

Defend public schools, our children, our democracy

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This op-ed was submitted by 11 leaders of community and education organizations in Milwaukee.

We need communitywide discussion and action to protect the future of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

We welcome input from all who believe in and support quality public education for all children.

We represent thousands of parents, community members and educators who have been working - and will continue to work - to ensure that all children receive a first-class education comparable to anywhere else in the state.

A Jan. 20 [Crossroads op-ed](#) by the executive board of Milwaukee Succeeds highlights the need to secure a sound financial future for MPS and to develop guiding principles for educating all the children in this city.

The initiative, however, was noticeably and disturbingly top-down, developed behind closed doors. Does Milwaukee need yet another policy mandate with vague and arbitrary "guiding principles" that ignore Milwaukee's hypersegregation, poverty and joblessness? That ignore the fundamental and inherent differences between public, voucher and charter schools?

Any discussion of the future of public education in this city requires input from all key stakeholders, in particular people who live in Milwaukee and people who are part of the MPS community, from staff to parents to students.

We believe that any set of guiding principles also must include the following:

All schools in Milwaukee that receive public funds must adhere to Wisconsin's open meetings/open records laws to ensure full transparency and accountability. The public must have access to information such as the percentage of students in poverty, English language learners, special education students, suspensions, expulsions, teacher certification, content of curricula and so forth.

All schools in Milwaukee that receive public funds must respect the constitutional rights of students and staff (for example, rights of due process and freedom of speech). They also must adhere to state anti-discrimination laws in areas such as sexual orientation or pregnancy.

All schools in Milwaukee that receive public funds must respect the language needs of students and must adhere to federal and state protections for English language learners. In particular, we must maintain and develop strong bilingual programs for the city's growing Latino community.

All schools in Milwaukee that receive public funds should serve all children, including children with disabilities. This also means they should accommodate the needs of all children with disabilities and not exclude, expel or counsel such children out of the school.

All children in Milwaukee deserve a rich curriculum, including a comprehensive academic program and art,

music, physical education and access to school libraries.

We should establish a moratorium on new charter schools that are part of national franchises. Our precious educational dollars should be kept in the community, not sent out of state.

We must develop a regional discussion on hypersegregation in Milwaukee and how such hypersegregation negatively affects not only education but jobs, transportation, housing and health care.

For the past two decades, education reform in Milwaukee has been dominated by consumer-based, privatization initiatives. They have not worked. The Milwaukee Succeeds op-ed repackages school privatization as a call for a "unified education agenda." But, at its heart, school privatization is a disservice to our children and our democracy.

We must improve our public schools. But we also must defend the constitutional right to a free, public education for all children. A truly public education means more than funneling tax dollars to private voucher schools and semiprivate charter schools that operate outside of expected norms of public oversight and accountability - and that undermine the very survival of MPS.

MPS is the only educational institution in this city that has the capacity, commitment and legal obligation to serve all of Milwaukee's children.

We look forward to conversations that include all the stakeholders in this community, that protect the rights of all and that recognize the inherent bond between strong public schools and a strong democracy.

This was submitted by Christopher Ahmuty, ACLU of Wisconsin executive director; Jasmine Alinder, board president of Parents for Public Schools of Milwaukee; Tony Baez, Centro Hispano Milwaukee executive director; the Rev. Willie Brisco, Milwaukee Inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope president; James Hall, NAACP Milwaukee Branch president; Marva Herndon, chair of Women Committed to an Informed Community; Robert Kraig, Citizen Action of Wisconsin executive director; Larry Miller, Milwaukee School Board vice president; Christine Neumann-Ortiz, Voces de la Frontera executive director; Bob Peterson, Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association president; and Milwaukee School Board member Annie Woodward.

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