

Changing the Vision for Public Education

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George A. Clowes

"We're elected by everyone and yet the attitude has been that we should exclude students who don't go to public schools. Why shouldn't we be serving them?"

The April elections brought a dramatic shift in power to the board of the Milwaukee Public Schools. As a result, Bruce R. Thompson--currently half-way through his first term on the board--could become president when the newly constituted board meets to elect officers.

Since he was elected to the board two years ago to represent Milwaukee's Fifth District, Thompson's reform views have generally been in the minority. But voters in April rejected five candidates backed by the teachers' union, giving reformers a 7-2 majority on the board.

Thompson is an educator with a PhD in mechanical engineering from the University of Pennsylvania and an MBA from the University of Chicago. He is a professor in the School of Business at the Milwaukee School of Engineering. He became involved in school reform issues several years ago through his daughter's Montessori daycare center, which qualified for the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. As a result of his interest in the program and subsequent letters published in local papers and in *The Wall Street Journal*, Thompson met many of the people involved in the choice program, including John Gardner and Mayor John O. Norquist.

When the city-wide school board seat opened up four years ago, he and John Gardner both thought the other should run, so they drew straws for the opportunity. "John lost, so he had to run," joked Thompson. Gardner's election four years ago was close, but he was re-elected this April by a solid 61-39 percent majority. A few days after Gardner's re-election and the election of four other reform candidates, Thompson spoke with *School Reform News'* managing editor George Clowes about the changed prospects for improving schools in Milwaukee.

Clowes:

Milwaukee is unusual in that most of the people involved in school choice seem to be Democrats--for example, John Gardner and the Mayor. Is that the case?

Thompson:

I would say that most are Democrats. That's my background, too. There's a feeling that the city

won't survive if it keeps losing families and if the schools don't improve. It really comes out of an analysis of what it takes to reform the school system and have a viable urban area. It comes from practical considerations.

Clowes: *What were your aims when you were first elected to the board and how successful have you been in achieving them?*

Thompson:

It's a mixed bag. With the short-term ones, I think I've been fairly successful. I wanted to put admission standards back into some of our high schools, and we got that through. These were supposedly high-powered schools and yet the students who could benefit weren't getting in. They were being displaced by other students who had no interest, and so we put in admission standards.

Another aim of mine was to put more emphasis on technical education. Two years ago, we were making no progress on that at all. Now we're well on the way to setting up a new technical high school, with both public and private money involved and agreements with a number of different institutions.

It's engineering as well as vocational, because what we found was that quite a few of our students at the engineering school came in thinking that they were going to be technicians. Then they'd decide that it would be more interesting to design the product rather than just repair it or install it. That's fallen off as the emphasis has changed from vocational to engineering. There used to be a culture that said, "If you're not going to college, you're going to be a failure." That's changed.

I also wanted to reverse the flight of the middle-class, but that's still going on. Every year, we lose over a thousand white students from the city school system. We're down to less than 20,000, and it won't take too long before they're all gone. There hasn't been much success in halting that.

Clowes: *What were the major issues in the recent school board election?*

Thompson:

From the voters' point of view, school choice was not the issue. From the union's point of view, it was *the* issue--school choice and charter schools. What set off the unions was that two of the schools chartered through the university were with local organizations that in turn contracted with the Edison Project to run them. That was anathema to the unions.

The union produced a video with all of their candidates and they went around to all the schools with it, saying that these terrible charter schools were coming, with bad education, but all the children would leave and go to them, and everyone would lose their jobs and pensions. I'm not sure it's quite logical, but that was their theme.

We started off with a disadvantage because this is a very low turnout election and the one base of voters--the teachers--was very scared. As it turned out, I think a lot of teachers voted against

the union candidates. The turnout was even lower than in the past, and yet the union didn't win.

Clowes: *In light of the surprisingly low turnout, what was it that produced support for the pro-school choice candidates?*

Thompson:

I think it was just quality: our people were clearly more competent. Several of their incumbents didn't seem to run at all. They were entirely dependent on the union doing everything for them, and the union did some dumb things. One of the things that became a big issue was a proposal to give laptop computers to all the high school students. People just thought that was stupid. One of the incumbents who was defeated had proposed that, and all of the union-backed candidates got tied to it because they had voted for it.

There was also a private individual named Jack Rosenberg, who was real mad about the school choice issue. He spent \$20,000 of his own money for what I thought were counter-productive ads specifically directed against John Gardner. But the message of his ads seemed to be that you could only get a good education if you sent your children to private schools. If the ad did anything, it helped school choice candidates.

Clowes: *How has the defeat of the union-backed candidates changed the landscape for school reform in Milwaukee?*

Thompson:

Everyone in this new group wants to have local schools that parents want to send their children to. That's not the case now. For example, I have a number of schools in my area that people in the area generally don't send their children to. What has happened is that the most desirable schools tend to be the magnet schools and so students get bused all over, away from their neighborhood. But if parents don't get their children into the magnet schools, they leave the city. So a big thrust will be to replicate the magnet schools on a neighborhood basis.

One of the ways we'll do that is to look at the schools with waiting lists. All of our Montessori schools, for example, have waiting lists, so why not have more Montessori schools and why not localize them? Now, that's simple in theory . . . but what you have to do is get a building in the neighborhood. That's not so simple because the school buildings are already being used.

