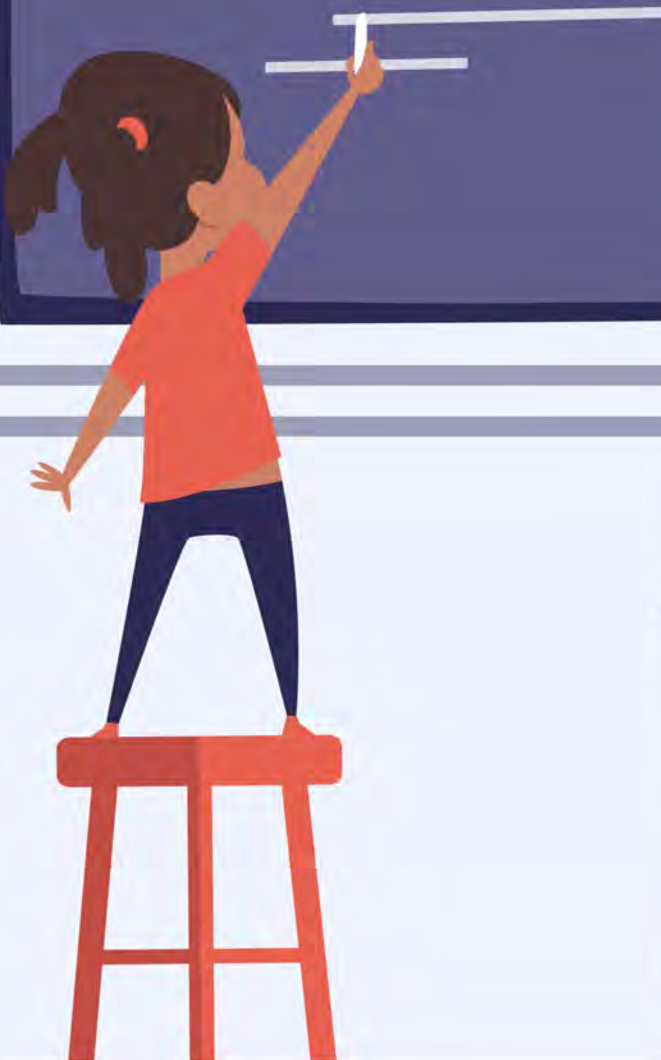
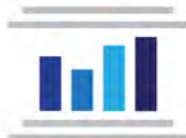
RAISING THE BAR

Local and National Lessons for Milwaukee's K-12 Schools





WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

ABOUT THE WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

The Wisconsin Policy Forum was created on January 1, 2018, by the merger of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum and the Madison-based Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. Throughout their lengthy histories, both organizations engaged in nonpartisan, independent research and civic education on fiscal and policy issues affecting state and local governments and school districts in Wisconsin. WPF is committed to those same activities and that spirit of nonpartisanship.

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the second and last in a series on Milwaukee's education ecosystem and is the successor to *Roll Call: A Landscape Review of the Students, Financing, and Performance of Milwaukee's K-12 Schools*, published in August 2024. We wish to acknowledge and thank the Northwestern Mutual Foundation for its generous support of *Roll Call* and through the initial stages of research for *Raising the Bar* via the funding of a dedicated research fellow, Robert Rauh. His participation allowed us to complement the Forum's research expertise with the experience of a respected Milwaukee education leader. In addition, we would like to thank the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and Lannon Stone Foundation for their general support of the Forum's education research.

We further offer gratitude to the organizations and individuals who shared their time, talent, and thoughtfulness through many hours of meetings, draft report reviews, and interviews. School leaders across Milwaukee and civic leaders in many of the national centers highlighted in this report were exceedingly generous with their time and insights. Most particularly, our study advisory committee members (listed in Appendix A) provided diverse perspectives and critical feedback throughout the development and execution of this research. The analysis offered in this report, however, should be attributed to the Wisconsin Policy Forum alone.

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Report authors:

Sara R. Shaw, Deputy Research Director
Jason Stein, President

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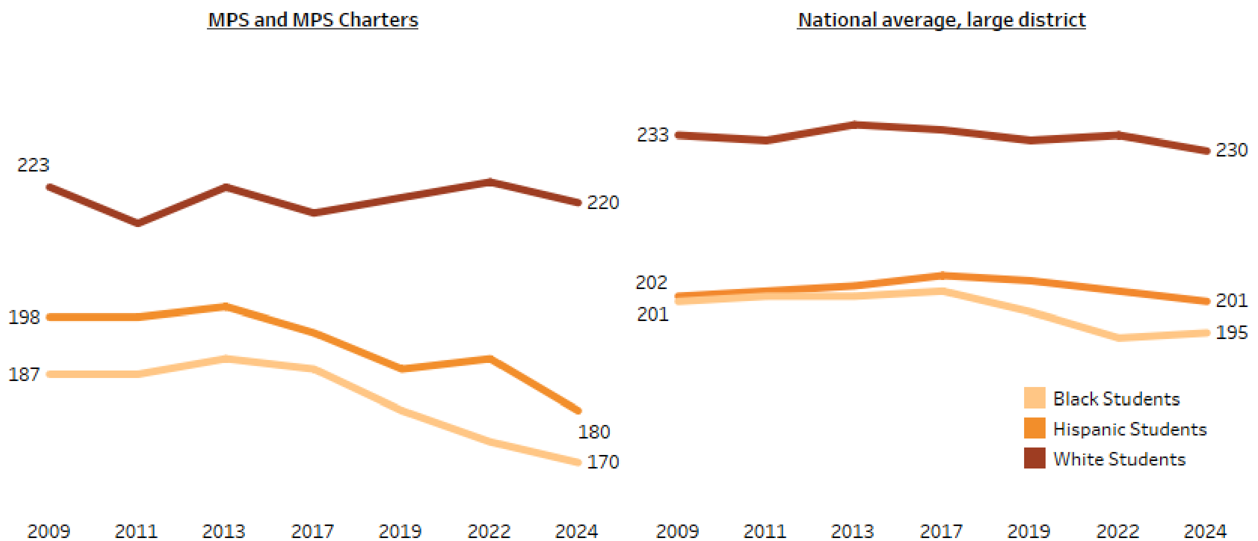
INTRODUCTION

In August 2024, the Wisconsin Policy Forum published *Roll Call: A Landscape Review of the Students, Financing, and Performance of Milwaukee's K-12 Schools*. Coming decades after a series of state laws established multiple publicly funded education sectors in the city, and one decade after the Forum last took stock of the resulting landscape in a two-part series, *Roll Call* was intended to ground policy discussions with key facts and nonpartisan insights on Milwaukee's schooling system. The report looked at the Milwaukee Public Schools, charter schools, and private choice programs and their respective students, funding, and academic outcomes.

The result was a sobering picture on nearly all fronts. Milwaukee is home to a declining student population with high levels of need compared to the rest of the state and country. The enrollment declines have placed financial pressure on the system, since Wisconsin schools receive the majority of their funding on a per-pupil basis and face challenges in adjusting their operations to serve fewer students. In particular, Milwaukee has yet to see a meaningful decrease in the number of schools serving the city's children.

Most concerning of all were our findings about school performance and student outcomes. Although schooling options for Milwaukee families – especially for low-income families of color – have increased greatly since the 1990s, outcomes for children have not transformed. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city's schools were showing some improvement against multiple metrics but remained far below the progress that proponents of the changes had envisioned. The pandemic then erased most of those small gains. Both before and after the pandemic, the majority of Milwaukee students did not attend highly rated schools. Wide disparities in reading and math scores persisted and indeed worsened post-pandemic, particularly between Black and white students (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Milwaukee's Gap Between White and Non-White Students Widens
Average fourth grade reading score*, Milwaukee versus national large city average



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Note: score is out of a possible 500 points. The minimum score for achieving "basic" is 208; the minimum score for achieving "proficient" is 238. Average large district includes public school students within all U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more (including MPS).

In response to these most troubling findings, this report turns its attention to the levers and strategies that might improve academic results for Milwaukee students. To identify these

approaches, we first examined the Milwaukee schools at which students score above the city's norm. We identified these schools using both achievement scores and growth scores from the 2023 Report Card issued by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). These scores allowed us to compare students' knowledge and skills and how much they have grown compared to their peers. We further conducted key informant interviews with a sampling of these schools' leaders, identifying common themes that may inform the work to improve schools across Milwaukee.

Next, we turned our attention outward: What successful efforts occurring *outside* of Milwaukee might merit consideration? We used the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to identify districts that share some key characteristics with Milwaukee but have produced stronger outcomes for students over time. Using national and local coverage of the school improvement efforts in these locations, in addition to further key informant interviews, we identified a selection of promising practices and innovations. We then considered whether and how these efforts might work best in Milwaukee.

Our report concludes by synthesizing our findings on Milwaukee's challenges from *Roll Call* with these new local and national lessons and by laying out themes and policy options for action. We hope these options will prove useful to policymakers and concerned residents hoping to chart a new path forward for the city's schools and its children.

Terminology: the most popular K-12 schooling options in Milwaukee

Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) –The "traditional" public schools that are staffed by district employees, governed by an elected school board, and subject to all state and federal regulations related to public schools. Together, they comprise the local school district for students who live within the city of Milwaukee and by law must serve these students.

Milwaukee Charter Schools – Independently operated, secular schools considered public institutions under the law. Charter schools operate with more autonomy than traditional public schools, in exchange for which authorizers regularly review their performance, finances, and compliance with the law. In Milwaukee, charter schools can be authorized by MPS, the Common Council of the city of Milwaukee, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), or Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), although MATC has never exercised this authority. Charter schools authorized by the city or UWM are considered "independent charters." Charter schools authorized by MPS but run by an outside entity are called "non-instrumentality charters" and operate in a similar fashion to the independent charters. (Charter schools that are both authorized and run by MPS are called "instrumentality charters." Since they function more like traditional public schools, they are grouped with other MPS schools for the purposes of this report.)

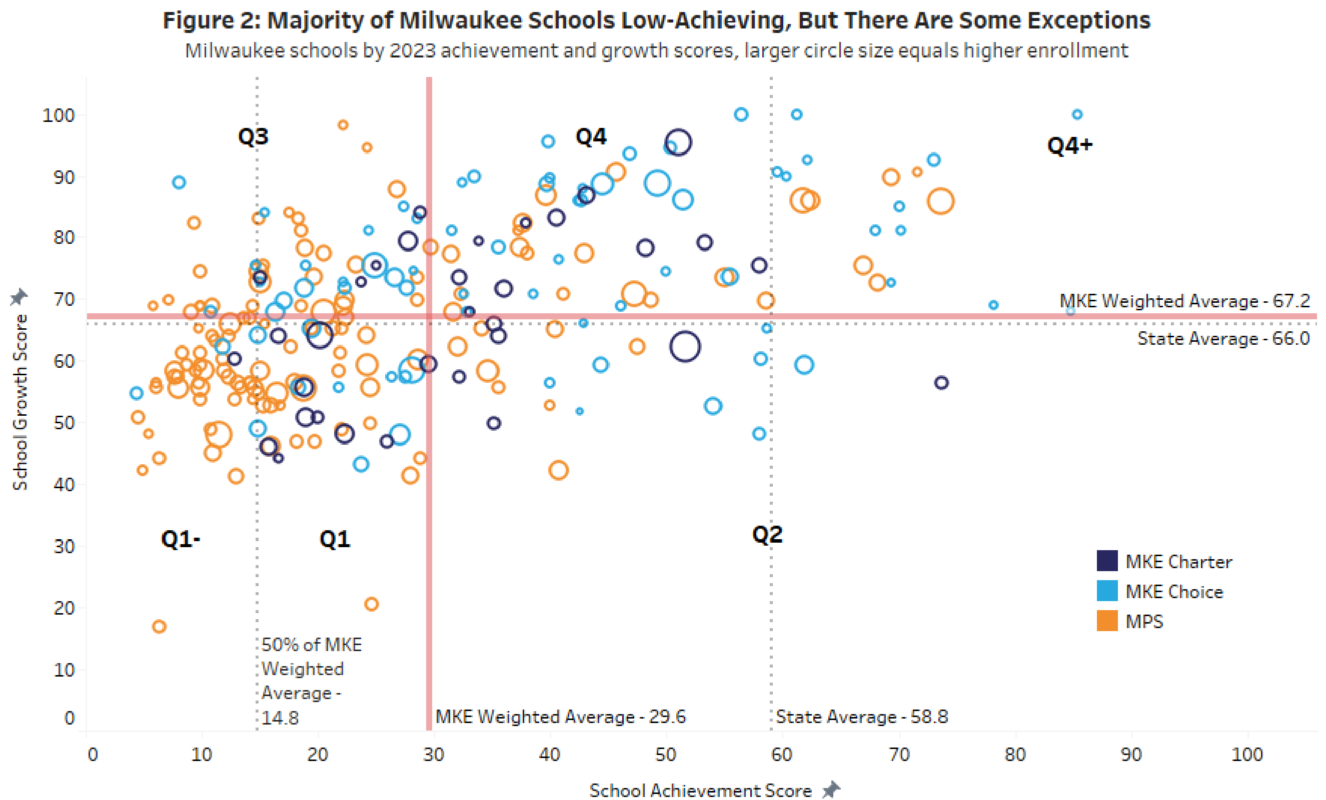
Private Choice Programs – Taxpayer-funded, state-administered programs that provide tuition vouchers for students to enroll at private schools, either religious or secular. Eligible students must meet residency and income requirements. Private schools participating in the choice programs are subject to more regulation than other private schools but substantially less than traditional public and charter schools. Academic outcome data presented in this report for the private choice programs includes any student attending a private school located in Milwaukee city boundaries via the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the Racine Parental Choice Program, or the statewide Wisconsin Parental Choice Program.

LOCAL EXEMPLARS DEMONSTRATE THE POSSIBLE

The first proof that Milwaukee schools could offer different outcomes for the city's children comes from Milwaukee schools themselves. Although Milwaukee schools struggle overall, the positive outliers demonstrate that alternative outcomes are possible within the city and offer insights into what it may take to improve outcomes for all children.

Some Milwaukee schools stand out positively

The city and its three K-12 schooling sectors – the traditional public schools of MPS, charter schools, and private choice programs – offer a wide range of academic outcomes for their students. Figure 2 illustrates this range on a scatterplot, in which the city's average growth and achievement scores form red gridlines dividing Milwaukee's schools into four quadrants using 2023 Report Card data from DPI. Those schools scoring the highest on both achievement and growth will be our primary focus as "exemplary schools" within the Milwaukee context, though the other school types are worthy of brief discussion as well.



A discouragingly large portion of Milwaukee schools (39.0% in 2023) is in the "low growth, low achievement" quadrant located in the bottom left of the scatterplot, indicating the depth and breadth of Milwaukee's educational crisis. We further split this quadrant to show the schools that are

more than 50% lower than the city's average for achievement. These are "Quadrant 1 minus" (Q1-) schools, while the rest are "Quadrant 1" (Q1) schools.

The "low growth, higher achievement" schools located to the right of and below the scatterplot's red gridlines, in Quadrant 2 (Q2), are the least common, representing 9.8% of Milwaukee schools in 2023. A community may be less concerned with the ability of these schools' students to read or do math than their Q1 counterparts, but may still ask questions about how the school could more effectively support students' growth. (Concerns about achievement may also remain when many Q2 schools still score below the state's average.)

Quadrant 3 (Q3) schools, located in the upper left-hand corner of the scatterplot, are the inverse of Q2 schools: "high growth, low achievement." In 2023, 22.0% of Milwaukee schools were Q3 schools,

Background and Methodology: Our Use of School Report Cards

DPI issues annual report cards for every publicly-funded school in the state. These report cards use multiple metrics to assign overall accountability ratings out of 100 points to each school. Our analysis focuses on two critical metrics to capture key dimensions of student learning and success:

Achievement – students' level of knowledge and skills in English Language Arts and math as measured on the Forward exam (for grades 3-8) or ACT suite (for grades 9-11). Scores are out of 100 points.

Growth – the annual change in student achievement compared to peers. Scores are out of 100 points.

We used 2023 Report Card data on growth and achievement to locate Milwaukee schools on a graph cut into quadrants using state and city averages (see Figure 2). Descriptions and score ranges for each quadrant are below. The state average for achievement in 2023 was 58.8, and the state average for growth was normed at 66. The weighted average for achievement in Milwaukee's schools in 2023 was 29.6. For growth, the 2023 weighted average among Milwaukee's schools was 67.2. Milwaukee schools without demographic data, growth scores, or achievement scores were excluded from this analysis. We did not use 2024 Report Card data due to the timing of its release relative to the data work behind this report, and because we and the public are still learning the full implications of changes to 2024 student assessment cut scores and Report Card scores.

Quadrant description	Milwaukee schools, students contained	Achievement score range	Growth score range
Q4+: Schools that scored *above* the state average in both achievement and growth	19 schools 7.0% of students	58.8 – 100.0	66.0 – 100.0
Q4: Schools that scored *above* the city average in both achievement and growth but are not Q4+ schools	50 schools 21.8% of students	29.6 – 58.8	67.3 – 100.0
Q3: Schools that scored *above* the city average for growth but *below* the city average for achievement	52 schools 19.5% of students	0.0 – 29.5	67.3 – 100.0
Q2: Schools that scored *below* the city average for growth but *above* the city average for achievement	23 schools 10.2% of students	29.6 – 100.0	0.0 – 67.2
Q1: Schools that scored *below* the city average for both growth and achievement but are not Q1- schools (see next row)	48 schools 24.5% of students	14.8 – 29.5	0.0 – 67.2
Q1-: Schools that scored *below* the city average for growth and *below* 50% of the city average for achievement	44 schools 17.1% of students	0.0 – 14.7	0.0 – 67.2

in which student improvement surpassed peer growth in both the city and the state. Despite this growth, however, students' achievement remained below the city's average.

