



Challenges Facing the Milwaukee Public Schools

High Costs for Transportation and Facilities

Introduction

Among the critical issues facing the Milwaukee Public Schools are dealing with the district's high transportation costs and managing its many underutilized or poorly utilized facilities while also ensuring that children have access to quality education programs. The issues are in many ways interconnected. The district spends more than \$50 million each year for the daily transportation of thousands of students—often to schools far away from the neighborhoods in

which they live. At the same time, many neighborhood schools operate well below student capacity, which affects the availability of offerings such as art, music, and physical education.

In the last several years, initiatives have been launched to reduce transportation expenses and improve neighborhood schools with varying degrees of success. Since 2002, the district has invested more than \$100 million constructing new facilities and undertaking renovations to persuade parents to place their children in

neighborhood schools. Some of these efforts did result in increased access to quality programs. However, there are also numerous examples of costly investments that produced disappointing results. Debt service related to these projects and other capital expenditures exceeds \$10 million annually. Complicating matters further is that total enrollment at MPS is in decline, which means that some facilities will almost certainly have to be closed and sold.

The aim of this report is to summarize some of the current issues facing MPS in terms of transportation and its sprawling physical plant as well as efforts to address the problem.

Transportation

Since 2000, MPS has spent more than \$400 million transporting thousands of elementary, middle, and high school students. The district has engaged in a variety of efforts to reduce these costs, including attempts to build more efficient transportation models, persuading parents to enroll children in schools closer to their homes, and encouraging use of the Milwaukee County Transit System over the traditional yellow bus service.

Some of these initiatives, notably a restructuring of the district's transportation regions, resulted in lowered expenses for busing elementary and middle school students. Costs to bus high school students during the same period, however, increased by 32%.

Although not strictly an effort to reduce transportation costs, district officials sought to decrease the numbers of students taking the bus through the \$100 million Neighborhood Schools Initiative. Since then, the total number of students taking daily bus trips have

declined from nearly 73,000 in the 2000-2001 school year to just over 56,000 in the 2007-2008 school year. A large share of this decline, however, is attributable to a decrease in enrollment and management of the regions. However, these changes have reduced educational options for some parents who choose or have to utilize district transportation. Perhaps what is most frustrating is that despite these changes, the district's annual cost of busing has remained virtually unchanged.

Proposals to Reduce Transportation Costs

Over the years, several large proposals have emerged to reduce expenditures in this area, including having MPS run all or part of the transportation services it contracts out to private firms or using the Milwaukee County Transit System to a greater degree. Each of these steps would require commitments of time and money by the district.

In October 2008, the board approved a plan to alter the transportation regions for attendance area schools that could save \$300,000. The administration is working on a similar proposal for citywide schools that it plans to unveil in 2009.

Other proposals under consideration include the development of lower cost shuttle services that would be provided for students attending neighborhood schools. Many of these options will be reviewed in upcoming budget cycles.

The Neighborhood Schools Initiative

Among the ways transportation costs could be reduced is by encouraging increased attendance at schools that are located closer to students' homes. Starting in 1999, MPS leaders, working with city of Milwaukee officials and representatives from the state of Wisconsin, developed a plan to finance more than \$100 million in capital improvements and new building development.

The Neighborhood Schools Initiative was intended to limit busing, improve programming in some troubled schools, and help the district compete with other education options like the taxpayer subsidized Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and charter schools.

While the long-term effectiveness of the program and the value of new buildings that will be owned by the district for decades cannot yet be fully gauged, the Neighborhood Schools Initiative has attracted criticism for its expense and scale.

An August 2008 analysis of the project by the Journal Sentinel found that student enrollment actually fell at about half the schools where classrooms were added through renovations or new building projects. Most of these schools were located on the north side of Milwaukee. Some schools, a number of them on the city's south side, were able to move students who were being taught in hallways and gyms into new classrooms. Enrollment at many of these schools increased. Across the district, old and decaying facilities were improved or replaced. Enhanced facilities have meant increased opportunities for partnerships with community organizations serving children and their families.

The Journal Sentinel investigation also found:

- The district spent \$7 million to lease new classroom space that it has never used from an affiliate of a local church.
- A \$1.9 million addition built for LaFollete School is vacant.
- A \$2.7 million project at McNair Academy, an elementary school, failed to stem enrollment declines. The board is now considering a proposal to use the facility to merge the school with another program.
- A \$2 million addition at Auer Avenue School remains unused. Children in the neighborhood around the school are enrolled at more than 90 other MPS schools.

Summary

The issues of transportation and the cost of school building projects are complicated by the fact that not just budget dollars are at stake. In the years since court-ordered busing to achieve school desegregation was lifted, transportation provided by the district has meant that some families have been able to send their children to MPS programs that might otherwise have been unavailable to them. This has given the district the ability to compete with a growing array of educational options from private and parochial schools as well as choice schools and charter schools.

Still, the district's expenditures in these areas are expensive items that constrain resources available for instruction, salaries for teachers and guidance counselors, and special education programming. Dealing with these items will be a major issues for board members and district leadership for years to come.

Sources

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