Clowes: *What other changes do you see?*

Thompson:

We're going to try very hard to redo the budget to give far more budgetary responsibility to the individual schools, to the principals. The budget is not tied to our strategic plan or to any kind of goals. It's just a very big budget with lots of detail but with no incentives to encourage people to go where we want to go.

Before I was elected, a number of school board members went up to look at how they had decentralized in Edmonton, Alberta, and got quite enthusiastic about it, but the union put the kibosh on it. We've invited the superintendent who did Edmonton's decentralization to meet with us. Right now, the union doesn't have a lot of leverage to stop it.

The union has been surprisingly ineffective, largely because they have been so negative. If the union had allowed MPS to set up charter schools with private schools two years ago, we never would have had the program that allowed the city or the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to do it. They've had no long-term vision. In fighting the more moderate reform, they paved the way for more extreme reform.

Clowes: *How has school choice helped the Milwaukee Public Schools?*

Thompson:

I think in three ways. One is that school choice does give some clout to reformers. There are lots of people who say "We should change--but we need to do it gradually." School choice helps step up the pressure and to give more clout to the person who says, "We have to do it right away, because we're going to lose 10,000 students if we don't."

Second, choice has opened up some spaces for us to help in the shift to neighborhood schools. If parents want their children to go the neighborhood schools, you have to have space in those neighborhood schools. We were really gridlocked when I came in, but now it's a lot easier to find space in the school in your neighborhood because of the students who have gone to the choice schools. And compared to us building facilities, school choice is a pretty cheap way to get additional space.

Third, the choice schools tend to serve students who don't seem to fit well in our schools. An awful lot of the students in the choice schools are those who were having problems in our schools. In a way, that's not surprising because if you're a parent and your child is doing well in the public schools, why move him? It's almost the opposite of "creaming."

Clowes: *Has choice actually improved the Milwaukee Public Schools?*

Thompson:

Yes. For example, I mentioned the new technical high school. That was a very innovative kind of agreement and I think that without the competitive pressure from choice, it never would have gone through. The union wouldn't have allowed it. But they got scared.

The other big change is that we've signed a new agreement with the union that for the first time allows schools to interview and select teachers rather than having them come in on the basis of seniority. This gets rid of what we call "The Dance of the Lemons." If you're a fairly good principal, the way you get rid of bad teachers is not to fire them but to make it uncomfortable for them so that they transfer to another school. The bad teachers would move around until they finally ended up in a school where the principal was too incompetent to get rid of them. The new contract puts pressure on principals to fire bad teachers.

That change occurred during the recent campaign and I think the union was feeling the pressure from the choice schools and the charter schools. They were also scared to death that their candidates would lose, which they did anyway.

Clowes: *What do you see as the most likely development in school choice in Milwaukee over the next few years?*

Thompson:

I think it's going to be school choice within MPS. What I would like to see is a system where it's almost impossible to tell who's the public school and who's the private school because there'll be so much variety within MPS. We'll have our own charter schools and a whole mix of different schools.

Also, there are an awful lot of homeschoolers out there who would like to have access to recreation, and music, and art. Why shouldn't we be serving them? We're elected by everyone and yet the attitude has been that we should exclude students who don't go to public schools. There was a time when a lot of parochial schools would come down and share shops and gyms at public schools in Milwaukee, but for some reason that's largely disappeared. It reduces the constituency for the public schools. It's politically stupid, too--why tell a portion of your population that you're not interested in them?

Clowes: *What one message about education would you like to leave with our readers?*

Thompson:

People will say to me, "Choice is nice, but it's not a panacea." My response is, "Of course it's not. We need to be doing everything." What has happened in Milwaukee shows that it's not just a matter of one reform, of putting all your eggs in one basket. You have to do everything, you have to allow many reforms. The more things you're doing, the easier it is to do more.

If you say, "We need to reform MPS and we need to keep out choice schools," that makes it much harder to change MPS. But if you have school choice and charter schools, that makes it much easier to reform MPS.

George A. Clowes

Author bio:

George Clowes is a Heartland senior fellow addressing education policy. He served as founding managing editor of *School Reform News* between November 1996 and January 2005. During those eight years he solicited and edited hundreds of articles reporting on the latest developments in curriculum, school choice, school finance, and other aspects of school reform.

He also authored many articles for *School Reform News* himself, including a lengthy interview each month with a leading figure in the school choice movement. In addition, he wrote longer articles for other publications such as *Education Reform and America's Future*, *GOP Can't*

Decide Between Tax Credits and Vouchers, and Still No Consensus on School Choice. In 2001, he helped develop *The Heartland [School Reform] Plan for Illinois*, and in 2008 he authored a research study on lessons from the Milwaukee voucher program, called *Can Vouchers Reform Public Schools?*

Born and raised in England, Dr. Clowes attended public schools in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire. He received a Doctorate degree from the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology in 1965 and he was a Fulbright Scholar conducting postdoctoral research in biochemistry at Northwestern University from 1965 to 1967. Over the years, his research studies and analyses in chemistry, biochemistry, manpower planning, and school choice have been published in peer-reviewed journals.

Dr. Clowes spent most of his career in the private sector, working as a research chemist, software developer/database manager, and market research director. In the public sector, he served as Village Trustee and as Park District Commissioner in the Village of Mount Prospect and he is currently an advisor on the village Youth Commission. As a community access volunteer, for the past 15 years he has produced -- and often directed -- a monthly teen-oriented cable TV show called *YouthView from Mount Prospect*.

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