Finally, the remaining 29.2% of Milwaukee schools are located in the upper right-hand quadrant of the scatterplot, representing the city's "high growth, higher achievement" schools. We divide these schools into Quadrant 4 (Q4) and "Quadrant 4 plus" (Q4+). Students at Q4 schools grew more and scored higher on achievement than their Milwaukee peers, though they remained below the statewide average for achievement. Students at Q4+ schools not only grew more than their peers but also scored above the statewide achievement average.

These Q4 and Q4+ schools are of greatest interest for our quest for "bright spots" in Milwaukee, and, encouragingly, they make up the second-largest proportion of schools in the city after Q1 and Q1-minus combined. We approach them with caution, however, aware of the role that student characteristics can play in outcomes. As *Roll Call* previously discussed, student groups are not represented evenly across Milwaukee schools by their overall Report Card rating. In particular, students identified with disabilities, students classified as economically disadvantaged, and Black students in Milwaukee were most likely to attend the city's poorly rated schools from 2017 to 2023. In addition, MPS students educated in concentrated poverty and segregation, with 80% or more of their classmates classified as economically disadvantaged and as a single race (so-called 80/80 schools), were likely to attend a poorly rated school.

Conversely, the city's highest performing high schools were more likely to educate a student body that was more integrated, more affluent, and with fewer students identified with disabilities than other city schools. They were also more likely to practice selective admissions. These data led us to conclude that some schools' relatively stronger results might reflect "their particular student population or other structural differences, as opposed to primarily crediting success to the quality of instruction and operations."

The same challenges of interpretation exist here. Q4 does contain 80/80 schools – specifically, 20 out of the 50 in 2023, which included 11 schools serving a majority of Hispanic students and nine schools serving a majority of Black students. Yet, these schools still represent the minority of Q4 schools. The underrepresentation is exacerbated in Q4+, where only one school was classified as 80/80 using 2023 data. As a result, the existence of 80/80 schools in Q4 and Q4+ illustrates both the possibility and the additional challenge of achieving strong results in Milwaukee when serving less advantaged student groups. We strive in the remainder of our analysis to assign the most weight to those lessons emerging from Q4 and Q4+ schools that are also 80/80 schools, in hopes that they best represent what could be possible for the rest of the city.[1]

Common characteristics of high-growth, higher achieving schools in Milwaukee

In examining the list of Q4 and Q4+ schools in Milwaukee, we found a wide range of school types and options, with representation across MPS, charter schools, and private schools, and across the city geographically. The smallest school served 103 students, while the largest served over 1,300 students.

[1] The full list of Q4 and Q4+ schools for 2023 is available in Appendix B. Schools that serve at least 80% economically disadvantaged students and at least 80% students of a single race are marked in *italics*.

Amid this diversity, some commonalities emerged. They were not exclusive, however – that is, not all schools with these characteristics were Q4 or Q4+ schools, and there was no single characteristic shared across all Q4 and Q4+ schools. Moreover, these commonalities as listed are meant to be descriptive rather than conclusive; they may or may not have a direct relationship to the factors driving success at these schools.

First, as already denoted, the Q4+ schools in 2023 served a population that was not representative of the city as a whole. Out of the 19 schools, nine educated a student body that was less than 50% economically disadvantaged,[2] and white students comprised the majority of the student body at seven of the schools. For comparison, previous Forum analysis found that all three publicly-funded sectors in Milwaukee served, on average, at least 75% economically disadvantaged students and at least 90% students of color in 2023. The Q4 schools reflected this citywide average much more closely, serving 77.3% economically disadvantaged students and 88.6% students of color.

At 18 schools across Q4 and Q4+, no single racial or ethnic student group made up a majority of the student body. Racial and economic segregation was still common in Q4 and Q4+ but by a much smaller degree than among the city as a whole: 30.4% of Q4 and Q4+ schools were 80/80 schools, compared to 50.0% of all Milwaukee schools. Schools without a racial or ethnic majority made up 26.1% of all Q4 and Q4+ schools, compared to 12.7% of schools in Milwaukee at large. The 18 racially integrated Q4 and Q4+ schools comprised over half of the city's 30 total schools without a racial or ethnic majority.[3]

Serving less disadvantaged student populations can mean that a school faces fewer challenges in providing a high-quality education. Integration has received particular national attention as a school improvement strategy that can effectively distribute community resources. In a city with a small and shrinking white youth population, however, it may have limited large-scale viability absent efforts that would involve other districts or major demographic shifts.

Beyond demographics, the combined list of 69 Q4 and Q4+ schools reveals some commonalities in their structure and programming. We identified 23 schools that operate as part of a network of schools, in which an umbrella leadership organization manages multiple school buildings or campuses.[4] These networks exist in both the charter and the private sectors and may offer the benefits of some economies of scale, administrative support to diminish the burden on individual school leaders, proven success at one site before expansion to further sites, strong board leadership, and committed donors. Not all networks confer all of these advantages, however, and notably there are networks operating in Milwaukee that do not include any high-growth, higher achieving schools. In addition, in multiple cases, a network contained one or more Q4 or Q4+ schools but also contained schools in other quadrants. As is the case with other shared

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[2] This number may be higher; one of the remaining 10 schools contained a private choice program with participating students classified as more than 50% economically disadvantaged – but the program's students comprised only 11.8% of the full school's student body. The remainder attended on private scholarships or paid tuition to attend.

[3] Separate analysis of these 30 schools shows some common, though not defining, characteristics among them: 21 were within MPS, 23 were elementary or K-8 schools, and 19 were located on the city's south or southwest sides.

[4] DPI data rules are not consistent in distinguishing between distinct schools within the same network and multiple campuses of the same school. For example, included in the 22 network schools and 69 Q4 and Q4+ schools are four schools all affiliated with Milwaukee College Prep, each listed separately. On the other hand, Saint Marcus Lutheran School is counted as a single school in this list despite operating three distinct school locations. Therefore, the count of 22 "network schools" in the Q4 and Q4+ list is somewhat understated.

characteristics, network association therefore appears to be a theme among Milwaukee's exemplary schools but not a guarantee of success.

Another commonality across some Q4 and Q4+ schools is unity under a defined instructional purpose. National nonprofit TNTP calls this quality "coherence" – "a unified instructional program [with] set priorities that are clear to all." The most visible examples of coherence within Q4 and Q4+ were the 12 schools defined as Montessori schools, International Baccalaureate schools, or bilingual, dual language, or language immersion schools. These schools may benefit from attracting staff or students invested in that specific program, with common passion for a method of teaching and learning and common expectations of instructional rigor. Some of these schools are also selective in their admissions, either via explicit admissions criteria or, in the case of language schools requiring a prerequisite degree of fluency, by default.

After accounting for the above commonalities among most of the group, 15 Q4 and Q4+ schools remained that did not neatly fit into pre-existing categories. These schools tended to be small, with a median enrollment of 193 students in 2023. Their demographics were similar to the city's overall student enrollment, with a median student body of 83.0% economically disadvantaged students and 91.5% students of color. Nearly all (13 out of 15) served students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Finally, 13 out of 15 were private choice programs. (In total, 34.9% of the students at Q4 and Q4+ schools in 2023 were served in private choice programs, compared to 17.5% in charter schools and 47.5% in MPS.)

In all, while there was no single immediately discernible characteristic shared across Milwaukee's exemplary schools in 2023, there were some emergent themes. Schools with larger shares of more advantaged students or more integration than the city's norm; schools operating as part of a network; schools with clearly defined, rigorous, and attractive instructional programs; and small, private grade schools together comprised the vast majority of schools serving students best according to the Report Card's growth and achievement metrics. As we noted previously, however, other schools shared these characteristics on paper but did not experience the same success.

School leaders identify critical levers for success

To move beyond what quantitative data could reveal, we conducted interviews with a range of school leaders in Milwaukee to uncover further themes of what it takes to operate a successful school in the city. Our interviews focused on Q4 and Q4+ schools and particularly those classified as 80/80, as we hoped to illuminate levers that could apply regardless of a school's population. We supplemented these interviews with a focus group composed of youth representatives from the Autonomous Youth Council hosted by local nonprofit Milwaukee Succeeds.

No leader identified a single "silver bullet" as the key to their success. Most leaders, however, readily identified three or four strategies or conditions that they considered to be critical. We here summarize the six most commonly mentioned levers for success.

Unifying mission and stable staff and culture

Nearly every school we visited has a "north star" in place: a clearly articulated focus that attracts and retains committed staff and families, supports a coherent school culture, and guides leadership decision-making. At some schools, the north star is an academic program, such as dual language or International Baccalaureate. For private schools, their faith base and values may fulfill a similar role.

The choice of specific focus may be less material than the fidelity of its implementation and the level of buy-in it garners from stakeholders.

In interviews, school leaders highlighted how many of their other levers for success depend upon this critical foundation. Their staff believe in the school's mission, feel supported in enacting it, and feel invested in upholding it. As a result, they stay: In a city marked by high turnover for both teachers and principals, these exemplary schools stand out for the long tenure of their staff and leaders. At one school, not a single teacher has left in the five years of the school's existence. At another, the principal pointed to teachers who had been at the school for 15 to 20 years; he himself is in year 15 as principal and first arrived at the school as a teacher 28 years ago. While pay is a factor in this longevity, with multiple school leaders noting that they have increased salaries and offered creative perks, they also see culture as their true competitive advantage.

> "We can't compete on everything, but if we can have a good culture and get close [on pay], people will stay." – School Leader A
>
> "We have the highest expectations of teachers in the city, maybe the state, but they like the culture." – School Leader B

This consistency in personnel pays manifold dividends for culture, instruction, and relationships with families. Low turnover means fewer new staff to train on the school's north star, its processes and procedures, and what it takes to support student and school success. When new teachers do start, they benefit from the wraparound support of the veterans. When the school takes on a new initiative, it does so from a common base. One school leader gave an example: "Everyone already understands the concept of backwards planning. Even when we take on a new curriculum, we have that [shared] background." Families gain familiarity and therefore trust with staff and leaders, contributing to a positive culture and often yielding another form of consistency: strong student retention, with the same students returning year after year – a phenomenon not taken for granted in the school choice environment of Milwaukee. There are even cases of former students now teaching at their old schools or sending their own children to be educated there.

High expectations paired with nurturing supports; "muscle and music"

> "We want kids who feel loved, supported, pushed, and seen." – School Leader A

Nearly all school leaders pointed to the need to set high expectations for children – academically and behaviorally – that are communicated to families and shared across staff. Some schools hired staff expressly on the basis of their alignment with the school's beliefs on this front.

Leaders were clear, however, that they matched this high bar with wraparound supports that developed the whole child. Example supports included ample social workers and counselors, lower staff-student ratios for more interaction between adults and children, colocation with a health clinic, afterschool offerings, an extended school day and year, and a range of non-core classes that allowed children to explore both their strengths and their challenges. When children struggle, leaders draw

upon a range of interventions designed to meet their needs and put them back on track. At a few schools, formal programs continued even after graduation, supporting students' long-term success.

The phrase "muscle and music," popularized by longtime Milwaukee education reporter Alan Borsuk, captured this blend of rigor and joyful caring for many interviewed leaders. One spoke of "unleashing" both students' and teachers' passion as a powerful strategy for making a school a welcoming place. Another stated that her school was built around the "and": "Academic excellence *and* serving the whole child."

School leaders did acknowledge cases in which communicating and enforcing their high expectations could effectively (if not intentionally) result in screening or counseling out families from the school. From the perspective of some leaders, these cases were counterbalanced by examples of families for whom the high expectations were an activating force, inspiring them to raise their own expectations for themselves and for school. Yet, it is worth noting overall that the more autonomy a school has over its enrollment processes, the more opportunity exists for this form of selectivity, which might serve as a barrier to broad implementation across the city.

Commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement

High expectations do not solely apply to students at the schools we visited. They also extend to rigorous standards for teachers. Similar to their approach with students, however, these standards do not leave teachers to flounder while attempting to reach them. Instead, the schools cultivate a staff-wide growth mindset and employ processes that support teachers' continuous improvement. Coaching and professional development occur frequently and are often focused either on schoolwide priorities or individual or team development needs, with particular emphasis on improving instruction.

"I'm not going to have you do a training and then not practice." – School Leader C, recounting his hands-on approach to staff professional development

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To get to high-quality instruction, many school leaders strategically focused their efforts. At one network of schools, this meant identifying "anchor standards" for every grade – that is, prioritizing the most important knowledge and skills that students should gain in each grade, and then ensuring that teachers knew what grade-level attainment of those standards looked like. Multiple schools employ a "response to intervention" approach, in which classroom teachers offer pedagogically strong instruction to all students while also providing additional support to targeted students through systems like a personalized learning lab or small group instruction with a dedicated teacher.

Our youth focus group, which included both high school and postsecondary youth, emphasized that high-quality instruction, especially in the later grades, includes connecting school learning to their interests and future career prospects. A high school leader echoed this point, noting, "We have something for every student no matter where they want to go."

Data-driven decision-making undergirds much of this continuous improvement and differentiation work. Teachers and school leaders use informal and formal assessments to understand what students know and how to best support them. Schools track their progress towards goals to see whether they are on track and where they need to change tack. One school leader checks

attendance data every morning and calls parents individually to find out where missing kids are. Another summarized, “Typically, we see the data follow where we focus,” meaning that school leadership track key metrics and observe the most progress on the metrics directly aligned with their identified focus areas.

Proactive, intentional family engagement

When asked about levers for success, multiple school leaders named family engagement as the very first critical element. As one leader routinely said at parent-teacher conferences, “The number one indicator of your child’s success will be how well we at the school and you as parents are aligned.”

Instead of assuming that the onus to engage lies with families, these schools take it as their responsibility to reach out and to foster a welcoming school environment. One school set up a parent hub stocked with coffee and treats across the hallway from the youngest classrooms, where parents still walk their children in for drop-off (the school does not offer busing). MPS received praise for its parent coordinators, who are stationed at every school as dedicated liaisons between school and home. Bilingual staff at schools serving families who speak a native language other than English are valuable for welcoming families. Various schools set goals for 100% parent-teacher conference participation and adopt a “whatever it takes” attitude for hitting that goal.

> “Families help our students’ success.” – School Leader C

The city’s choice environment means that some of these schools benefit from buy-in from parents before students even walk in the door: Parents have made an intentional choice to send their child to that specific school. Even in those cases, however, school leaders emphasized the need to communicate their high expectations and to build relationships with families from the beginning. One such school conducts home visits for every newly enrolled child. Others hold back-to-school meetings focused on mutual family-school commitments and parental empowerment.

Parental empowerment can mean both “treat[ing] parents as the primary educators,” as one school leader named, and acknowledging that schools can be learning sites for parents as well as for students. One school holds regular parent education events on topics like literacy supports at home and healthy routines to build around school. At another school, teachers upload homework directly to a site that parents can access and encourage parents to ask specific questions about school to their children as part of strengthening the home-school connection.

Our youth focus group emphasized the importance of these relationships between teachers, families, and students by highlighting how often they witnessed “disconnect” between home and school. Specific examples included hearing teachers say that parents do not listen to them or believe their accounts of how a student behaved at school, or parents who did not appear to know or care how much school their children were missing. Several current and former students expressed a wish for stronger connections and saw them as critical to resolving student concerns and supporting students with appropriate resources.

Additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships

School leaders across the various sectors noted that they rely on external support to offer their high level of programming. This support might take the form of fundraising or partnerships. One MPS principal referred to a local foundation as "our partner from day one. We wouldn't sustain our programming without that funding." A number of private school leaders expressed appreciation for the 2023-25 state budget increase for private choice programs while also noting that state funding alone remains insufficient to cover costs.

Multiple leaders referred to professional networks of support, like regular lunches with colleagues in other schools or the MPS program that pairs retired principals with current assistant principals as leadership mentors. Still, a couple of leaders expressed a desire for more professional collaborations and relationships between school and community.

"We could still use more community partnerships, instead of all of us trying to do it all ourselves on islands." – School Leader D

School-level autonomy, accountability, and support

Few school leaders explicitly raised the importance of being able to make their own decisions over staffing, curriculum, use of time, or other resources, perhaps because this autonomy was built into the foundational conditions of many schools by virtue of their private or charter status. Even the MPS schools highlighted had greater levels of autonomy than other traditional MPS schools due to their specialized programs.

As leaders described their work, however, the value of control over school-level decisions shone through. Some school leaders chose to extend the school day or school year in order to increase the amount of instruction or wraparound services available to students. Others pointed to deliberative in-house curriculum selection processes to align with the school's instructional expectations or hopes for cultural responsiveness. Multiple school leaders spoke of the importance of being able to choose their own staff and then design professional development – often led by teachers themselves, promoting their agency and growth – that aligned with the school's expectations and goals. Autonomy in budgeting allowed leaders to weigh tradeoffs of financial decisions. For example, one school regularly considers offering busing but each year chooses to allocate those dollars to additional staff instead.

"There are a few things that we do different...but they pay off greatly." – School Leader E

The opportunity to make these critical decisions appeared to contribute to school leaders' sense of ownership over their schools' ultimate success or failure. Indeed, although external accountability rarely came up in conversations with these exemplary schools (none of which are currently at risk of state or local consequences for underperformance), leaders were quick to acknowledge when they felt that they could still be doing more for children. In some cases, they pointed to actions they were

already taking internally to address specific issues; in others, they felt that additional monetary resources or partnerships would be necessary to elevate their work further.

This balance between the need for both support and accountability – whether internal or external – is perhaps an under-appreciated complement to school-level autonomy. These leaders do not necessarily want *all* decisions to fall upon their shoulders. One school leader expressed gratitude for his school's supporting backbone organization, which handled many administrative issues and allowed the principal to focus on the decisions that would most impact the school's success. This background support ultimately increased the principal's sense of ownership and accountability, since it removed distractions and emphasized what work was within his locus of control.

