

# MPS faces a crisis in both accountability and democracy

By Bruce Thompson  
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For Milwaukee Public Schools, the financial crisis that many of us have been warning about is here. As principals get their initial budgets, they are faced with cutting teachers; larger class sizes; the loss of specialty teachers such as those in art, music, physical education; and the loss of librarians. Perversely, schools that have the best student achievement are often the hardest hit, since the middle-class students attracted to these schools bring less aid with them.

While many other school systems (and other government units) are also facing cuts brought on by exploding health care costs and the weak economy, MPS has been particularly hard hit. And much of the MPS pain is self-inflicted. Next year, MPS is facing a 77% fringe benefit rate, meaning that the cost to the district of an employee is 77% more than that employee's pay. If the unfunded liability for retiree benefits were correctly included, the fringe benefit rate would rise to almost 104%, meaning that the cost to the school district of an employee is more than twice that employee's pay.

The biggest factor in the exploding benefits cost is the cost of health care. MPS offers two plans, one of which costs MPS twice as much per employee as the other. Yet because MPS pays the full cost of the plans, there is no incentive for employees to pick the less-expensive plan. Employees can retire at age 55 and continue to have MPS pay for their health insurance at the rate it did when they retired. Pensions have an employer and an employee contribution, but MPS pays both parts.

Didn't anyone see this coming? The answer is yes. For the past 10 years at least, anyone who studied the numbers could see the coming disaster. The only question was how quickly it would come. Of course, many tried to pretend it would not happen; when the School Board expanded the early retirement plan, it rejected our proposal for an actuarial study of the cost.

The bigger question is why didn't anyone do anything to avert the disaster that clearly loomed on the horizon. Part of the answer is, of course, the natural human instinct to put off unpleasant decisions in the hopes that something will turn up. But the bigger explanation, I believe, is a failure of democracy, or at least what passes for democracy, in the MPS context.

Early in the 20th century, reformers in Wisconsin and other states determined to get the public schools out of politics. Part of their strategy was to turn school board elections into nonpartisan affairs held at times when there were no partisan races. Typically the only other candidates on the ballot are those running for judge.

For around half a century, this arrangement seems to have worked pretty well. But the emergence of powerful teachers unions changed the dynamics. If the unions were unable to get what they wanted at the bargaining

table, they could work to elect school board members who were dependent on union support. Low turnout in school board elections, combined with the lack of overall interest in the School Board, meant that the unions were the only consistent players in School Board elections.

I recall early in my first term, the negotiations that led to the expansion of the early retirement program; at times, it felt as though the union was negotiating with itself: not getting what it wanted at the negotiating table, the union would go directly to who would override the negotiators.

This dynamic has been true of many big-city school systems. One study of school board elections in another city found that one-third of the voters had a financial interest in the school system. Nationally, this imbalance is one factor cited by advocates of takeovers by mayors or governors.

In Milwaukee, the natural resistance to change coming from unions has been compounded by the emergence of a group of small but very vocal ideological groups. These groups are united by several issues, such as an obsession with school vouchers and opposition to testing. Increasingly, they seem to be joined at the hip with the unions.

For example, one group that claims to be interested in health care and employment issues routinely distributes election literature praising School Board candidates the unions support and attacking those the union opposes. Last year, this group received a \$200,000 grant from one of the national unions.

But two parts of these groups' underlying belief system have particularly contributed to the present crisis. One is their concentration on inputs rather than outcomes. This means they have little interest in better using resources or in making the schools more effective. In their view, good schools are schools that spend a lot. The second is their denial of the whole concept of limits and trade-offs, the idea that if one spends more on one thing (such as benefits), there is less for something else (such as music). Often, any attempt to address the expanding fringe benefit costs is dismissed as an attack on teachers.

As we are discovering this year, these dynamics are not just harmful to children and their chance for a good education. In the long run, they are harmful to teachers, facing ever larger classes, and to the unions, whose membership declines. Like the workers at General Motors or the steel companies, they are likely to wish that management had been able to make the hard decisions before the crisis hit.

Can School Board democracy be saved by tweaking it? Over the years, a number of proposals have been advanced to try to increase participation in School Board elections and thus dilute the power of economic interests.

One is to move School Board elections to coincide with higher-profile races, such as those in the fall for legislators, governor and president. The effect of this change, which I endorsed when it came before the Board, is unclear. It would certainly increase turnout, but would the higher campaign costs needed to reach a larger number of likely voters discourage potential candidates?

Another route would be to increase interest in MPS governance issues through groups that could analyze issues coming before the board and balance pressure from those intent on preserving the status quo. This approach has been tried in other cities with mixed success. Vociferous opposition to the very modest proposals in the so-called McKinsey study does not bode well for future efforts in this direction. In my experience, any efforts to broaden participation in Milwaukee School Board elections is likely to run into a buzz saw from the groups that don't want anyone else to play on their turf.

Recently, there has been a great deal of talk about democracy in connection with MPS. Ideally, a democratic

model would assure that Milwaukee citizens get the kind of school system they want for their children and that convinces them that their taxes are wisely used. Yet a recent poll of voters showed widespread dissatisfaction with MPS in general and the School Board in particular. They see the board as too fixated on ideological battles rather than working together to solve problems and making hard but necessary decisions.

There is another election that is going on continuously: where parents elect to send their children. MPS is losing that election. Recently, the School Board considered what to do with a cluster of north side schools that lost half their student population in the past 10 years. Many parents are choosing to send their children to choice, non-MPS charter and suburban schools.

Ideally, the growing financial crisis will serve as a wake-up call. The present model has proven too prone to being hijacked by special interests. The important debate is about what should replace it.

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