

**A MICAH EDUCATION COMMITTEE  
POSITION PAPER  
*Mayoral Control of Milwaukee Public Schools***

The idea of a mayoral control of MPS is a constant topic in pronouncements by the business community and the mainstream media. Responding to a chorus of calls from community power brokers, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation recently commissioned a report by the Public Policy Forum. This report, entitled “School District Governance Reform: The Devil Is in the Details”, focuses on school district takeovers, using five systems similar in size to MPS for comparison. The study concludes that there is no successful uniform model, that the particular identity of each mayor makes a great difference, and that governance reform is a long, complicated, and unpredictable process. Most tellingly, the report concludes with this summation:

*“The bottom line is that school district governance reform is messy, difficult work that requires repeated efforts over several years. In the end, governance reform in and of itself may result in improvement in a district’s fiscal condition, but may not have sustainable impacts on student achievement, especially of low-income and minority students.”*

According to the media sales pitch, mayoral control would aim specifically to impact low-income and minority achievement. To us, this appears to be yet another in a long series of “silver bullet” reforms that, following initial hype, recede from public consciousness after the promised dramatic results fail to materialize. Seeing the mixed results of other similar experiments, state legislative approval of a mayoral takeover might just be purchase of another pig in a poke.

Mayoral control, say its advocates, would provide clear accountability. A mayor’s administration alone would be accountable. This might be true, or it might not, depending on the particular mayor, on city politics, and on the unseen power of big money interests. In Chicago, for example, the mayor functions as an autocrat. This year, he appointed a new ‘CEO’, as he’s called, of the 400,000 student public school system. The appointee, Ron Huberman, is a former policeman, who last headed the Chicago Transit Authority. He had no background, either by training or experience, in the field of Education. The appointed President of Daley’s appointed Board had made the mistake of advocating the naming of someone with an actual Education resume; and so he was

called into Daley's office, there to submit his abject resignation. Accountability and transparency? Not with a powerful autocratic mayor. In Chicago, schools are closed without a hearing for affected parents and teachers. One man and his viceroy reign supreme in a system where school buildings are in a state of disrepair that would be scandalous here, and where schools in President Obama's Hyde Park neighborhood have ratios of 1 teacher/no aide for 30 - 32 students. Education Secretary Arne Duncan notwithstanding, a sober look to the south is not very encouraging.

Mayoral control of schools would eliminate an elected Board. Proponents argue that school board elections have dismal turnout and that a small determined group of voters can sway an election, whereas mayoral elections have high turnout. We feel, however, that there are better, more democratic solutions available, like moving school board elections to coincide with mayoral, congressional, or even presidential elections. This would allow voters to continue to elect representatives for their local districts, keeping representation at a grassroots level. We insist that more democratic representation is better than less. Takeover advocates say that the present elected Board has only two minority directors (including the President). But three or four years ago, the Board was majority-minority. It waxes and wanes. That is how democracy works; it is not neat and it is not always as effective as autocracy. But it is our American legacy, and we value it far above facile promises of quick results. At the very least, any change in MPS governance should be done ONLY after a democratic referendum of city voters. Why would an American city want anything less?

A mayor in command could be a strong advocate for education. We agree. We also think that the mayor's influence would be better used to bring all interested parties in the community to the table to collaborate in assisting MPS. A companion piece, calling on the mayor to be a forceful advocate for community schools, accompanies this paper. This could be accomplished through appointment of an independent blue-ribbon advisory board.

Takeover could promote a standardized curriculum, say its partisans. But there is already a strong commitment on the part of MPS administration and Board President to accomplish that same end. Furthermore, "standardized curriculum" is often a code word for a grim policy of rote teaching toward standardized test results, to the detriment of things like creativity, critical thinking skills, and even recess.

**New York City schools under Mayor Bloomberg and his school czar Attorney Joel Klein have racked up some successful test scores. But education experts and New York State education officials warn that these test results are questionable: they are subject to statistical manipulation, deliberately skewed by the elimination of low-scoring populations, and enhanced by the increasing ease and predictability of state standardized tests. (“Mayor Bloomberg’s Crib Sheet,” by Diane Ravitch, NY Times, 4/10/09; and “New York City’s Elementary and Middle Schoolers Show Gains,” by Javier Hernandez, NY Times 6/2/09). The New York State Senate approved the renewal of Bloomberg’s authority on August 7, 2009, with changes providing for greater parental and community involvement, independent fiscal review, local hearing relative to school closings, and the like. This approval had been delayed for months while Bloomberg resisted any changes to his authority.**

**The Public Policy Forum’s report shows that some school systems have experienced better fiscal management after takeovers. The systems highlighted in the report, however, were financial basket cases, with fiscal management problems the like of which we have not seen in Milwaukee. A recent headline-grabbing study of MPS spending practices never asserted mismanagement even while it questioned spending choices. New Board President Michael Bonds is a fiscal management expert intent on tightening spending policies and procedures.**

**The contention that state or mayoral control could bring in more funding is clearly obsolete in this time of universal deficits and budget cuts. The State is currently slashing its promised commitment to education funding.**

**Exasperation is a big factor in desire for change. Some say that any change is better than the status quo. We sympathize with people’s frustration. But urban problems, like unemployment, poverty, poor health care, drug and alcohol addiction, violence, and family breakdown seem to be intractable. City authorities like the Mayor and Common Council struggle continually to get a handle on these problems. Why would their taking on the closely linked problems of a big urban school system promise new success?**

**In conclusion, it is our conviction that the business community, whose viewpoint is well represented in the media, is motivated strongly by the desire to have an urban work force with decent basic math and reading skills at its disposal. If arts**

**education, the sciences and social studies, critical thinking skills, grassroots democratic governance, and even the joy of learning are sacrificed to the idol of test-driven instruction, then we will have abandoned the vision of public education guaranteed by our state constitution and enshrined in our American heritage. We think this would be a grave mistake.**