Challenges to success

These levers for success – unifying mission, stable staff and culture, high expectations paired with nurturing supports, commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement, proactive and intentional family engagement, additional capacity, and school-level support, autonomy, and accountability – are unlikely to surprise educators or education policymakers. Many of them align with what many would consider to simply be "good schooling" and with national research on the topic. To take one recent example, the national nonprofit TNTP recently published "The Opportunity Makers," a report on the qualities shared across the small percentage of U.S. schools that effectively catch up students who have fallen behind academically. Their conclusions, while not an exact map onto the Milwaukee school leaders' insights, share some of the same themes:

Table 1: Locally Identified Strategies for School Success Align with National Research

Exemplary Milwaukee School Levers for Success	TNTP's Qualities and Actions of "Trajectory-Changing Schools"
Unifying mission and stable staff and culture	Coherence: "Schools build a unified instructional program and set priorities that are clear to all."
High expectations paired with nurturing supports	Belonging: "Schools create an emotional climate for learning that activates students' ability to excel."
Commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement	Consistency: "Schools deliver consistently good teaching and grade-level content for all students."
Proactive, intentional family engagement	
Additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships	
School-level autonomy, accountability, and support	

Source: WPF interviews with Milwaukee school leaders, "The Opportunity Makers"

While these levers may appear to be mere common sense, implementing them at a high level can be complicated and difficult, as shown by the small percentage of Milwaukee schools categorized as Q4 or Q4+. Even within our exemplary school interviews and visits, leaders named risks to their ongoing success. At schools that are not as strong to begin with, these risks compound and may ultimately compromise their ability to improve.

The school leaders we interviewed expressed the most concerns about staffing and about the ongoing challenges of Milwaukee at large that spill over into the education space. For staffing, multiple leaders identified a **"diminished" hiring pipeline**: fewer candidates applying for each available position and a lower likelihood that candidates will have the desired qualifications. One leader said that it was particularly hard to find candidates for special education, science, and math positions. Private schools and to a lesser extent charter schools may have an advantage in this

arena, since private school teachers do not need to be licensed by DPI, and charter school teacher licensure is more flexible than at traditional public schools, although MPS has its own advantage in being able to offer higher salaries. All three sectors named hiring as a concern.

Increased staff turnover following COVID-19 was also an issue for some schools that previously had strong staff retention. Previous Forum research on public schools has documented the statewide pandemic spike in teacher turnover, with Milwaukee Public Schools experiencing above-average district-level turnover in all years examined (2009 through 2023). At least one principal also worried about the level of school turnover of principals and other leaders in the city. Previous Forum research has also validated that concern, at least for public schools. The principal suggested the need for more pathways into these positions that are supported by mentoring and leadership training programs.

School leaders also feared that **deep-rooted issues** in Milwaukee ultimately placed an upper limit on their ability to provide a high-quality education for children. At one school, a case of reckless driving had caused a crash against the school's fence on the very first day of classes. Its leader reflected, "I fear that the chaos of our surroundings will negatively affect our schools." Another leader described an existential external threat: "Our communities and our kids don't have hope." For her, this lack of hope – born legitimately out of generations of not being well served – stacked the deck against students before they ever arrived at school. Another leader echoed this sentiment specifically with regard to Milwaukee's North Side.

Two leaders noted the need to **support families even before children reached school age**, identifying the time between birth and age five as a critical opportunity. While there are programs available to connect new parents to community resources, one leader observed that many parents appear unfamiliar with the "brain research on birth to five." He wished that schools and communities were better integrated, in part to facilitate stronger relationships and information-sharing, and hypothesized that more attention to family supports from policymakers would lead to greater success in schools. As one example, he pointed to the relatively high rates of health insurance coverage among Black children and wondered if the medical system could help teach parents how to best support their children's education.

Multiple people we interviewed worried about **how effectively their schools were preparing students for the next level**. Leaders of K-8 schools were not convinced that their students would thrive in high school; leaders of high schools were not convinced that their "college eligible" graduates were truly "college ready," both academically and socioemotionally. Youth in our focus group echoed this sentiment, stating that they were not as prepared for the next stage of their schooling (whether high school or college) as they thought they would be.

Other challenges to school success included:

- The ongoing **effects of COVID**, which leaders saw manifesting in a drop in family involvement, an increase in absenteeism and student mobility, decreased student engagement with school and their peers, a decline in shared decision-making between school administration and teachers, and changes in teacher behavior, including unexpected mid-year departures.
- The **relentless level of attention** required to sustain a strong school culture.
- Any **additional effort required at the high school level** to adapt – or create from scratch – materials or systems that were often designed with K-8 students and structures in mind.

- **Funding scarcity.** Leaders described every dollar as critical, believing that they could not afford to lose any money without compromising their success. They were regularly on the lookout for ways to increase revenue in order to better and more sustainably serve students. Charter and private choice leaders were especially aware of these needs due to the new MPS funding made possible through the 2020 and 2024 referenda. MPS, meanwhile, has pointed to the low state reimbursement levels for special education in particular as a financial challenge unto itself. We summarized these and other funding issues in *Roll Call*.

Applying lessons to Milwaukee as a whole

These risks and challenges are not insurmountable at Milwaukee's most successful schools but pose greater threats to schools in less favorable positions. For example, the consistency of leadership, staff, and students named in many of our interviews is a relative rarity in city schools overall. Personnel turnover, student mobility, and absenteeism are more likely to be the norm, which could disrupt even the best-led and funded initiatives.

At the same time, our interviews make it clear that it is possible to achieve better results for students regardless of school sector or student demographic makeup. The key question is how to extend those conditions and techniques for success to more schools.

An initial list of considerations could include:

- How can the city's school sectors and partners in higher education, government, nonprofits, and businesses collaborate to develop **talent pipelines** – from teachers to administrators – for all Milwaukee schools?
- How can Milwaukee's school sectors incentivize **leadership and staff stability** in schools with more challenging working conditions? How might these incentives differ between school sectors?
- How can each school sector best balance giving school leaders **autonomy and support** in making the best decisions for their schools, while also providing **accountability** if those decisions do not yield results?
- What **unique barriers do the different "quadrants"** of schools face that, if mitigated, could propel those schools closer to Q4? For example, are there common themes among the Q3 schools that illuminate how they might support students to not only high growth but also higher-than-average achievement?
- What **funding levels and sources** are necessary such that every school has access to the necessary resources? How would those levels be determined?
- How can Milwaukee as a city more effectively **stabilize students and families** – including their housing needs – to decrease the disruptive effects of student mobility and position students for a stronger starting point upon entry into the school system?

Summary: What works inside Milwaukee?

The fact that 28.8% of Milwaukee's children attended high-growth and higher achieving schools in 2023 may be interpreted both positively and negatively. On the one hand, we may be discouraged that this proportion is not higher. Even some Q4 schools feature achievement levels that still lag the statewide average. On the other hand, there are schools within Q4 and Q4+ that prove that stronger

outcomes are possible for Milwaukee students. They also offer insight into what it may take to improve outcomes in any school in the city.

Key informant interviews identified six key levers for success:

- Unifying mission and stable staff and culture
- High expectations paired with nurturing supports; “muscle and music”
- Commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement
- Proactive, intentional family engagement
- Additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships
- School-level autonomy, accountability, and support

Other sources upheld several of these levers. For example, the prevalence of network schools among the Q4 and Q4+ list affirmed the value of school leaders exercising autonomy over major decisions while also relying upon backbone institutions for support. Similarly, we identified multiple Q4 and Q4+ schools with clearly defined and rigorous instructional programs, in direct alignment with the levers associated with unifying mission and instructional excellence. The latter was also found in the recent national research out of TNTP, which terms it “coherence” and “consistency.” TNTP also named “belonging,” a close proxy for the lever related to pairing high expectations with nurturing supports.

The road to implementing these levers for success across the city is fraught, however. Even at Milwaukee’s exemplary schools, leaders expressed fears that their hard work could be undone by factors both within and outside of their control. At schools already struggling, these risks compound, especially for those serving student and family populations with more challenges. A citywide path forward may well need to include components encompassing staffing and leadership pipelines, wraparound supports for families that begin in early childhood, additional funding needs, and more.

If this seems too great a challenge for a city to wrap its arms around, the examples of Milwaukee’s finest schools remind us that change is possible one school at a time. Yet they also warn that this change may be limited if not eventually accompanied by more holistic, societal, or collective action.

NATIONAL EXAMPLES OFFER PROMISING PRACTICES

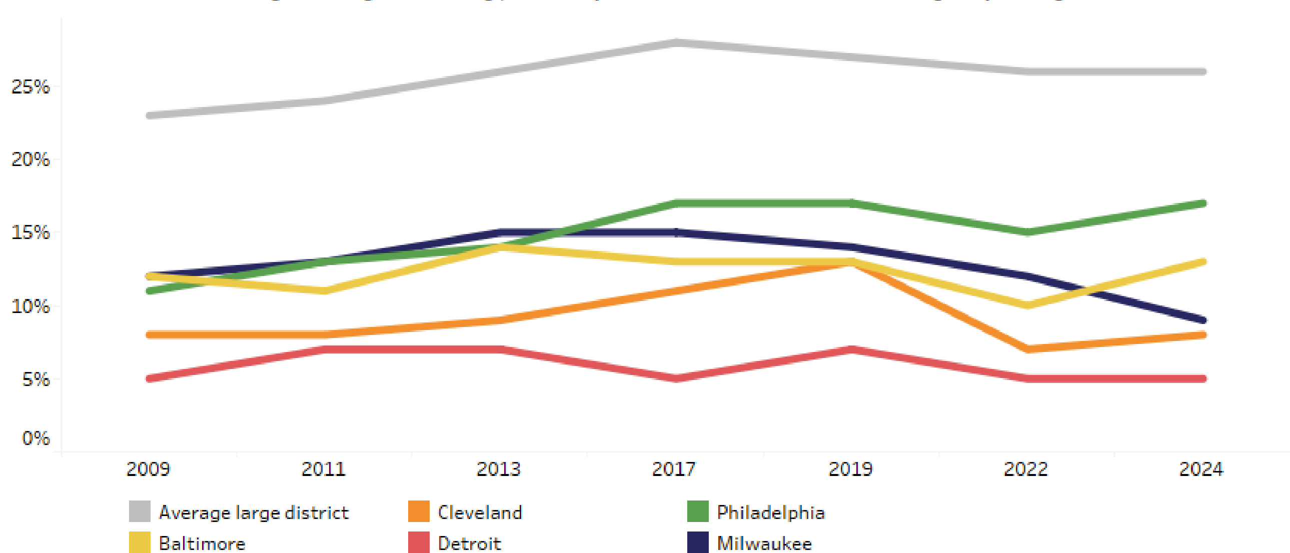
While local schools remind us of the positive results possible within Milwaukee, they largely operate as exceptions to the city's dispiriting outcomes. To examine what may be done systemwide, we next turned our attention to other cities nationally, looking for lessons for Milwaukee. All of these places test on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), providing us with comparable student performance data. Some stood out for their overall growth, while others were also notable for shrinking disparities between student groups. In all cases, we made note of the local context influencing school conditions, including student demographics, school governance, funding, and the presence and extent of school choice.

National data validate city's challenges and highlight alternatives

As we have marked in *Roll Call* and other previous publications, Milwaukee has one of the highest poverty rates for school-age children of any large urban center nationally, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Among the 20 districts that have reported out their NAEP data since at least 2013, only four cities have higher child poverty rates: Baltimore (31.3%), Philadelphia (32.1%), Cleveland (39.1%), and Detroit (40.2%) all topped Milwaukee's 30.4% in 2021. All five cities have struggled with consistently low student outcomes as measured on the NAEP, falling well below the national average for large cities (see Figure 3). Note that our NAEP analysis[5] specifically focused on fourth grade reading, although other grades and subject areas are

Figure 3: High Poverty Urban Districts Score Well Below Other Large Cities

Average fourth grade reading proficiency, selected cities versus national large city average*



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Notes: Each city's scores reflect the its public school district and any charter schools authorized by the district (e.g., MPS and MPS charters but not Milwaukee's independent charters or private schools). "Average large district" includes all public school students within U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

[5] Results from the 2024 NAEP administration were released on January 29, 2025 and are reflected in this report's visualizations. The majority of our analysis took place before late January, however, meaning that it was primarily grounded in results from 2009 (the first year of Milwaukee's participation) through 2022. (The NAEP is typically administered every other year, making 2022 the most recent year prior to 2024. Milwaukee did not participate in 2015.)

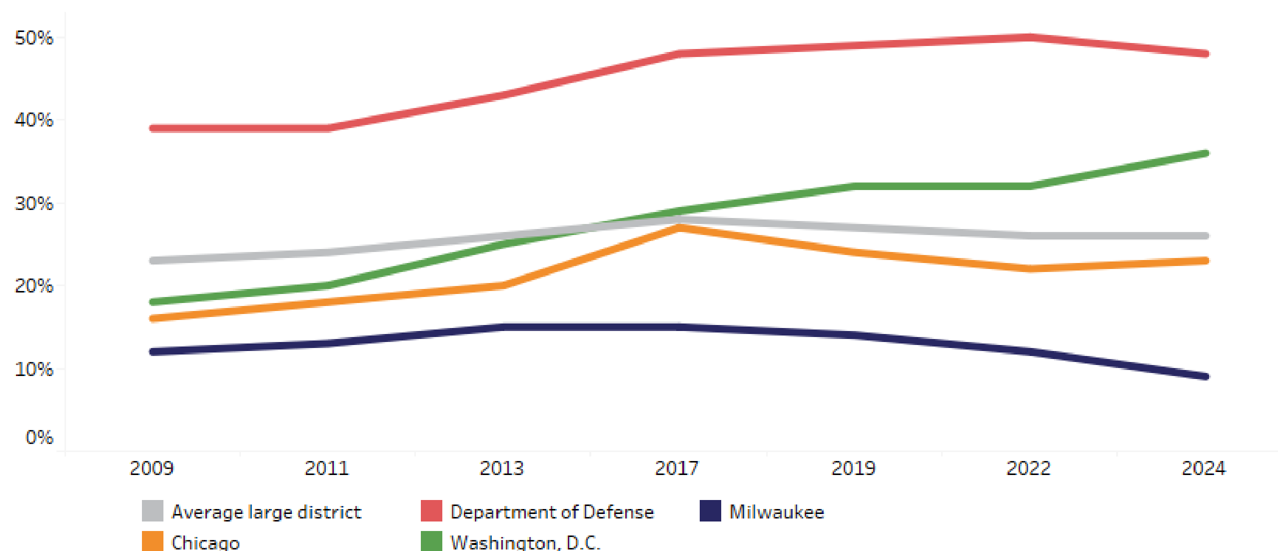
also of great concern. Neither private schools nor independent charters are included in the NAEP data for Milwaukee or any other city.

The outcomes in these cities bear out existing research tying student performance to poverty and lead us to approach the experiences of other cities with caution. The work in other cities with less poverty may not always translate to Milwaukee's context. In recognition of that, we have attempted to acknowledge these different local contexts when considering the promising practices and innovations in other locales. Different state laws and systems also come into play, particularly with regard to funding. The majority of states in the country weight their primary funding formulas to account for student poverty, which provides a material benefit to schools serving mostly economically disadvantaged students. Wisconsin, however, provides no such weight for public school districts, charter schools, or private choice programs, despite to being home to a large city with exceptionally high child poverty rates.

At the same time, we do find examples outside of Milwaukee where students face real struggles but schools and policymakers have taken meaningful steps to improve their outcomes. Indeed, even within these five high poverty cities, the data indicate that positive change is possible and that Milwaukee is an outlier in its stagnation. Among specific student groups, average fourth grade reading proficiency dropped from 2009 to 2024 for Black and Hispanic students in all five cities,[6] but the declines were largest in Milwaukee. Both Cleveland and Philadelphia outpaced the national large city average for improvement from 2009 to 2019, with fourth grade reading proficiency rising by five and six points, respectively (compared to the national average improvement of four points, two points' improvement for Detroit and Milwaukee, and only one point for Baltimore). In the most recent NAEP assessment of 2024, Philadelphia and Baltimore regained the ground they lost to the pandemic, while Milwaukee continued falling further.

Figure 4: Selected Districts Show Markedly Stronger Outcomes than Milwaukee

Average fourth grade reading proficiency, case study districts versus national large city average*



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Notes: Each district's scores reflect the traditional public school district and any charter schools authorized by the district (e.g., MPS and MPS charters but not Milwaukee's independent charters or private schools). "Average large district" includes all public school students within U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

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[6] This statistic excludes Baltimore's Hispanic student population, which NAEP marked as not meeting reporting standards in 2009.

Other locales showed even more improvement and higher attainment rates and formed the basis for our case studies in this section. Although their youth poverty rates are lower than Milwaukee's, other key contextual similarities recommended them for examination. Specifically, Chicago and Washington, D.C. emerged as standouts for rapid NAEP growth that occurred within an environment of school choice and at least somewhat similar student demographics. We also selected the Department of Defense schools for a case study due to their NAEP growth, overall NAEP attainment, and relatively high student mobility, which has also posed a specific challenge for Milwaukee schools. Figure 4 on the previous page shows fourth grade reading proficiency rates for these locations compared to the national average for large cities and to Milwaukee.

In addition, our advisory group of local and state experts recommended four other NAEP-testing locations worthy of study for Milwaukee's consideration: Denver, Miami-Dade County, Boston, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg County. These districts did not rise to the level of a full case study due to either material differences from Milwaukee in their student demographics or schooling conditions or because of NAEP results that did not stand out as much. As Figure 5 shows, however, they also outperform both Milwaukee and the national large city average, and analyzing them revealed additional insights into school improvement work.

