



MPS Scandals Reveal Need for Improved Oversight

Recent scandals at Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) are reinvigorating calls for reform at the troubled school district. These calls are now coming from unlikely sources such as the broader news media and the governor, both of which have spent years providing cover for the failing school district.

I would have thought that calls for cleaning house at MPS would have begun after WPR reported that nearly 1,000 students in the district did not attend a single day of school last year. Or the fact that chronic mismanagement led the Department of Health Services to suspend MPS from the Head Start program. Or that despite all of these scandals, the MPS superintendent was the highest-paid administrator in the state, making nearly double the governor's salary.

That same superintendent's resignation last week is only a start. My hope is that these scandals lead to an overhaul of Milwaukee's public education system that I have spent the past decade calling for.

Among peer districts, MPS has some of the lowest student outcomes in the nation. According to data from the Department of Public Instruction, not a single student tested proficient in math in nine Milwaukee schools. This is unacceptable!

At the same time, MPS is one of the best-funded districts for its size in the entire nation. How can we justify this abysmal performance when MPS is showered with such substantial funding? The answer appears to lie in a pervasive culture of mismanagement. For example, instead of channeling resources into the classroom, MPS spent years squandering millions of dollars on maintaining vacant school buildings throughout Milwaukee. Why is MPS spending so much on empty buildings? The goal is obvious: to keep these properties out of the hands of private schools that could potentially lure students away by offering a better education. This is not just financial mismanagement—it is a moral failing. It is a betrayal of our children's right to quality education and a blatant disregard for the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

Compared to other large districts in the state, Milwaukee has the highest proportion of non-teaching staff by far. Only 37% of MPS staff are involved in instruction, far below the other large school districts in the state. Yet despite its legions of administrative staff, their excuse for being eight months behind on their data reporting is understaffing in the finance department!

We need urgent and comprehensive reform. Our children deserve better than a system that prioritizes property over pupils. We must hold MPS accountable for its spending and outcomes. We need greater transparency in how funds are allocated and used. We must demand that every dollar is spent with the sole aim of improving student achievement.

Members of the legislature have spent a decade or more sounding the alarm, only to have Governor Evers and the Department of Public Instruction continue to cover for the district. Now that scandals

have emerged that not even the governor can spin, he has proposed an audit of MPS to be conducted by a third party under his control. Given that MPS continued its decline during the governor's tenure as Superintendent of Public Instruction, putting the "education governor" in charge of assembling an audit is like having the fox guard the henhouse. I agree with the legislature's proposal of an audit by the nonpartisan Legislative Audit Bureau, which just received a national award for excellence in performance auditing.

Everyone in the state should be watching the mismanagement at MPS with horror. MPS has revealed that it cannot solve its problems on its own, and no amount of money can make up for such egregiously failed leadership. If outside help fails to resolve these problems, then we need to consider more drastic moves such as breaking up MPS into multiple, more manageable districts.