues facing MPS, funding and student achievement, the perception that the district is failing its students academically has the potential to create the most long-term damage to the reputation and economic health of Milwaukee and

southeastern Wisconsin. Businesses are reluctant to locate to a region in which the school system is seen as failing, creating a cascading effect of high unemployment rates, poverty, and a lack of opportunity for residents. A healthy MPS is critical to the long-term success of Southeastern Wisconsin, and needs to be an urgent priority for the administration, the school board, other elected officials, and community partners.

### **Sources**

“Milwaukee Public Schools DIFI Executive Summary.” Milwaukee Public Schools. February 2008.

“Wisconsin School Performance” Department of Public Instruction. Online Database. <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/>.

“State’s learning gap still vast.” Journal Sentinel. October 19, 2005.

“State black 8<sup>th</sup>-graders rank worst in nation in writing.” Journal Sentinel. April 4, 2008.

“The Milwaukee Quality Education Initiative.” Tim Sheehy. August 2008.

### ***About Advocates for Student Achievement***

*Formed in 2007, ASA’s mission is to increase academic achievement for every student in Milwaukee by recruiting and electing school board members who have the talent, focus and experience required to make its urban schools among the best in the nation. For more information, visit: [www.asamke.org](http://www.asamke.org).*