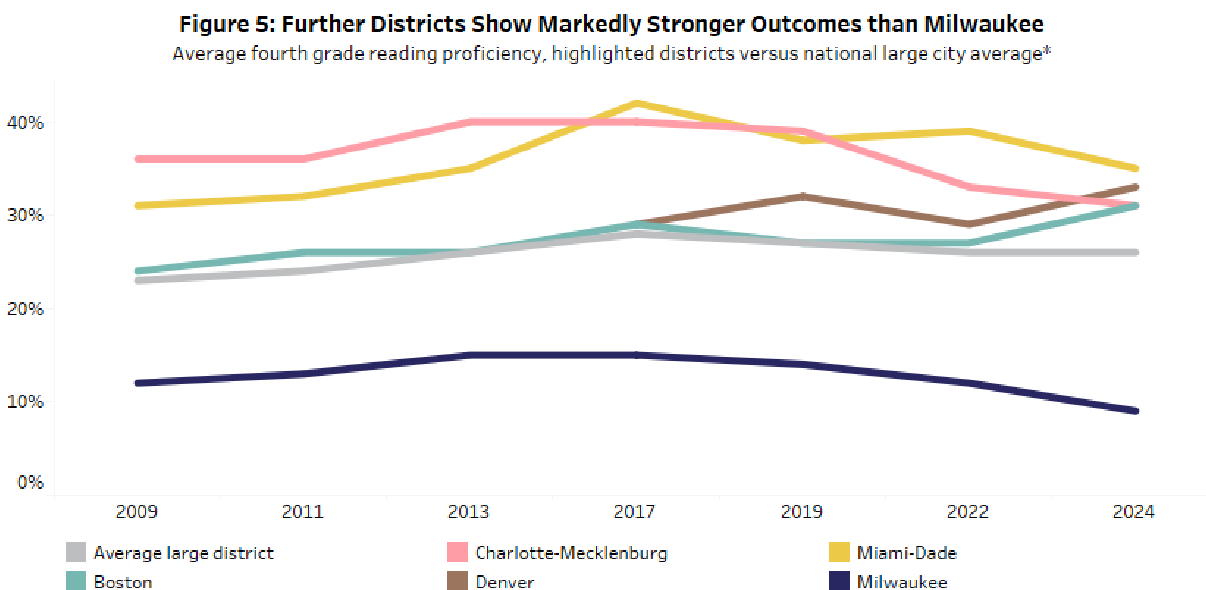

Figure 5: Further Districts Show Markedly Stronger Outcomes than Milwaukee

Average fourth grade reading proficiency, highlighted districts versus national large city average*

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Notes: Denver did not begin NAEP participation as a highlighted district until 2017. Each district's scores reflect the traditional public school district and any charter schools authorized by the district (e.g., MPS and MPS charters but not Milwaukee's independent charters or private schools). "Average large district" includes all public school students within U.S. cities with populations of 250,000 or more.

For each studied district, we have noted how their experiences might particularly speak to Milwaukee's specific context, needs, and opportunities. Ultimately, it will be up to policymakers and practitioners to determine the best application of promising practices, innovations, and lessons learned from other places – and then to start the hard work of implementation.

Washington, D.C.: "Time, talent, and neighborhood"

In the last 15 years, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has emerged as one of the most improved school systems in the country according to NAEP data, doubling fourth grade reading proficiency from 18% in 2009 to 36% in 2024 and avoiding the pandemic-era drop characteristic of

many other U.S. districts. It has also enjoyed growing enrollment at a time when many urban districts face declines. Although its conditions are not a precise match for Milwaukee, it shares certain characteristics that make its success particularly worthy of attention. For example, Washington, D.C. has a high degree of school choice, with 52% of publicly-funded students attending traditional public schools and the remainder in charter schools as of 2024. Milwaukee, however, has struggled to offer uniformly high-quality options across sectors, while in D.C. the rise of charter schools has been accompanied by a marked improvement among its traditional public schools. The NAEP results of the latter now outpace D.C.'s charter schools.

As with every district and school we examined, it is difficult to isolate specific reforms that may have been the primary drivers behind D.C.'s educational progress, especially in cases such as D.C. in which demographic change occurred at the same time. In many cases, the improvements occurred amid changes in policies, leadership, and student populations, challenging our ability to disentangle cause and effect. However, after reviewing reports analyzing the D.C. reforms and interviewing key informants, we identified several factors as particularly salient for understanding D.C.'s success and considering potential application to Milwaukee.

Committed, connected, citywide leadership

D.C.'s turnaround arguably began with the Public Education Reform Amendment Act (PERAA) of 2007, which established mayoral control over both DCPS and the city's charter schools. Research into mayoral control as a lever for improving school systems and student outcomes has shown mixed results; as a 2009 Forum report on the topic concluded, "Governance reform may result in improvements in a district's fiscal condition, but may not have sustainable impacts on student achievement, especially of low-income and minority students."

At least in D.C., however, key informants credited the change in governance with setting education as a citywide priority, establishing clear lines of accountability, attracting strong leadership, and enabling those leaders to focus on academics by leveraging other agencies to support functions like facilities or summer programming. Importantly, these new conditions persisted over a series of mayors and school leaders, giving reforms time to be implemented and improved. The governance change thus was valuable not only as a one-time shakeup but also for sustaining that new course.

One might imagine ways in which these positive conditions could be put in place even in a city like Milwaukee without mayoral control. For example, fostering collaboration between a city's educational and social service agencies does not depend upon all agencies reporting to a single person. In fact, even under mayoral control, most social service agencies and programs would remain under the Milwaukee County executive. Joint councils, intergovernmental agreements, or public-private partnerships might each achieve similar ends of coordination and leadership through different means.

It is also possible that the present conditions of Milwaukee lend themselves to renewed consideration of governance innovation. MPS recently hired a new superintendent and, as Alan Borsuk has written, a third of the school board is set to turn over in the next election, with only one of the emptying seats being contested. In this leadership transition and an engagement vacuum, changing governance conditions may appeal to some.

D.C.'s approach to handling the post-COVID surge in chronic absenteeism exemplifies the particular benefit of having D.C.'s educational and service agencies collaborating under a citywide umbrella. Instead of considering absenteeism to be an issue solely for the schools to handle, the mayor

initiated a public service announcement campaign to encourage students and families to come back to school. Home visits by teachers built relationships between families and school and yielded strong enough results that DCPS integrated the program into its ongoing budget. At the time of our interviews, proposed legislation was under discussion to establish D.C.'s Department of Human Services as a first referral point for families with truant students, shifting away from the city's previous, more punitive approach, which had discouraged schools from engaging social services on behalf of their students. The results from these and other concerted efforts have been promising: According to data from national think tank FutureEd, D.C. had the fourth strongest recovery in chronic absenteeism rates from 2019 to 2023 compared to 40 other states.

Competition, accountability, and continuous improvement

At the same time that DCPS underwent these structural changes and began rapidly improving, D.C.'s charter sector was expanding. Families could participate in a unified enrollment system that allowed them to more easily search and apply for schools regardless of sector. One key informant stated that the system also more equitably distributed students across DCPS and the charters and therefore gave DCPS more confidence that its student enrollment did not differ materially from that of the charter schools. To that end, some policymakers credit the competition as a motive behind DCPS' advances. Even now, another key informant said, "The competition pushes us to say, 'What would attract a family back to that school?' Because otherwise they will go somewhere else."

D.C.'s charter schools face productive pressure of their own in the form of school accountability. They all share a single authorizer, the DC Public Charter School Board, the members of which are appointed by the mayor – further coordinating the city's schools under a single executive – and which is tasked with ensuring that the charter schools provide a quality education for students. It executes this charge in large part through two mechanisms: annual evaluation of every school using a performance management framework, and a comprehensive review of each school at least once every five years. The performance management framework and associated annual School Quality Report are intended to inform families' decisions on where to send their children to school while also offering feedback to school leaders and the charter school board on the strengths and needs for improvement within each school. While these School Quality Reports are specific to the charter sector, a statewide framework also subsequently emerged that better facilitated cross-sector evaluation, using the same metrics across DCPS and charter schools.

The five-year charter reviews, meanwhile, assess charters' academic results, compliance with the law (including special education and English Learner protections), and "fiscal management and economic viability." At the end of each review, the charter school board votes on whether to continue or revoke the school's authorizing charter, effectively choosing whether to close the school or keep it open. Data indicate that these charter reviews are not rubber stamp processes: While the charter school board voted to open 31 new charters between 2012 and 2020, it also revoked the charters of at least 10 schools over the same time period. For one interviewee, the board's approach demonstrated that it welcomed innovation and choice while also remaining committed to school accountability.

The charter board has slowed its closure decisions in recent years in acknowledgment of the pandemic's disruptive impact and implementation of a newer performance management framework. The same informant characterized this pause as understandable but "not healthy. We want the charters to continue pushing us forward."

For now, enrollment continues to grow for both DCPS and the D.C. charter sector, although birth rate decline may force those numbers down in the future.

Strengthening the educator corps

The backbone of DCPS' reforms in recruiting, training, and retaining high-quality educators is its IMPACT evaluation and feedback system, which was originally implemented in 2009, has undergone multiple improvement iterations, and applies to all school-based personnel. The IMPACT model offers feedback to teachers in four core areas: instructional practice, instructional culture, student achievement, and collaboration. In the recollection of one key informant, the prospect of evaluation prompted DCPS teachers to seek a better understanding of what they should be teaching and how. This positioned DCPS to raise academic standards and to implement new high-quality curricula aligned to the standards. Evaluations did not begin until these standards and curricula were in place and acted to offer immediate feedback on how well teachers were implementing them.

Frequent and timely feedback not only supported stronger instructional practices but also offered a premise for performance-based pay to incentivize the district's strongest teachers to stay and specifically to serve in schools facing more challenges. DCPS revised its compensation system to align with IMPACT such that highly rated teachers are eligible for bonuses, with larger bonuses available for those teaching in high-needs schools. In the district's most recently published data, DCPS retained 93% of teachers receiving the top "highly effective" ranking and, impressively, an even higher percentage (94%) of highly effective teachers at its high-poverty schools. MPS, on the other hand, has high overall turnover and does not attach compensation to educator performance or to school needs, although some Milwaukee charter and private schools may do so. An internal MPS report indicated that a disproportionate number of schools with inexperienced teaching staff (defined as five or fewer years of experience) were located in the most disadvantaged board districts.

Overall, the district's commitment to educators' professional growth appears to have supported its recruitment efforts and overall workforce stability and quality. One key informant reported that, even in the high national post-COVID turnover environment, DCPS has not faced a teacher shortage crisis. Turnover does occur, but exiting teachers are more likely to be less effective. Some of the district's most highly rated and highly paid teachers work at the schools with the greatest needs, supporting students at these schools with both stability and expertise.

Principal autonomy and support

In addition to strong teachers, DCPS has also found principals to be critical levers for change. As one interviewee stated, "Where a school is outperforming its demographic expectations, it is because the principal has done something to change the school dynamic."

Within the context of competition from charter schools, which offer high levels of flexibility to school leaders, DCPS attracts principals to stay in part by offering them some significant autonomy. For example, a recent policy change allowed principals to exercise more decision-making authority over their school budgets. At the same time, former DCPS chancellor Kaya Henderson has reflected that the autonomy should still be channeled toward common goals.

DCPS principals also receive differentiated guidance through the district's cluster support model, which groups schools together by type rather than by geography. Cluster superintendents can identify strengths and gaps within the cluster, vary their support accordingly, and facilitate learnings across the cluster. For example, the cluster model revealed that the high poverty schools saw a

marked drop in student achievement when students transitioned to high school in ninth grade. As a result, ninth grade academies are now the norm in high poverty high schools, and a similar intervention is underway to ease the transition into middle school as well.

Attracting enrollment and resources

Enough of these changes – and, importantly, an accompanying shift in narrative and perception – had taken root by 2014 that student enrollment patterns began to change in response. The Urban Institute reports that, after years of DCPS enrollment decreasing due to families migrating out of the city or sending children to D.C. charters, the district's enrollment began a slow upward trend in 2010 for the first time since at least 2002, with greater acceleration in 2014 and 2015. Data presented by the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education show that enrollment overall – for both DCPS and the city's charters – continued to rise for the next decade.

These enrollment changes occurred alongside a larger shift in the city's demographics. Census data show that, from 2000 to 2010, D.C.'s overall population grew, driven primarily by increases in white households, with additional increases in Latino and Asian households alongside a decrease in Black households. The number of births to college-educated women increased by a full third from 2003 to 2011 (from 2,400 to 3,200, compared to 5,800 children born to women without college degrees in 2011), leading the Urban Institute to characterize the change as "rising demand among higher-educated families." The net effect was both that more families entered the D.C. school system and that the entry of these families changed the system's student demographics.

These changes complicate our understanding of D.C.'s progress. The increasing affluence of the district's families likely both reflected and contributed to the increasing academic scores of schools. One might argue that the previously mentioned levers for change were less impactful than the simple influx of students who were more likely to score well because of their more advantaged background. At the same time, these students were more likely to enroll in D.C.'s schools because of the city's commitment to improvement. Their enrollment brought additional resources that could further support all students, in line with research indicating the benefits of less segregated schools. As one former city official stated, "We know the benefits of integration on performance."

With its increasing diversity, D.C. now grapples with ensuring that families of all races and ethnicities benefit equally from its schools. The city's Black-white achievement gap as measured by NAEP has rivaled Milwaukee's for years. In fact, in 2022, both DCPS and the combined DCPS and charter system had the largest Black-white achievement gap in fourth grade reading out of all states and cities measured. (Milwaukee's gap was fourth largest among measured cities.) The nature of the issue is different in D.C. than in Milwaukee, however: D.C.'s gap is driven more by consistently strong results for white students even as Black students' pre-pandemic outcomes also improved, rather than by the performance declines among Black students seen in Milwaukee.

Recent work to close gaps at DCPS has included focusing on early literacy, using a science of reading approach. One key informant attributed the district's relative success in weathering the pandemic to this effort, pointing to the average NAEP score for fourth grade reading, which remained unchanged from 2019 to 2022 in contrast to many other districts' learning loss. Still, this stability masks differences among demographic groups: white fourth graders in DCPS improved in reading from 2019 to 2022 while Black fourth graders dropped slightly and Hispanic fourth graders dropped substantially. In fact, Milwaukee outpaced D.C. for Hispanic (though not Black) fourth grade reading, with students showing slight gains between 2019 and 2022 rather than a decline. A 2024 survey

from national education advocacy organization 50Can found that D.C. had the highest average levels of parental satisfaction with their state's schools (Wisconsin ranked 25th) but also the largest gap in school satisfaction between low-income households and middle- and high-income households.

While D.C. and Milwaukee both clearly have more work to do on equalizing student experiences and outcomes, D.C.'s conditions may be more conducive overall to success thanks to having turned around its enrollment trends and attracting not only more students but also more resources.

Supporting families and neighborhoods alongside schools

As D.C. has committed leadership and attention to its schools, the scope of its work has expanded to engage families and neighborhoods more directly. One goal is to align government resources across the city to address social issues that impact education, thereby relieving schools of some of that burden. Existing collaboration between city agencies – noted above – supports this effort.

> "When I left DC Public Schools, I committed to myself that I would never just work on education because without health care, housing and jobs, education is one leg of a four-legged stool that will fall down — it can't stand on its own. I have seen too many kids who have housing insecurity and food insecurity, too many people for whom a sickness can wipe out the whole family, too many people for whom even if they work, they don't make enough to support their family. That stuff gets in the way of the work that educators do. That does not mean that we shouldn't do what we, as educators, are paid to do and try to knock down every barrier. It also doesn't mean that educators shouldn't be held accountable. It forces us to clarify what we expect educators to accomplish." – Former DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson, as interviewed for the Aspen Institute and The 74.

Safety has been a major area of focus. When schools reported that much of their attention was occupied by ensuring safe environments, the mayor's office launched the Safe Passage program, modeled on an existing Chicago Public Schools initiative. "Safe Passage Ambassadors" monitor students' routes to and from school, building relationships with students and intervening as necessary to protect student safety. They are assigned to specific areas and schools, ideally becoming part of the school community. Ambassadors inform school staff of events affecting students en route to school such as an incident at the nearby Metro station or a fight defused by an ambassador.

Free, full-day, and universal pre-kindergarten (PreK) through both schools and community-based organizations serves as another support to families, neighborhoods, and schools. The Urban Institute characterized DCPS' "aggressive" growth of PreK slots as a critical contributor to the district's enrollment increases, as it met family child care needs and educational desires. Research also ties access to high-quality early childhood education and care to improved outcomes for children and cost savings for society.

Application back to Milwaukee

The net result of D.C.'s changes – both those undertaken intentionally by policymakers and those wrought by shifting demographics – is an educational landscape with healthier enrollment numbers

and overall better student outcomes. In broad strokes, the city has benefited from strong leadership that has persisted beyond any single individual, collaboration between city agencies, productive competition between traditional public schools and charter schools, clear expectations for school performance, investments in high-quality teachers and principals, a diversified and more affluent student population, and wraparound programs to address some social problems.

Consideration of how these levers might apply to Milwaukee must first contend with some material differences between the two cities. First, while Milwaukee's decline in Black population and increase in Hispanic population recalls similar trends in D.C. prior to D.C.'s turnaround, the same is not true for white households, parental education levels, or overall population. Milwaukee's white youth population and overall city population are both shrinking, not growing as in the case of D.C. By 2024, national data showed that only 8.9% of MPS students were white (including MPS charter students), compared to 17.5% in DCPS. In addition, whereas D.C. saw a substantial increase in the number of births to college-educated women from 2003 to 2011, the Milwaukee numbers shrank marginally (from 1,851 in 2003 to 1,812 in 2011, according to the Wisconsin Department of Human Services). D.C. also has a lower child poverty rate than Milwaukee – 25.0% of five- to 17-year-olds in 2021 in D.C., compared to 30.4% in Milwaukee (although the D.C. figure is closer to Milwaukee than most other U.S. districts that report out on NAEP). Put simply, Milwaukee is not in as strong a demographic position as D.C. was, where any school reforms could occur alongside the additional resources and positive momentum conferred by a more advantaged and growing population.

Second, DCPS has historically spent materially more money per child than MPS does (and, by extension, than the average Milwaukee charter or private choice school does). The most recent NCES data reports that, adjusted by the 2022 Comparable Wage Index for Teachers to make for a fairer geographic comparison, DCPS spent $21,629 per student in 2022 – nearly $3,000 more than MPS at $18,668. These amounts include federal pandemic relief aid and are therefore inflated above normal operating expenditures, but a similar difference existed in 2020 as well. However, the gap between MPS and DCPS may shrink in the near future as MPS' 2024 referendum for $252 million phases in. Milwaukee's charter and private schools also saw spending increase under the terms of the 2023-25 state budget, though by far less (see *Roll Call*).

