

Rebuilding our Schools, our Communities and our Democracy

By Bob Peterson (*Published in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, March 2, 2014*)

There is an inherent link between strong public schools, healthy communities, and a vibrant democracy. In Milwaukee, all are endangered.

We cannot rebuild our Milwaukee Public Schools without rebuilding our neighborhoods. Our public schools, in turn, are essential to that rebuilding. But only if we preserve our schools as democratic institutions connected to the community.

Long before the powers-that-be abandoned our public schools, they abandoned our communities. It is time to call a halt to the politics of abandonment.

For more than a quarter century, what has been the status quo in Milwaukee? Ignoring segregation. Standing by while job growth bypasses the city and is centered in the suburbs. Living in denial about the need for regional mass transit. Taking money away from public schools and funneling tax dollars into private voucher schools and privately run charter schools. The list could go on.

To rebuild MPS, we need a new vision. Yet what is being promoted? So-called turnaround plans and a proliferation of privately run schools — which undermine democratic control of our schools and do nothing to improve academic achievement.

We do not need precious local dollars channeled to national McFranchise charter chains, whether Rocketship, KIPP or Universal Schools. We cannot afford to squander tax dollars on over-paid national consultants who fly in on Monday, leave on Friday, and never make a lasting commitment to either our schools or the children and communities we serve.

Schools as greenhouses for both democracy and community revitalization

Our schools can — and must— be greenhouses for both democracy and community revitalization.

The Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA), working with community and parent groups, is developing initiatives to make much-needed improvements in our schools. Here are some.

- Schools as **community centers** that provide wrap-around services for children and recreation and adult education for the neighborhood.
- Schools that educate the whole child rather than turning children into mere test-takers. All schools should have libraries and strong programs in art, music, and physical education. Class sizes must be reduced, and children must have access to quality tutoring.
- Culturally responsive teaching. This includes bilingual education, learning a second language for all students, and multicultural, anti-racist teaching.

- Significant parent involvement, from supporting children at home to volunteering in classrooms and being involved in school councils. One important step — hiring parent organizers at each school.
- Policies that focus on safe schools, restorative justice, and high expectations that help students grow into caring, responsible adults.
- Stable, collaborative leadership that respect all employees, parents, and students. The revolving door of principals must end.

These goals are within our reach. MPS already has a number of high-achieving schools that we can learn from. People know of the language schools and programs in Advanced Placement and the International Baccalaureate. Here are other examples.

- Three teachers from ALBA, a teacher-led school on the south side, were recently named *People* magazine's teachers of the year. This school, among other successes, teaches all its students to be bilingual.
- MPS has the largest public Montessori program in the country, and the MPS schools have long waiting lists.
- The STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) programs, with support from the business community, have increased student achievement at high schools such as Bradley Tech and at elementary schools such as Vieau.

Rather than build on these homegrown successes, city and state powerbrokers want to turn over struggling MPS schools to out-of-state consultants or charter operators. Why not follow the example of Hopkins-Lloyd Community School?

Hopkins-Lloyd is reaching out to members of the neighborhood, and is partnering with Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope, Hepatha Lutheran Church, and Marquette University Dental School. This spring, under the auspices of the MTEA, Wisconsin Vision will provide eye screening and free glasses for all students.

MPS has many serious challenges. But we must never forget that MPS remains the only institution in this city with the capacity, commitment and legal obligation to educate **all** children.

As MPS searches for a new superintendent, it is imperative that the school board build on the strengths of the district's educators, parents, students and broader community.

It's time to say no to privatization schemes that cater to out-of-state educational entrepreneurs. Our children, our schools and our democracy are not for sale.

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