These differences may point to needs outside of schools' immediate control, which could substantially support school improvement – an overall city environment more conducive to in-migration, for example, or increased spending for Milwaukee schools as a whole.

Still, other similarities between the cities – including significant child poverty, a majority Black student population (55.1% in DCPS in 2024, compared to 49.5% in MPS), parallel enrollment shares between traditional public schools and other alternatives, and the very low proficiency levels from which both cities began their NAEP journeys – recommend to us the education-based lessons from D.C.'s progress. In particular, the need for long-term leadership commitment to change and accountability, collaboration across government to support that commitment, investments in effective educators, and supports for students outside of school all appear relevant to Milwaukee's challenges and attainable within its context.

Chicago: "Time, focus, and patience"

With its much greater size, Chicago may not immediately come to mind as a Brew City peer. Its impressive and rapid progress on NAEP and other national metrics invite serious consideration, however, especially in light of its diverse student body and similar emphasis on school choice both

inside and outside the traditional public school system. For example, in less than a decade, from 2009 to 2017, the city improved its fourth grade reading proficiency from 16% to 27%. Whether this progress persists through the current stark political and financial challenges of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) remains to be seen and may eventually offer further lessons for Milwaukee, albeit of a less positive nature.[7]

Published accounts emphasize how much of the city's success thus far is due to its long-term commitment to change – and furthermore to the targeted nature of that commitment, whereby leaders used data to focus on a few key levers at a time rather than attempting sweeping change all at once. Over time, the cumulative effect of these levers has added up such that our key informants warned, "We get in trouble when we say there was one answer [to Chicago's success]. There are multiple answers."

With that in mind, we list some of the most commonly cited levers below while also acknowledging that none of them operate in isolation. In addition, their impact may be less tied to the specific policies chosen and more related to the focused, data-informed process by which they were chosen, as well as to demographic change. Milwaukee leaders may determine that the specific context and data for the city lends itself to a different "small number of high-leverage processes for change" to which the city can dedicate its "time, focus, and patience" (as the authors of *How a City Learned to Improve its Schools* characterize Chicago's approach).

Data-driven decision-making

Many of the initiatives highlighted in *How a City Learned* share a common origin story: Researchers and school leaders examined the city's educational data to determine where a change to the current system could make the biggest difference. Once identified, they could then focus on shifting that indicator, implementing reforms and measuring progress along the way.

For example, as of 2001, CPS' course failure rates for Algebra One were the strongest predictor of high school dropouts. When this fact came to light, improving passage rates for Algebra One became a major district priority. CPS partnered with external organizations to first better understand why Algebra One failure rates were so high and then enact initiatives tailored to holistically address those root causes: additional and standardized training for current middle school math teachers, shifts of already outstanding math teachers into Algebra One, expanded access to algebra at every middle school, optional summer school for students, and curricular professional development.

This data-driven approach also included the adoption of a "freshman on track" measure when research revealed that the number of credits and course failures during a student's freshmen year was highly predictive of high school graduation. Another example was the use of a research-backed framework for the "Five Essential Supports for School Improvement," which isolated key school environment factors for school leaders' attention. The use of these metrics has since spread beyond Chicago and is now a feature in the state report card for all Illinois school districts.

[7] At the time of publication, CPS was weathering intense leadership turmoil following hostile relations between the mayor and the schools' CEO, culminating in the latter's firing without cause, a mass mid-term exodus of its board members, and the beginning of a long-awaited transition from a seven-person mayorally appointed school board to a 21-person elected school board. In addition, the district has projected a deficit of $505 million for 2026, which does not include any additional costs incurred through the labor contract currently under negotiation.

Developing capacity and talent through partnerships

Notably, none of the examples above occurred solely within CPS. Instead, as *How a City Learned* and others detail, the district relied upon partnerships with multiple external entities. CPS executed data-sharing agreements with the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research to grant the academic researchers access to detailed datasets, which in turn enabled the research insights that drove district priorities. To deepen teachers' instructional skill sets, CPS collaborated with local colleges of education to offer subsidized endorsements focused on the needed skills. Higher education, foundations, the business community, and nonprofits further supported efforts through both financial contributions and capacity-building.

The degree to which partnerships extended the capacity of the district and its people was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the big bet that CPS placed on principal leadership. Like D.C., Chicago identified school leaders as defining factors in school quality. In order to improve schools, therefore, CPS committed to improving school leadership. The work of doing so involved groups as varied as researchers, the principals' labor union, a new urban education leadership program at the University of Illinois-Chicago, and a new nonprofit philanthropy called The Chicago Public Education Fund. The combination of these relationships yielded stronger training and performance of Chicago principals, which in turn allowed the district to commit to greater principal autonomy as part of its broader decentralization initiative. Put simply, CPS could release principals to do their best work within the schools they knew best once they had developed the skills to do so effectively.

External programs like the Chicago Teacher Residency Program have built up the teacher pipeline as well, offering year-long, full-time, paid training for prospective teachers that culminate in licensure, a master's degree, and a commitment to teach in CPS for at least four years. City schools also developed partnerships with Teach For America, the Broad Center, and other talent pipelines, while programs like Northwestern University's nonprofit leadership program through the Kellogg School of Management further bolstered the ecosystem. Finally, a focus on developing young leaders of color imbued many of these efforts, diversifying the talent pool and strengthening the city's ability to effectively serve its predominantly students of color. One observer remarked, "The importance of a strong talent pipeline cannot be overstated…. It's astounding, the…talent across the city."

School choice, transparency, and interventions

In the city's increasingly decentralized school system, which hosts not only traditional public schools and charter schools but also offers many choices and specialties within CPS itself, the importance of accessible data increased for school leaders, policymakers, and families. The school district and the charter schools looked at each other's data competitively to spur innovation and, in the words of one interviewee, "steal best practices." Without data transparency, the city's pockets of success may have remained isolated, rather than visible for others to compare and learn from. Easily available and comparable data can also inform families' decisions about where to send their children to school, although one key informant commented that the district's commitment to transparency on this front has not been consistent. Furthermore, the data may exist without parents knowing how to access or effectively use it; parent empowerment training would be a valuable supplement.

Overall, Chicago became defined by more choice, transparency, and local control – whether in the form of charters, CPS specialty schools, increased principal autonomy, or Local School Councils that act as miniature school boards for every CPS school. As that shift occurred, a parallel transformation played out within the district: As *How a City Learned* recounts, "CPS [went] from a command-and-

control bureaucracy, largely isolated from its community, to one that worked in service to a system of schools in partnership with its community." Like DCPS, CPS adopted a network strategy that grouped schools together under the supervision and support of network superintendents. High schools comprised their own network in acknowledgment of their specific opportunities and challenges. The Chicago District-Charter Collaboration Compact prompted the establishment of a unified enrollment process for high school, leadership pipelines, funding equalization goals, and a school quality rating policy across the city's education sectors.[8]

Some school turnaround innovations also followed. Besides the charter schools, the city also experimented with placing chronically struggling CPS schools under the contractual governance of an external nonprofit called the Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL). The governance transition included school facility renovations, leadership and staff turnover, extended instructional time, and a standardized curriculum. Upon the phase-out of the turnaround program in 2021, CPS cited its results, including 84% of AUSL schools achieving the highest rating on the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement survey and a fourfold increase since 2015 in the number of AUSL schools achieving the highest or second-highest rating out of five on the city's school quality ranking system. One key informant particularly praised AUSL's effectiveness at creating safer learning environments, training and supporting teachers, and establishing a minimal academic baseline previously not present at the targeted schools. Yet, she also noted that progress seemed to stall after these initial improvements in conditions.

Perhaps as notable as the specific turnaround strategies that AUSL pursued was the fact that CPS determined a subset of schools requiring additional support and then chose an intervention tailored to those schools. This "zone" approach took root in other cities as well, sometimes in conjunction with contractors like AUSL and sometimes as part of an in-district redesign. Common features included additional resources, staffing flexibility, and streamlined processes to grant turnaround schools more flexibility, support, and accountability.

Finally, the city and district also took on the deeply unpopular work of closing some schools, focusing on severely under-enrolled schools with extensive facilities needs and poor academic performance. The legacy of those decisions remains controversial, although the budgetary case for some dramatic action appeared clear.

Other cited factors

Embedded in the examples above but also worth citing in their own right were additional district and school strategies to:

- Extend the number of school hours and length of the school year in order to gain **more instructional time** for students
- **Decentralize** the bureaucracy and decision-making of CPS, including via increased principal autonomy and a cluster support model similar to D.C.'s
- Leverage a **community-wide commitment** to long-term educational change efforts. This commitment was initially bolstered by mayoral control (authorized by the state legislature), a strong working relationship between the mayor and CPS, and the mayor's targeted recruiting

[8] For more on the Compact, see the introduction of the dissertation of Dr. Tina Owen-Moore, former Chicago school leader and Wisconsin district superintendent and current Board Clerk for Milwaukee Public Schools.

of the private sector to contribute money and talent, but it has also weathered multiple (and often high profile) leadership transitions. This resilience may reflect the decentralization of the district, which can mitigate the impact of any single change at the top; the strength of the district's partnerships, which can outlast individuals; and the accountability that the private sector applies to the schools given its investment. Whether this stability continues to hold strong remains an open question given the district and city's present governance and financial upheaval.

Application back to Milwaukee

Calls for reform in Milwaukee have sometimes coalesced around an argument that the school district – by far the largest in the state by student population – is simply too big. The rapid and sustained academic growth of Chicago Public Schools offers a counterexample of a district that has turned around its educational trajectory despite serving over four times as many students. Its success may be credited to a combination of data-driven decision-making, which allowed leaders to focus change efforts on select high-impact levers; capacity-building partnerships; and a decentralized approach that empowered school leaders and fostered innovation.

This progress has occurred in an environment that is not only much larger than Milwaukee but also is marked by similar demographics. NCES data report that, in 2024, 47.0% of CPS students were Hispanic, 35.0% were Black or African American, 11.1% were white, and 4.6% were Asian or Pacific Islander. Like MPS, CPS has been in a state of overall enrollment decline and, specifically, managing a dramatic reduction in the number and share of Black students within its enrollment. From 2011 to 2024, CPS lost over 60,000 Black or African American students, shrinking their share of the student body by 7.8 percentage points. (Over the same time period, the percentage of Black or African American students in MPS decreased by 6.4 points, reflecting both a declining Black youth population in Milwaukee and shifts of students from MPS to other sectors.) One informant pointed out that this demographic shift, which also included a slight uptick in the number and share of white students, may be a factor in CPS' NAEP improvement as much as any education intervention.

It is true that the depth of child poverty is greater in Milwaukee – and D.C. – than in Chicago; in 2021, the poverty rate of 5- to 17-year-olds in Chicago was 22.7%, compared to over 30% in Milwaukee. On the other hand, the difference in per pupil spending is smaller between Chicago and Milwaukee than between D.C. and Milwaukee: Adjusted for cost-of-living differences, CPS spent $19,600 per pupil in 2022, compared to MPS' $18,668. This is not a negligible difference, especially when considering that Milwaukee's charter and private schools receive less public funding than both CPS and MPS, but dollars alone do not appear to define the differences in what Chicago has been able to achieve. As mentioned previously, these expenditures include federal pandemic relief aid dollars, which have since expired, and do not reflect the impact of either the 2024 MPS referendum, which will meaningfully boost MPS spending, or the smaller 2023-25 state budget increases for Milwaukee's charter or private choice schools.

Perhaps a more notable difference is in the wealth – both monetary and human capital – of the surrounding ecosystem. Chicago's strategy has relied upon the assets of a large American city, complete with a robust talent pipeline, philanthropic community, and higher education institutions for both research and training. As the largest city in Wisconsin and the economic heart of the state, Milwaukee has some of these same assets, but to a lesser degree.

The most applicable lessons from Chicago, therefore, may be those that focus on developing the resources already available. For example, Chicago leaders did not solely depend on attracting talent but also worked with higher education and other programs to target the development of existing people. For Milwaukee's colleges of education, which have seen fewer graduates in recent years, this may be an especially appealing prospect. Collaborations with data centers, whether in higher education or elsewhere in the community, could help target school improvement efforts while also building community strength and goodwill. Clearer and more actionable external-facing data may help Milwaukee access potential strengths of its choice environment, and parent data trainings could form part of a campaign to empower parents as advocates on behalf of their children, as some organizations in Chicago are currently attempting.

One key informant reminded us not to judge CPS a total success for as long as only one in five Chicago students were scoring proficient. (On the most recent NAEP, fourth graders averaged 23% reading proficiency.) The caution is warranted, but with 9% of Milwaukee fourth graders reading proficiently, there may still be much to learn.

Department of Defense schools: Internal drive, external supports

A review of NAEP exemplars would be incomplete without mention of the system of schools run by the Department of Defense (DOD). This system encompasses 161 schools both within the United States and overseas, serving 66,933 students as of January 2025. The DOD stands out on NAEP for both the performance and growth of students within its schools. Fourth grade reading proficiency was higher in 2024 than any of the 26 school districts reported out by NAEP and outstripped the highest scoring of those districts by nine percentage points. Moreover, these scores increased in every test administration from 2011 to 2022, and 2024 reading outcomes gaps between white, Black, and Hispanic fourth graders were smaller than at all but one (Cleveland) of the districts.

Notably, the DOD school system differs from Milwaukee more than D.C. or Chicago, from its student demographics to its unique military structure and accompanying resources. Some of these differences are telling, suggesting what might be possible in Milwaukee if students and families were better supported outside of school. In other cases, DOD's critical levers for success – as identified through key informant interviews and in-depth reporting from the *New York Times* – mirror themes already emergent from Milwaukee school leader interviews and other national exemplars, indicating the work that could be done even within the existing Milwaukee school system.

Rigorous, consistent academic expectations and implementation

Starting in 2015, DOD introduced higher academic standards to its schools. Both the thoroughness and the pacing of the changeover merit notice: Over the course of six years, DOD implemented the new standards for each subject area alongside new and aligned curricula, teacher training, scope and sequence documents, and assessments. The result was standardized instruction that supported high-level teaching and learning both within a school and across schools – the latter being of particular importance for DOD students, who often move between military bases.

This consistency is upheld by regular teacher observations and feedback opportunities, as well as built-in opportunities for teacher collaboration. As one key informant stated, "We have our standards, we have defined excellent instruction, and we spend time around those things to set common language and practices." Furthermore, DOD has held the course on these heightened standards, in

contrast with some state agencies (including Wisconsin's DPI) that have shifted performance standards such that more students appear proficient on state measures than on NAEP.

Focused, accountable leadership under supportive governance

The standards implementation exemplifies a hallmark of DOD operations: discipline to fully focus on an identified priority, with less buffeting from the specific combination of federal, state, and local political pressures to which other American school systems are subject. While valuable for democracy and accountability, these demands can lead to a short-term reform orientation, whether because of leadership turnover, initiative burnout, or political reactions guided more by expediency than by evidence.

Historically, DOD has been largely shielded from those issues and able to take on long-range efforts, although it faces its own unique pressures. One DOD leader was quick to note that scrutiny might build quickly if DOD schools began underperforming, meaning that accountability and engaged governance still play an important role.

To guard against complacency, the agency maintains and regularly updates a strategic plan that guides the agency's actions on select focus areas. A DOD leader reflected that the agency benefits from clearly articulated "vertical and horizontal priorities." Another stated, "We're not chasing shiny new objects – and we're not pressured to do that. We look at what's a best practice."

Developing people through continuous improvement

High-quality and consistent staff is a critical factor in successful implementation of these agency priorities. With schools spread across the globe, DOD cannot rely solely on centralized decision-making but rather invests in continuous improvement processes that both support its professional staff and promote ongoing growth on behalf of students. As one key informant described the theory of change, "We're not relying on a program to be magic. We're building the capacity of people to know the standards inside and out to apply them to the children in front of them every day. Then you need to hold onto your people."

In practice, this capacity-building and retention work includes coaches for teachers, collaborative supports for school leaders, and professional learning communities that stretch all the way up to the director of the DOD school system. The agency not only collects data regularly – from student outcomes to staff surveys – but also reviews and applies its learning on an ongoing basis. Staff ask, "If this isn't working, why? What else do we need to do to help make it work?" As a general practice, DOD schools do not assume that a program, once implemented, is set; instead, they constantly monitor, adjust, and recommit to upholding expectations.

Robust, distributed financial and human capital

Retaining the staff in whom the agency invests so much time and training is an easier endeavor for DOD than many other American school systems thanks to its funding. The *New York Times* reported in 2023 that DOD spent approximately $25,000 per child. (The geographic spread of the DOD schools does not lend itself easily to cost-of-living adjustments, but this amount appears well above current spending in both Milwaukee and Chicago. It is perhaps more on par with D.C., but one leader with experience in both D.C. and DOD characterized the latter as having greater resources.) The *Times* pointed to DOD's advantage in using these dollars to – among other investments – pay competitive salaries to teachers and stave off turnover. One key informant also pointed out that, at

least for the overseas teachers, retention is easier because quitting one's job may also mean needing to leave one's subsidized housing.

Being able to rely upon a well-resourced system also supports the "whatever it takes" attitude described in the agency's disciplined approach to implementing priorities and monitoring their success. If something is not working, and leaders determine that a course change is necessary, they have access to funding to ease the transition and the will to execute it. In cases where the students themselves are the ones in need of further support – which can occur frequently within the context of the military, as students navigate the strain and potential trauma of their parents' military service and their own moves – professional care resources are also available. This wraparound approach may feel foreign and enviable to Milwaukeeans facing high levels of child poverty and accompanying distresses.

Finally, the socioeconomic and racial integration of DOD schools means that these resources – both financial and human – are distributed relatively equally. As of November 2024, DOD reported serving a student population that was 41% white, 26% Hispanic or Latino, 14% multiracial, 10% Black or African American, and 6% Asian. Regardless of a parent or guardian's military ranking or pay, all of these students attend the same schools, creating fewer opportunities for structural disparities than is often the case in American school systems, and certainly less segregation than exists between Milwaukee and its suburbs or within Milwaukee itself. Operating apart from traditional American schools may also disrupt other traditional narratives and systems as well.

Family-level supports

Not only does DOD receive relatively high levels of funding to support students' education and needs, but students arrive at school better positioned to learn because of structural supports outside of the schools' direct control. Perhaps most saliently, by definition all DOD students have at least one parent or guardian who is employed by the military, which means not only a steady paycheck for the family but also access to both housing and health care, in addition to strict standards of discipline and conduct. This level of family stability stands in sharp contrast to Milwaukee, which has struggled with high unemployment rates for Black men in particular and longstanding housing affordability and ownership concerns.

Key informants also mentioned the self-selectivity of military families, who tend to carry a "service mentality" and "pride" with them, further supporting students' positive orientation toward school. Military-connected families attending DOD schools also tend to have younger children: 59.6% of DOD students were in fifth grade or under as of January 2025, which may mean a stronger familial influence. Living and going to school on a military installation further instills a sense of community that can support a positive culture inside and outside of school.

DOD school leaders also prioritize proactively building this positive culture; one interviewee stated, "Having a culture around, 'We find a way to build community with everyone who is here,' is essential. We serve everyone from wherever they come from, and with whatever they come in with." At the same time, he acknowledged that it is "difficult to disentangle our results from our supports." DOD does tremendous work within its schools but also benefits from a context in which students' families are already supported in critical ways and in which schools are equipped with resources to serve many remaining needs.

Application back to Milwaukee

DOD exemplifies the two-pronged approach of educating children via both in-school and out-of-school interventions. The leader with experience in both D.C. and DOD reflected this "both/and" approach: "It would have helped a lot of kids in D.C. if we had the military supports. It would not have been enough to hit our academic goals.... We have to put everything in to support our kids. We have to be relentless." Milwaukee's civic discourse at times can split itself between these two camps, with one limiting expectations of what schools can accomplish before students are supported with more resources, and the other pushing for more progress and accountability for schools regardless of student needs. DOD offers a call to adopt both of these mindsets.

The work to educate students would be meaningfully easier if students arrived at school more prepared to learn thanks to stable and sufficient housing and household income. Collective efforts to address these needs in Milwaukee may not appear to be education reforms *per se* (apart from those focused on early childhood education and care), but they form part of an essential base for student learning.

If student needs outside of school could be better alleviated, that would reduce pressure on Milwaukee schools to use educational resources to meet those needs. Until that time, it remains to be seen to what degree the recent increases in education funding to MPS (through its recent referenda) and to charter and private choice schools (through the 2023-25 state budget) will help schools close these gaps. Preliminary testimony from leaders suggests that both additional resources and shifts in the allocations of currently available resources may be necessary.

Finally, Milwaukee schools can learn from the actions that DOD takes within its direct locus of control. While these actions may be difficult in the more challenging environment of Milwaukee, the fact that they echo many of the best practices identified by Milwaukee's own exemplary school leaders supports both their credibility and feasibility. These levers include setting high expectations for students' academic success and ensuring that teachers have the resources, upfront training, and regular feedback to uphold those expectations; focusing on pulling a few key levers effectively rather than shifting strategies reactively; and continuously building the capacity of teachers and school leaders to both improve student results and increase educator satisfaction and retention. Overall, the DOD case study highlights the virtues of both stability and vision, which are possible to uphold even in a system as far-flung and with a student population in such flux as within the military.

Highlights from other selected cities

While the progress and context of D.C., Chicago, and the DOD schools lent themselves particularly well to case studies, NAEP data and the experts within our study advisory group encouraged us to also consider lessons from other urban centers – specifically, Denver, Miami-Dade County, Boston, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg County.

Denver

In 2018, Denver earned a spot on national education nonprofit Bellwether's list of eight cities to watch and learn from, thanks to its state-reported academic progress from 2014 through 2017 and its improved graduation rate from 2007 to 2017. (Bellwether also highlighted D.C. and Chicago in the same report; their other five cities either do not test on NAEP, or in the case of New York City were deemed to be too distinct from Milwaukee's context to warrant deep analysis for this report.)

NAEP data are only available for Denver since 2017, however, offering more limited confirmation of how the city's standing compares nationally.

Still, themes of the city's success as identified by Bellwether, national nonprofit Education Resource Strategies, and a pair of papers from the Center for Education Policy Analysis at the University of Colorado are instructive. That is particularly true in cases where they reinforce insights already gleaned from Milwaukee school leaders and national case studies:

- Active, ongoing **engagement** between school system leaders and the community to build **public will for change.** A key element of this engagement and commitment-building was sharing **transparent data** on the current status of student success and specific, measurable goals for the future.
- **Talent development pipelines**, including principal residencies, teacher residencies, pathways for paraprofessionals to grow into teacher roles, and teacher leader roles. This strategy also includes student-centered retention practices like **increased salaries for teachers and principals working in high-poverty schools**, **school leader autonomy** over staff selection and other key ingredients for school success, and use of district resources targeted to school needs to lighten the load on leaders and staff.
- District funding formula reforms to allocate **more dollars to students with higher needs**
- Increased **socio-emotional learning supports** for students, and district-wide restorative justice approaches to student discipline
- Systems that treat all publicly-funded schools in the city as part of the same "family of schools." In Denver, a school may be a traditional district school, a charter school, or a district-run "innovation school" that operates with flexibilities similar to those of a charter school. (A collection of innovation schools may form an innovation zone, an approach also seen in Chicago.) All of these schools operate under a **single performance framework**, which emphasizes growth; they are subject to the **same process to close or open new schools**; they join the "**District-Charter Collaboration Compact**" (mentioned in Chicago as well); and they participate in a **unified enrollment system** with no selective enrollment, wider attendance zones, and transportation provided to anywhere within the zone.

Denver's educational context is similar to Milwaukee's in terms of its high school choice environment, an elected school board, and a student body that is majority students of color. On the other hand, the specific makeup of the student body is less similar; Hispanic students made up the majority of the Denver student body in 2024 – 51.9%, nearly double the share within MPS – and Denver's child poverty rate in 2021 (15.2%) was half of Milwaukee's. Per pupil spending is lower in Denver Public Schools than in MPS: $14,373 in 2022, after adjusting for cost-of-living differences.

Miami-Dade County

With 335,500 students in 2024, a full three-quarters of whom were Hispanic, and a 16.2% child poverty rate in 2021, the size and makeup of the student body at Miami-Dade County Public Schools is even more dissimilar from Milwaukee's than Chicago's. However, it likewise operates with and within a school choice environment as extensive perhaps as any other urban center in the country – and does so while spending $13,500 per pupil as of 2022, adjusted for cost-of-living differences. Furthermore, it boasts impressive NAEP results, both in how the district compares to the other

available urban centers and in how its scores have grown over time. For example, fourth grade reading proficiency grew by 11 percentage points from 2009 to 2017 and tied for the third-highest level of proficiency among the 26 tested districts in 2024.

As may be expected for an urban center in which parental choice has thrived, many of the available articles and analyses of Miami-Dade's success are published by outlets predisposed toward school choice. They highlight how many different publicly-funded options are available for parents: traditional district schools, magnet schools and other district-run innovations, charter schools, private schools that students attend with state-funded scholarships, and even so-called "microschools." In their account, Miami-Dade's progress is attributable to the district and county embracing **school choice.** One might also frame it as the district **engaging deeply with families** on their desires and aspirations for their children, and finding that increased schooling options met those desires.

Another evident factor in the gains in Miami-Dade was the district's disciplined approach to using **data to increase internal accountability** and **make rapid course corrections.** The Education Next analysis describes four-hour-long quarterly meetings between the superintendent and principals in which principals reviewed key data points for their school, shared their plans to address concerning data, and fielded questions and instructions from the superintendent. Instructions might also go to district personnel in the room, for the sake of removing any district policy barriers to school-based efforts. This kind of timely and responsive interaction is not the norm in large districts and points to the informed urgency with which Miami-Dade schools operated.

The county has also benefited from attention to **teacher recruitment and retention.** Amid a financial crisis, district leaders avoided layoffs and instead reassigned district staff to teaching positions. As finances stabilized, the district began investing in raises for teachers again and cultivated a positive relationship with teachers' union leaders. It started a program called TEAChSTRONG MIAMI to fill shortages in math and science positions specifically in its high-needs schools. The county as a whole also has access to a new Teacher Accelerator Program launched in 2023 through a nonprofit and higher education collaboration to create an additional pipeline of teachers.

More broadly, nearly all accounts of Miami-Dade's progress focus on a single individual: Alberto Carvalho, who led the school system from 2008 through 2021, a long time for an urban superintendent. Sources cited his **consistent, committed, and driven leadership** as a key force behind many of the individual factors listed above. The stability of his tenure appears to have acted as a counterbalance to the speed of the district's changes, helping the system as a whole to adapt for the long term to better serve students.

Boston

For years, Massachusetts and Boston Public Schools were darlings of education researchers and policymakers, who cheered the academic gains that followed state innovations like establishing **more rigorous standards, assessments, and graduation requirements.** Some also posited that the state's relatively strong **social safety net** supported students outside of school so that they were more ready to learn inside school. The Boston region also enjoys the advantages of a **robust ecosystem of higher education institutions and education-focused organizations.** The district benefited for years from **strong and stable district leadership**, in this case in conjunction with mayoral control and a positive working relationship between the mayor and the superintendent.

After over a decade of rising, however, fourth grade NAEP reading scores for Boston schools stagnated from 2015 to 2022 (although, encouragingly, they improved in 2024). The district faced the threat of state takeover in 2022 amid an array of concerns, including leadership turnover, inequitable opportunities for students with disabilities and English Learners, school autonomy without accountability, and infrastructural needs – all despite spending a whopping $30,134 per pupil in 2022, adjusted for differences in cost of living.

While these and other concerns removed Boston from our in-depth consideration, we did observe notable similarities between Boston and Milwaukee with regard to their demographics and history of segregation. In addition, highlights from Boston may be of particular interest to Milwaukeeans in the present moment, as the recently hired MPS superintendent served as superintendent of Boston Public Schools from July 2019 through June 2022.

Child poverty in Boston as of 2021 was 24.2%, not as high as Milwaukee but above the median for the districts that report out NAEP results. Like MPS, district schools in Boston have seen a precipitous drop in Black students, with *The Boston Globe* reporting a loss of nearly 15,000 Black students between 2002 and 2022. The district's resulting shares of Black and Hispanic students are nearly the inverse of MPS', with 28.3% Black students in 2024 and 44.7% Hispanic students. In both cities, this drop in Black population followed an earlier wave of white flight into the suburbs, which was largely attributed to the increasing racial and economic diversity of the urban centers and the subsequent contentious, if not violent, and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to integrate schools.

In light of this history and current reality, the Boston region's Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity, Inc. stands out as an urban-suburban **racial integration program** that has not only sustained student enrollment over decades – starting with 220 students in 1966 and reaching over 3,000 students in the most recently posted data – but also shown improved outcomes for participating students. The most recent study concluded that Boston and Springfield students who used the program to attend suburban schools via busing experienced "large and lasting gains," including rates of academic success, attendance, graduation, and college attendance and attainment that were greater than would otherwise have been expected. At the same time, the receiving suburban schools did not appear to experience any negative effects from the integration of urban students. The program still faces critiques, including those of scale, with only a fraction of Boston students benefiting from it, and of placing the burden of desegregation on students of color (although program leaders are quick to point to its support from Boston's communities of color).

A similar voluntary desegregation busing program exists in metro Milwaukee as well but is nearly fully phased out as a result of 2015 state legislation that cut off any new program participants for 2016 and beyond. Known as Chapter 220 or the integration aid program, it supported both integration within MPS and between MPS and the surrounding suburbs. Unlike the Boston program, Chapter 220 was bidirectional: Suburban students could also use Chapter 220 to attend urban schools.

Chapter 220 program participation was on the decline even prior to its phase-out, falling from approximately 7,000 students in the late 1980s and early 1990s to 1,672 in 2015. Observers have noted that the decline occurred alongside a rise in other Wisconsin school choice options. These include not only the programs allowing students to use public funds to attend private schools but also the Open Enrollment program, which allows students who reside in one public school district to enroll in another public school district, subject to certain restrictions (e.g., available space, ability to

provide special needs services). Unlike Chapter 220, however, Open Enrollment does not provide funding for busing, and it was not designed to promote racial integration.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg County

The high NAEP scores of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools are comparable to those of Miami-Dade. They topped 40% proficiency in fourth grade reading in 2013 and 2017, but have slipped since then. In addition, its demographics reveal a student population with notably greater advantages than in Milwaukee, with a 13.4% child poverty rate in 2021 (the second-lowest of the 26 districts reported by NAEP) and 23.6% white students in 2024. Perhaps partially due to these advantages, CMS spends the least per pupil of all the districts we highlighted: $11,541 in 2022, adjusted for cost-of-living differences.

In its outcomes for its most disadvantaged residents, however, Charlotte bears some striking similarities to Milwaukee. A 2014 report from Opportunity Insights, a nonprofit based out of Harvard University, ranked Charlotte worst for absolute upward mobility – defined as “the expected economic outcomes of children born to a family…in the 25th percentile of the income distribution” – out of the 50 largest metro areas in the United States.

While Milwaukee fared better on that measure – though it still fell in the bottom half of the largest metro areas – it received its own dispiriting news in 2014: the national nonprofit Annie E. Casey Foundation ranked Wisconsin as having the worst results for African-American children in the country. The ranking reflected directly upon Milwaukee County, home to the majority of Black residents in Wisconsin. Subsequent publications further highlighted the particularly bleak challenges of Milwaukee’s Black population, including the bestselling nonfiction book *Evicted*, the 2018 documentary *Milwaukee 53206*, and a 2020 study from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Center for Economic Development that concluded, “On virtually all key measures of Black community well-being, Milwaukee ranks at or near the bottom when ranked against other large metropolitan areas. Moreover, when we examine historical trends in some key areas, the results are equally grim: Black Milwaukee is generally worse off today than it was 40 or 50 years ago.”

In Milwaukee, these findings and rising awareness of inequities did not on the whole generate substantive, unified action across political, civic, business, and community leaders. Yet there are some prominent exceptions, like the cross-sector alliance devoted to increasing affordable housing for Black Milwaukeeans and Milwaukee County’s declaration of racism as a public health crisis. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, however, the **public reaction was swift and action-oriented.** Leaders formed the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Opportunity Task Force to write a report on how to respond and improve the county’s economic mobility, an advisory council convened to guide implementation of those recommendations, and their combined efforts stood up a new initiative in 2017 called Leading on Opportunity, which is dedicated to managing the ongoing work. The Opportunity Insights team praised this reaction as exemplifying how a community might react to discouraging data, and the effect of the collective efforts is already bearing fruit: A 2024 Opportunity Insights update showed meaningful positive gains in Charlotte’s economic mobility.

> "One of the surprising findings from our work was that Charlotte had the lowest rate of upward mobility of the largest 50 metropolitan areas in the country. We were inspired by Charlotte's response to those findings. Instead of being discouraged by or seeking to challenge the data, local leaders and community members used 50 out of 50 as a call to action, an impetus for convening difficult conversations and beginning the hard work necessary to build a community where opportunity exists for everyone." – Opportunity Insights introduction to the Charlotte Opportunity Initiative

Specific aspects of Charlotte-Mecklenburg and Leading on Opportunity's work may be of interest to Milwaukee, especially its commitment to **data-driven action.** This work included initial analysis undertaken to identify root cause issues and core focus areas, a pivot to guiding collective action with what one key informant described as "data, strategy, and policy expertise," and specific supports developed to support that action. Those supports include an "Opportunity Compass" data tool that focuses leaders around the county on key metrics. Yet the larger takeaway for Milwaukee may be the example of what a **committed, collective, and strategic** movement can look like and result in. For Charlotte, this movement centered on responding to outrage over a lack of economic mobility; for Milwaukee, the same spirit would justifiably apply to students' educational outcomes.

Summary: What works outside Milwaukee?

Despite the unique context of each of the locations examined, several common themes emerged from our research into their levers for improving student outcomes. The very fact of these themes' consistency lends them further credibility for possible application to Milwaukee, while acknowledging that specific implementation always requires adaptation to a city's specific conditions. These themes include:

- **Lead boldly for the long term**. Strong leadership emerged as a top condition for meaningful educational improvement. It manifested in many forms, from the mayoral control of D.C., Chicago, and Boston to the collective civic engagement of Charlotte and Chicago to Miami-Dade's single charismatic superintendent. In each form, however, successful leaders balanced the urgent need for improvement with stability and long-term commitment. As a result, they avoided disruptive turnover or initiative fatigue, created space for reforms to take root, and could invest in relationships and partnerships to support the work. Perhaps most importantly, leaders took ownership of the challenges of their communities' schools and faced them courageously and strategically, showing willingness to take difficult actions.

- **Focus on a few high-impact levers identified through data and implemented with fidelity.** Chicago and DOD both exemplified this approach to school improvement, using data to target their efforts so that they could focus and sustain their attention where it would make a meaningful difference. In Chicago, research from external partners identified priority focus areas including Algebra One pass rates, ninth grade on-track rates, and the Five Essential Supports for School Improvement school conditions framework. Partners from outside the district further helped the district implement interventions and track their success. DOD, meanwhile, homed in on raising academic standards and implemented a multi-year coordinated campaign to bring the new standards into all aspects of its classrooms. This choice of focus not only led to stronger instruction for DOD students overall but also

answered their specific challenge of high student mobility and trauma by standardizing high expectations across all schools. Charlotte-Mecklenburg has also centered data in its economic mobility improvement work, using it to focus and coordinate the many actors in the space.

- **Recruit, develop, and retain talent.** Education is a people-powered enterprise, and every highlighted location took active steps to make the best use of their people. On the front end, leaders actively recruited more educators into the profession, as in Miami-Dade and Chicago. Equally if not more importantly, they also developed existing teachers' and principals' skills, which not only improved educator quality but also increased educator retention. D.C.'s teacher feedback and evaluation cycle ultimately incentivized its best teachers to work in its neediest schools. Chicago worked with colleges of education, philanthropies, and nonprofits to better align teacher and principal preparation and professional development to the needs of Chicago classrooms. DOD retains its long-serving teachers through a combination of competitive pay and continuous investment in educators' skills.

  For D.C., Chicago, and Denver, developing principals was especially important, because they identified school leaders as key levers in driving school improvement.

- **Offer school support, accountability, and data transparency, including in environments of school choice and autonomy.** D.C., Chicago, Miami-Dade, and Denver all feature school choice as a defining feature of their educational landscapes. Within that context, all cited the need for transparent data: to help families navigate their choices, to help systems leaders offer differentiated support to schools according to their need, and to inform when and what actions would be appropriate if they were not delivering improved outcomes for children. Miami-Dade held quarterly data summits to ensure principals both received needed supports and were held accountable to results. D.C. and Chicago designed school support models that offered more targeted support to district schools while empowering principals with more decision-making authority – thus focusing district leaders' energy and allowing school leaders to operate more nimbly and effectively. D.C., Chicago, and Denver all measure school quality using the same metrics across the charter schools and their traditional public schools, and all have a demonstrated track record of acting upon the results of those evaluations.

- **Increase and equitably distribute school system resources.** Perhaps the most expansive of the themes, this lever for success encompasses any action that increased a school system's available resources of time, money, or capacity or that resulted in the system's most disadvantaged students receiving more resources. Some strategies already cited fit in here, including D.C. and Denver offering higher salaries to teachers working in high needs schools and Chicago partnering with local philanthropies, nonprofits, and higher education to support its talent and data needs. Boston also benefits from its similarly robust ecosystem of partners. Other examples of resource augmentation and allocation include Chicago extending its school day and school year, which gave children more learning time; the sizable education budgets of DOD and Boston, which provide both students and educators with needed resources; and Denver's internal funding formula reforms, which now better distribute the district's existing dollars to its higher needs students.

  The specific role of racial and economic integration also merits mention here. As D.C. attracted more white and affluent families, its resource base and therefore ability to serve

students increased. The built-in integration of DOD schools benefits their students. And, in Boston, the METCO busing program continues to offer a desegregation option to families of color that has yielded positive results.

- **Support families and neighborhoods outside of school.** School leaders recognized that conditions outside of school are as important as conditions within school for protecting students' ability and readiness to learn. In D.C., collaboration between educational and social service agencies helps take some of the load off of schools. D.C. also invested in free, full-day, and universal PreK to better support families and prepare children. In both D.C. and Chicago, the Safe Passage Program offers trusted adult support to students before and after school. Boston benefits from longstanding social service networks at the state and city level, and DOD leaders are conscious of the advantages and resources available to their students by virtue of their DOD affiliation and associated family benefits.

These themes echo many of the levers for success identified by our exemplary Milwaukee school leaders: unifying mission and stable staff and culture; school-level autonomy, accountability, and support; commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement; high expectations paired with nurturing supports; proactive, intentional family engagement; and additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships. The core difference is one of ownership: Who is responsible for setting up and implementing those levers, and at what level (school, district or school system, city or county, etc.) do those actions occur? In our last report section, we explore those opportunities for ownership and action as well as final application of these ideas to Milwaukee.

Table 2: Locally Identified Strategies for School Success Align with National Themes

Exemplary Milwaukee School Levers for Success	Common National Actions for Improvement
Unifying mission and stable staff and culture	Lead boldly for the long term
High expectations paired with nurturing supports	Focus on a few high-impact levers identified through data and implemented with fidelity
Commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement	Recruit, develop, and retain talent
School-level autonomy, accountability, and support	Offer school support, accountability, and data transparency, including in environments of school choice and autonomy
Additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships	Increase and equitably distribute school system resources
Proactive, intentional family engagement	Support families and neighborhoods outside of school

MOVING MILWAUKEE EDUCATION FORWARD

Taking as our starting point the national levers for success discussed in the previous section, and combining those with the lessons from Milwaukee's own schools, we find five overarching themes that could drive any number of policy interventions on behalf of Milwaukee schools and students. We also list out selected specific policy options that may be worth special consideration. These "policies in practice" are organized within the larger themes.

Before noting these options, however, we must mention three uniquely difficult challenges to adapting the work from other cities – or, for that matter, specific standout schools in this city – to Milwaukee as a whole. The first is the depth of child poverty in the city and the longstanding poverty experienced by much of Milwaukee's Black population. None of the other highlighted cities faced that same level of headwind in bettering their schools. Within Milwaukee, individual schools have managed the worst impacts of poverty to produce better-than-average outcomes for children, but it may be difficult to scale up their success in the face of these hurdles. We note this obstacle not to dismiss the need to improve Milwaukee's schools but rather to acknowledge it as a particular challenge and as an issue that deserves attention in its own right (as laid out in our final theme below).

Second, key informant interviews for both *Roll Call* and this report highlighted the detrimental effect of high student mobility in Milwaukee – that is, students switching schools frequently, either during or between school years. This mobility not only negatively affects the youth who are moving but also presents a major challenge for any school or educator attempting to implement meaningful reform for an ever-shifting student population.

Finally, while many of our national comparisons include school choice as a feature of the landscape, Milwaukee's system of traditional public schools, charter schools, and private choice programs is particularly complex. For example, strategies that solely target the district's traditional schools would only account for 54.9% of the students educated in Milwaukee (using 2023 enrollment figures). Moreover, the charter schools are spread across three different authorizing bodies, and private choice programs operate independent of any Milwaukee authority with only state oversight. This diffuse governance further complicates attempts to move the city forward as a whole, as does the fact that state and federal law requires less data from private schools than public schools.

Within the themes and policy options laid out below, we therefore invite policymakers to grapple with the question of ownership: Whose responsibility is it to secure the future of Milwaukee's students? In some cases, distinct strategies for the different school sectors may be the most feasible. In other cases, it may be more advisable or powerful to pursue truly citywide coordination.

Lead boldly for the long term

We identified this theme not only in the national case studies but also in our research on local exemplars: Leaders identified the work of school improvement and success as a deep commitment carried out over years. It also required political will to face difficult realities and address them with at times painful solutions. D.C.'s willingness to change its governance model, redo its teacher evaluation and compensation system, and close schools exemplifies this committed approach, as did Chicago's school closures, the Department of Defense's wholesale implementation of new

standards, and Charlotte's head-on approach to confronting the lack of upward economic mobility for its poorest residents.

Policy in Practice: Set conditions to support new MPS leadership

At the time of this report's publication, Dr. Brenda Cassellius is in her first weeks as the new MPS superintendent. Her ability to lead boldly for the long term will depend not only on her own skills and the team that she assembles, but also her relationships with key stakeholders who could serve as partners or foils. Those include MPS board members, a third of whom will turn over this spring; district and school staff; the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association; Milwaukee's civic, business, and grassroots community leadership, including the mayor and the county executive; and state officials. Barring a change in current district governance structures (as some have called for), the new superintendent will need some level of cooperation from each of these entities in order to act both with urgency and sustainability. We hope this report may prove of some use in her transition, as will the recently released operational audit of MPS that was authorized by the governor. The latter makes clear both the external forces working against MPS and the urgently needed actions that are well within the district's locus of control. The governor also requested an instructional audit that has yet to be released.

Policy in Practice: Establish clear, committed civic ownership

Even if strong new MPS leadership emerges in supportive conditions, the MPS superintendent and board are not directly responsible for all students educated in Milwaukee. Indeed, no single governing entity within the city currently has sightlines across its full landscape of traditional public schools, charter schools, and private choice programs. This local vacuum limits opportunities for sharing data, coordinating between schools as well as with other partners, improving school and family supports, applying accountability measures fairly across schools, and making the system easier to navigate for families.

While past efforts to install mayoral control have not come to fruition, policymakers may still consider other avenues by which to establish citywide ownership of Milwaukee's youth outcomes. Some possible mechanisms include a deputy mayor of education, designated to exercise the soft power of the office; a council made up of representatives from the mayor's office, Common Council, the county executive's office, and the governing bodies for the three school sectors (including DPI for the private choice programs); or a public-private partnership similar to Charlotte's advisory council that brings together elected, bureaucratic, civic, and community leaders.

If such a path were chosen, the newly established "owner" would benefit from starting with a well-defined mission, scope, and authority to act. It would also ideally be a person or entity that begins with a high level of public trust and goodwill, to mitigate any public distrust of new layers of bureaucracy, politics, or cost tied to its establishment.

Policy in Practice: Develop and track metrics that focus attention on whether schools across the city hold high expectations for students, receive needed supports, are held accountable, and clearly communicate school quality to families

One specific action that established civic "owners" might take is to set a common standard for what we should expect of all Milwaukee schools. While the state's Report Card offers a version of this

standard, school leaders reported putting little stock in its findings, in part due to its frequent changes, nor did they report seeing families use it as a primary resource in school selection decisions. Others have pointed to the difficulty of finding the Report Cards in the first place or of understanding the demographic, structural, and score weighting differences between schools.

D.C. and Denver each developed performance frameworks to apply to all schools, and following their example may offer an opportunity to report what most matters to Milwaukee residents and leaders. Revisions to the state Report Card or clearer communications about it may also achieve the same end. As is always the case, however, defining the framework or rating system's primary *audience* would be critical, since different stakeholders will value different data points and use them for different ends.

Ideally, a unified and transparent framework lends itself to later difficult conversations about how to best allocate supports to schools. In cases of chronic underperformance despite strong supports, it informs discussions about how to hold schools accountable. This question of accountability is both particularly thorny and relevant in a city like Milwaukee that will likely be facing school closures in the near future due to declining student enrollment (as discussed later in this section). A public civic framework may also invite other innovations– for example, a unified enrollment system, a citywide data dashboard, or parent training sessions on how to best leverage the available data, all of which have featured in other cities' reforms.

Focus on a few high-impact strategies grounded in local data and then track them

Paired with the previous theme, this one discourages leaders from over-extending themselves and the system. Rather, the actions to which leaders and a community commit should be the "right" things: a limited number of strategies with a strong evidence base behind them. Once identified and implemented, these strategies should be monitored for success, with course corrections if necessary. Chicago offers perhaps the clearest example of this approach, with its deliberate data work to identify Algebra One pass rates, freshmen on-track rates, and five essential school environment metrics as critical to changing the overall trajectory of Chicago schools. The Department of Defense's laser focus on new standards also applies here, particularly with its benefits in the face of student mobility.

Which metrics or strategies deserve Milwaukee's undivided attention will be a matter of local determination and an opportunity for prioritization and partnership. The Milwaukee Succeeds initiative offered an initial vision of four goals and "11 different areas of educational importance" from its founding in 2011 until 2019, when it refocused on solely early childhood education and high school success. The Redefining Ready initiative has gained traction nationally and regionally for its re-envisioning of school quality priorities. A sampling of current civic organizing reveals a breadth of other possible focus areas, including the My Brother's Keeper initiative's pillars of Black youth high school graduation, postsecondary education completion, safe neighborhoods, and gainful employment. Elementary school literacy tutoring programs both fledgling (like Forward Scholars and 95 Wisconsin) and well established (like Reading Corps and the Tragil Wade-Johnson Summer Reading Program) represent another point of potential focus, as do youth activists' calls for better nutrition and trauma-informed support in schools.

Attempting to focus civic attention on all of these at once is unlikely to yield focused action. Our *Roll Call* analysis suggests fourth grade reading scores, eighth grade math scores, the share of students scoring “below basic” (or “developing,” in the current parlance), chronic absenteeism, and student mobility as specific issues ripe for coordinated attack, especially to the degree that proposed solutions can acknowledge the particularly negative current outcomes for the city’s Black students. Given the recent discovery of unsafe lead conditions in some MPS schools, we would now add safety and health to this short list, not only for the sake of children’s immediate health but also in acknowledgment of these as preconditions for any other school improvements or efforts to stem enrollment losses.

Policy in Practice: Take on chronic absenteeism as a critical, citywide issue

In 2023, 36.8% of Milwaukee’s charter school students in 2023 missed 10% or more of school days in the year, over twice as many as were chronically absent before the pandemic. In MPS, meanwhile, absenteeism had already been above 30% pre-pandemic and in 2023 affected over half (51.3%) of students. Recently released 2024 data show some limited improvements, but the figures remain alarmingly above pre-pandemic norms. Until these numbers improve significantly, any school-based intervention will be inherently limited and will not reach those youth arguably most in need of connection.

A multifaceted effort to address chronic absenteeism in both a targeted and holistic way could begin by identifying its primary causes, identifying the roles that many actors – from schools to government agencies, nonprofits, and businesses – can play in remediating those causes, and tracking collective progress to reverse these numbers and set school attendance back on track. D.C. has already modeled this work through cross-agency collaboration and seen meaningful results in decreasing its chronic absenteeism rates, as have other cities outside of our case studies, like Providence, Rhode Island. In Milwaukee, there may be a particular value in collaboration between the city, schools, and the county on this issue, especially via the county’s Department of Health and Human Services, which comes in frequent contact with parents and youth. Note that no city-wide database is currently available to display real-time data and facilitate cross-sector action.

Policy in Practice: Secure data to investigate student mobility causes and solutions

As previously discussed, when students move between schools, both their schooling and their relationships are interrupted. Meanwhile, schools with high student mobility struggle to maintain a consistent school culture, and any school improvement efforts may not take root if students are not present for long enough to benefit from them.

Yet, few quantitative data are easily available to understand the full scope of the issue or to inform initiatives to resolve it. The last time that an in-depth analysis for Milwaukee was published was 2018, and it required a lengthy collaboration between the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, and DPI. Further qualitative data would also help diagnose root causes and therefore solutions. For example, if student mobility is largely driven by poverty and housing instability, that invites a meaningfully different set of policy interventions than mobility driven by families who are dissatisfied with one school and therefore switch to another (a relatively easy move given the many school choices in Milwaukee) or than transfers due to student discipline issues. A recent Milwaukee parent poll from the Institute for Reforming Government shed some initial light on the issue, finding that a full quarter of respondents’ children had changed schools every one to three

years. The most frequent reasons selected included better academics, proximity to home, and better alignment with values or religion.

Even without more detailed data, some action to mitigate the impact of student mobility may still be possible. The Department of Defense's commitment to standardized high-quality instruction across all of its schools offers a lesson here, as students can expect to find the same curriculum and high expectations at any school they attend. Such standardization would be more difficult within the decentralized school choice environment of Milwaukee, although state mandates or opt-in campaigns, communities of practice, or coordination between schools may still be possible.

Foster collaboration to increase capacity and support community commitment

Although many of the local and national exemplars examined depended upon strong individual leadership, they also relied upon partnerships, which lightened the load on schools and expanded their potential impact. D.C. took on chronic absenteeism as a citywide issue in part by coordinating its educational and social service agencies. Chicago knew where to focus its school improvement energy thanks to collaboration with local researchers, and it improved the quality of its teachers and principals through targeted two-way relationships with local colleges of education and talent nonprofits. Charlotte's wounded civic pride brought actors from around the county together to examine multifaceted solutions that no single actor would be able to carry out alone.

As noted in an earlier theme, partnerships may be most effective when focused, rather than inviting many cooks into the kitchen without a clear recipe. Even when not at maximum efficacy, however, they can still build community trust and communicate educational progress as a shared community goal. Within the context of Milwaukee's politically fractured school landscape and reduced public trust in public schools, those benefits may carry particular weight. Indeed, the recently released operational audit of MPS highlights "restor[ing] trust" and "increasing trust and partnership with community stakeholders" as top priorities for the district and are goals in which all three sectors might reasonably share.

Some collaborations may birth collective action efforts reminiscent of attempts from Milwaukee's past – for example, the Transformative Reading Instruction model first piloted in Milwaukee in 2014, which showed promising progress and subsequently expanded to more schools across Milwaukee's school sectors before COVID disrupted attempts to transition its leadership from city nonprofit Milwaukee Succeeds to the district and schools themselves. Also in 2014, multiple high-profile organizations combined their resources to holistically support Carver Elementary, yielding some positive changes but ultimately minimal payoff in student results. As reported by Erin Richards for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, student mobility was the initiative's Achilles heel, with too few children remaining at Carver over enough months to benefit from the improved learning environment. Other observers pointed to teacher and principal turnover as further undermining factors, which also negatively affected the Transformative Reading Instruction interventions.

These past experiences both point to Milwaukee's potential for future collective efforts and offer cautionary tales of what may derail them. The city's declining youth population may prove to be a particular source of tension, since it is likely to exacerbate the competition for students and funding between schools and sectors. Places like Chicago, D.C., Denver, and Miami-Dade County have shown how such competition might contribute to positive results for children if supported by strong

leadership, support, accountability, and data transparency. It remains to be seen whether the current state of Milwaukee education – including not only the approaching enrollment crisis but also heightened public scrutiny, the arrival of a new superintendent for MPS, and the election of new school board members – will increase or decrease the chances for productive competition and collaboration.

Policy in Practice: Collaborate with outside partners to target school improvement efforts with data

Focusing a school or district's efforts on the highest-leverage strategies starts with good data. While leaders and educators still need to know their own data, external partnerships with skilled researchers and data experts can lighten the load on school leaders, allow for more innovative or long-term examinations than the daily demands on school administration typically allow, and build community investment, bringing more people into the work of supporting schools. Chicago saw such a partnership play out to powerful effect in its work with the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research; similar collaborations in Milwaukee may yield even more fruit, especially if they are able to support data work across all three school sectors. It bears acknowledging, however, that data requirements and availability vary substantially across the sectors, meaning that some cross-sector work would likely only be possible under new state mandates or via opt-in participation.

School improvement efforts based on data may also lend themselves to differentiated support and accountability models that take schools' varied conditions into account. To that end, D.C. and Chicago implemented district-supported "clusters" of schools, while Chicago further established – as did Denver – "zones" of schools that operated with greater flexibility paired with more supports and accountability.

Policy in Practice: Coordinate citywide advocacy for additional resources while ensuring the best use of existing resources

School leaders in Milwaukee commonly spoke of the need to go outside of public funding to secure the dollars necessary to do their work well. It remains to be seen to what extent the ongoing implementation of the MPS referendum may lessen that pressure for district schools, and what role the 2025-27 state budget will play in shaping school finances. In the meantime, some shared areas of concern may unite the sectors and offer opportunities for joint advocacy – for example, increasing special education and bilingual-bicultural education reimbursement levels, funding full-day pre-kindergarten, reestablishing a tie between the rate of inflation and increases to base K-12 funding, and weighting the base funding levels to account for student poverty (as is done in the majority of states, including those home to the majority of our highlighted NAEP examples).

At the same time, the city's declining youth population means that the deployment of some existing resources should be re-evaluated, including staff assignments (discussed further in the next theme) and the use of school facilities. At the time of publication, MPS had retained a consulting firm to produce a long-range facilities master plan for the district. Implementing that plan will involve bold leadership and will also benefit from close collaboration with community leaders and residents, acknowledging both short-term costs and disruptions and long-term benefits. Recent reports of lead exposure at some MPS schools adds greater urgency to this work on facilities. At least some charter schools and private schools will likely face their own challenges of overall student enrollment decline, which may lead some civic leaders to think strategically about facilities across all three sectors. Ultimately, leaders should consider whether any potentially necessary school closures could

also represent a chance to preserve strong schools, remove some of the city's worst performing schools, and invest in neighborhoods.

Recruit, develop, and retain educators who believe in our children and are equipped with appropriate skills and resources

More than speaking to simply a talent pipeline, this theme reflects the commitment we found in national and local leaders to instructional excellence and continuous improvement. The Department of Defense invests in its teachers not only through competitive pay and benefits but also through regular feedback cycles that help teachers learn and students achieve. D.C. rewards and retains its highest-rated teachers through a compensation and evaluation system that also incentivizes the best teachers to work at the highest need schools. When Chicago examined Algebra One pass rates and determined that its Algebra One teachers needed more training, it reassigned some of them (instead bringing in stronger teachers from other math courses) and sent others back to school but only after working directly with the relevant colleges of education to ensure that the training matched their needs and expectations.

"Educators" here also includes principals, which all three case study locations identified as critical to school success (a finding validated by independent national research). To leverage their potential impact, Chicago in particular adopted a strategy of pairing principal support with autonomy: equipping talented school leaders with skills and resources to run their schools as they knew best.

In Milwaukee, discussion of the talent pipeline can sometimes be constrained to recruitment. It is true that Milwaukee needs more teachers, particularly in high-needs schools and subject areas. To address recruitment without also accounting for how to develop teachers' skills and retain them for maximum positive impact on students, however, would be a half-solution that would also ignore the potential for Milwaukee to more intentionally identify and empower its principals. Ideally, more and stronger initial teacher candidates grow into the profession through continuous improvement and become both excellent teachers and potential candidates for administrative leadership. Extending that growth and support to principals could also stem the city's high principal turnover rates, which destabilize schools and improvement efforts.

Policy in Practice: Coordinate campaigns to attract talent for longer-term retention

Recognizing the city's workforce needs, several Milwaukee efforts to recruit and train new teachers are either already well established, ranging from teacher preparation programs at local colleges of education to nonprofits such as the Center for Urban Teaching, City Year Milwaukee, Teach For America – Milwaukee, and the Urban Learning Collaborative. With each one pursuing its own goals, seizing or creating further opportunities for coordination could help ensure that the sum total of these efforts adequately covers the city's needs. For example, is teacher recruitment tailored to match the city's particular staffing needs in special education, bilingual education, science, and math? Is recruitment solely focused on teachers, or does it also capture other critical roles such as principals, instructional and pupil services personnel, and support staff? If one placement program focuses on a single sector, are other programs supporting the other sectors? For what educator mindsets do programs recruit, and how do they align with teacher quality and retention research? Are all programs intentionally recruiting and supporting candidates of color, to diversify the workforce? How promising are programs that begin recruitment in high school through dual enrollment or career pathways?

Beyond alignment of their current work, collaboration between these organizations could also yield new ideas or initiatives designed to improve recruitment and retention system-wide. One initiative might mirror the mission of Visit Milwaukee and market teaching in Milwaukee to those who might not otherwise consider it. Another might identify barriers to licensure, support candidates in overcoming them, and lobby for the removal of those barriers. A third might incubate alternative pathways into teaching, like apprenticeship or residency programs. Finally, a concerted effort to understand and address teacher turnover and teacher absenteeism could go a long way toward not only stabilizing the workforce but also supporting school improvement efforts.

Policy in Practice: Partner with existing programs to target teacher and principal preparation and further develop and retain current educators

If the previous policy option focuses on *who* comes into the educator workforce, this one centers on *what* they are taught. As Chicago learned, becoming a successful teacher or principal in the city involved mastering a distinct skillset on top of general education training. Fostering more two-way communication between Milwaukee's schools and its talent pipelines on specific needs – for example, training on new science of reading expectations, proven pedagogical approaches, or urban school leadership – could yield educators who are more likely to succeed and stay. Local colleges of education concerned with both enrollment and graduation rates may find this a particularly appealing option, since it opens up a new cadre of potential enrollees – namely, teachers or school leaders coming back to school to retrain on specific skills. It may also provide them with feedback on the effectiveness of their programs if they can track the success and longevity of their graduates.

Policy in Practice: Balance principal support with autonomy and vision for excellence

Levels of principal autonomy vary widely across Milwaukee, from the most traditional district public school to the most independent single-site charter or private school. School leaders are rarely positioned for success at either extreme: in theory, too much autonomy without enough support can leave a principal flailing, while too much prescriptive "support" does not leverage the specific insight and potential power of the principal position. The process of correcting either imbalance will look different based on the context of each sector and school; for example, the principal of a private school with little oversight might seek out a community of exemplar principals (some of which are already established by existing formal and informal efforts), while an MPS regional superintendent might differentiate the level of support or autonomy granted to principals based on their student outcomes. The common goal may be to ensure that principals are empowered to lead with the skills, community, and high expectations to do so both effectively and sustainably. Achieving that goal would also likely pay dividends for teacher retention, as teachers routinely cite staff culture and leadership support as reasons to remain or depart from their roles.

Policy in Practice: Explore ties between educator quality, school placement, compensation, and retention

Little reliable public data currently tracks how educators are distributed across Milwaukee schools and sectors by years of experience or quality of teaching. Beginning to collect and report these data would allow for first establishing a baseline understanding of which students have access to which teachers. Over time, these data could also seed initiatives to increase the odds that the highest need students benefit from the best teachers and most stable school environments, akin to the pay and retention incentives implemented in D.C. and Denver. A few non-district schools in Milwaukee have already begun experimenting with such practices.

Support families and neighborhoods outside of school

While this report focuses on education and ways that Milwaukee's schools could better serve children, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the policies and realities outside of school that currently make high-quality teaching and learning a difficult enterprise for students and educators. Indeed, ignoring the factors affecting students before and after school would mean missing a substantial opportunity to lighten the load on schools – not to mention materially benefit youth and families themselves. The Department of Defense has acknowledged the important role that military family stability plays in supporting their students' readiness to learn; D.C. has begun more intentionally turning its attention to neighborhood interventions as part of shoring up its schools; and the fact remains that every city participating in the district NAEP exam with a child poverty rate as high as Milwaukee's also struggles to show meaningful growth and attainment (though some still exceed progress in this city).

The range of possible focus areas to address student and family needs is daunting, but the issues most frequently raised in local interviews included housing stability; public safety; racial and economic segregation; and broader and deeper interventions for the birth to five period of a child's life, including more support for new parents and guardians in Milwaukee, supported transitions for families from infancy into the early childhood education and care system and later into K-12 schooling, and greater affordability, accessibility, and quality within the child care system.

The national exemplars discussed thus far offer some ideas on this front – for example, D.C.'s introduction of free, full-day, universal PreK; the integration advantages of the Department of Defense schools, Boston's busing program, and D.C.'s changing demographics; and the countywide response of Charlotte-Mecklenburg to improve upward economic mobility. Ultimately, however, specific and actionable reforms to address poverty and families' needs merit examination in their own right alongside the equally urgent work to improve education.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of publishing *Roll Call*, which raised and amplified concerns about the current and long-term health of Milwaukee's education landscape, and other recent news, leaders at both the local and state level justifiably asked what could be done to better serve the city's students. This question sometimes contained an insidious, nagging doubt – *could* anything be done?

Our work in this report set out to offer insight and initial answers based on existing work both within the city's schools and from outside Milwaukee. Our results validated some of the fears expressed in the second question: Milwaukee's very high levels of child poverty, the destabilizing effect of its student mobility, and the difficulty of coordinating strategic action across its many sectors and schools all create material challenges for any serious attempt to reform the system, whether by trying to expand the success of Milwaukee's current bright spots or by trying to apply the lessons from other cities.

At the same time, those local bright spots and national exemplars shared enough similarities with Milwaukee to suggest that better outcomes for Milwaukee's children are indeed possible, even under current conditions. Our examples also shared enough common drivers of success as to increase confidence that they could be applied to Milwaukee, with some adaptation to local context.

On the **school-based** side, we observed that relatively few schools in Milwaukee exceed the city's average academic growth and achievement scores while also educating a student population reflective of the city's typical youth needs. Those that do, however, were likely to point to the following levers as foundational for their positive results, offering a blueprint for other schools looking to improve:

- Unifying mission and stable staff and culture
- High expectations paired with nurturing supports
- Commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement
- Proactive, intentional family engagement
- Additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships
- School-level autonomy, accountability, and support

On the **system-based** side, our three national case studies and supplementary highlights from four other cities and counties yielded the following strategies for improving student outcomes:

- Lead boldly for the long term
- Focus on a few high-impact levers identified through data and implemented with fidelity
- Recruit, develop, and retain talent
- Offer school support, accountability, and data transparency, including in environments of school choice and autonomy
- Increase and equitably distribute school system resources
- Support families and neighborhoods outside of school

These school- and system-based themes echo each other, highlighting the overarching importance of **strong leadership** at every level (administration, school, and classroom); **high expectations** for what both staff and students can accomplish; accompanying **supports** and a growth mindset so that staff and students believe they can reach those high expectations; school **accountability** if they do not;

data informing both the selection of interventions and monitoring of their progress; **resources** obtained and strategically allocated to do all of this work; and acknowledgment of the role of influential factors **outside of school**.

Together, the lessons from within and outside of Milwaukee point to broad actions that the city might take to change its educational trajectory, some of which directly mirror the themes already named from our national exemplars. Where applicable, we highlighted possible focus areas but acknowledge that specific implementation will ultimately depend upon policymakers' discernment, interest, and political will. While some of these focus areas could involve state or federal actors, they can largely be directed at a local level – a notable point given the current relationship between the blue-leaning city and red-leaning state Legislature, and given the current federal uncertainty.

- **Lead boldly for the long term.** This action encompasses not only the new MPS superintendent but also the civic community at large, reflecting the spread and interdependence of Milwaukee's students across sectors. It requires being willing to identify needed reforms and act accordingly, while also bringing along key stakeholders to build trust and sustainability. Tracking commonly defined metrics (although not always an easy task in the current data landscape across sectors) would be key to informing this leadership, from highlighting successes to determining needed interventions to communicating with families.

- **Focus on a few high-impact levers grounded in local data and then track them.** Not only bold but also strategic action defines effective leadership. Two immediate opportunities for focus in Milwaukee include chronic absenteeism, which remains shockingly high in the wake of the pandemic, and student mobility, on which we currently have little data to help inform possible in-school or out-of-school interventions.

- **Foster collaboration to increase capacity and support community commitment.** Where schools can strategically partner with each other and with sectors outside of education, they can expand their access to resources like money, talent, and data insights. Higher education, nonprofits, and businesses all have potential roles to play. Joint advocacy on shared interests at the state level, including funding, may pay dividends across the sectors. Schools also need to consider their existing resources, especially within the context of a declining student population in the city. Stretching staff thin across school buildings strains finances, the quality of students' experience, and community trust. Other resource constraints can contribute to schools that are under-enrolled or even in violation of health standards.

- **Recruit, develop, and retain educators who believe in our children and are equipped with appropriate skills and resources.** Milwaukee's bright spot schools rely on educators with high expectations for children and a growth mindset toward their own development, creating a positive culture that fosters staff stability. They are outliers in an education landscape otherwise often characterized by high teacher turnover, vacancies in key subject areas, and little intentional correlation between teacher quality and student needs. The various existing programs to address Milwaukee's educator workforce needs may find that coordinating their efforts allows them to expand their recruitment and retention impact, while new partnerships between schools and training programs (including colleges of education) could further develop current educators. These include principals, who may represent an under-tapped lever for school improvement in the city if imbued with both autonomy and skill development.

- **Support families and neighborhoods outside of school.** Alongside the school system-based work outlined above, parallel efforts to address some of the city's most pressing issues for families and neighborhoods would alleviate the challenges facing students and schools. These issues include housing stability; public safety; racial and economic segregation; and broader and deeper interventions for the birth to five period of a child's life.

All of these paths forward depend upon determination, strategy, and a willingness to treat the city's many types of schools as part of the same system, serving the same students. These qualities have not always been present across Milwaukee, especially when competition between the three school sectors has proven isolating rather than productive. The city also suffers from the normalization of deeply negative outcomes as reported in the NAEP test scores (and by nearly any other academic metric), which have remained entrenched for decades. It has been too easy in the past for Milwaukee to ignore the urgency of these outcomes, to blame them on one sector or another, or to claim that no progress is possible until underlying social conditions improve. A shrinking population of students means that failure to chart a new trajectory will become more costly than ever.

Fortunately, other cities have seen seemingly immovable outcomes start to improve when pushed with a deliberate, concentrated will. There are school leaders in Milwaukee who are already showing that outcomes could be different and more positive for children here. Milwaukee's mayor has called for increasing the city's population to one million people, an impossible goal if families do not believe they can raise their children and give them a good education here. It is possible – but first, we must raise the bar for what we expect for Milwaukee students and act accordingly.

APPENDIX A: WPF STUDY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Committee Member	Most Recent Organizational Affiliation
Alan Borsuk	Lubar Center for Public Policy Research and Civic Education at Marquette University Law School
Anne Chapman	Wisconsin Association of School Business Officials
Chris Thiel	Milwaukee Public Schools
Colleston Morgan	City Forward Collective
Gabriel Velez, Ph.D.	Marquette University, College of Education and BLEST Hub
Laura Gutiérrez	United Community Center
Quinton Klabon	Institute for Reforming Government
Rashida Evans	TNTP

Note: Listings reflect members' most recent organizational affiliations at the time of the study advisory committee's first convening in December 2023.

The Forum is also grateful for the contributions of Dr. Jeanette Mitchell, Dr. Joshua Cowen, Walter Lanier, and Bob Peterson to the first report in this two-report series.

APPENDIX B: HIGH-GROWTH, HIGHER ACHIEVING MILWAUKEE SCHOOLS, 2023

Schools that serve at least 80% economically disadvantaged students and at least 80% students of a single race – so-called “80/80 schools” – are marked in *italics*.

Note that these lists represent classifications from a single year. Some schools listed as Q4 in 2023 were instead Q3 in 2022, and vice-versa, for example. Other schools might fluctuate above or below the 80/80 threshold from year to year. In all, these lists should not be taken as a definitive ranking of Milwaukee schools but rather as a point-in-time illustration of some of Milwaukee’s highest quality K-12 institutions.

Quadrant 4+ Schools

Schools that scored above the state average in both achievement and growth, 2023 Report Card

School Name (alphabetical)
Bay View Montessori School
Catholic East Elementary
Divine Savior Holy Angels High School
Fernwood Montessori
Golda Meir School
Marquette University High School
Maryland Montessori
Milwaukee German Immersion
Nativity Jesuit Academy
New Testament Christian Academy
Reagan College Preparatory High
Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic School
Saint Gregory the Great Parish School
Saint John's Lutheran School
Saint Lucas Lutheran School
Saint Sebastian School
Saint Thomas Aquinas Academy
Whittier Elementary
Yeshiva Elementary School

Quadrant 4 Schools
Schools that scored above the city average in both achievement and growth but are not Q4+ schools, 2023 Report Card

School Name (alphabetical)
Academy of Accelerated Learning
ALBA (Academia de Lenguaje y Bellas Artes)
Alcott Elementary
Blessed Sacrament Catholic School
Bruce Guadalupe School
Carmen Middle School South
Christ St. Peter Lutheran School
Cooper Elementary
Fairview Elementary
Garden Homes Lutheran School
Garland Elementary
Greenfield Bilingual School
Highland Community School
Humboldt Park Elementary
IDEAL (Individualized Developmental Educational Approaches to Learning)
King International High School
Milwaukee College Preparatory School: 36th Street Campus
Milwaukee College Preparatory School: 38th Street
Milwaukee College Preparatory School: Lloyd Street
Milwaukee College Preparatory School: Lola Rowe North Campus
Milwaukee French Immersion
Milwaukee Parkside School
Mother of Good Counsel School
Mount Lebanon Lutheran School
Mount Olive Christian Day School
Northwest Lutheran School
Notre Dame School of Milwaukee
Our Lady Queen of Peace
Pathways High
Prince of Peace
Risen Savior Lutheran School
Saint Adalbert School
Saint Augustine Preparatory Academy
Saint John Paul II School
Saint Marcus Lutheran School

Saint Martini Lutheran School
Saint Peter Immanuel Lutheran School
Saint Rafael the Archangel School
Saint Roman Parish School
Saint Vincent Pallotti Catholic School
Salam School
Salem Evangelical Lutheran School
Seeds of Health Elementary Program
Tamarack Waldorf School
Trowbridge Street School of Great Lakes Studies
United Community Center Acosta Middle School
Victory Elementary
Vieau Elementary
Whitman Elementary
Woodlands School