



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

**Contact:** Mark Sommerhauser, Communications Director & Researcher  
(608) 982-0324 or [msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org](mailto:msommerhauser@wispolicyforum.org)

**For release:**  
March 27, 2025

## Raising the Bar: Local and National Lessons for Milwaukee's K-12 Schools

*Using data and interviews, report draws lessons from peers with improved student outcomes*

With too few Milwaukee students receiving an adequate education across all school types, leaders in the city can look to high-performing schools in Milwaukee and around the country for a roadmap for improvement, a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds.

The report identifies and explores drivers of success for exemplary Milwaukee schools serving large shares of disadvantaged students. It also finds themes shared by other large cities that have become national examples of improvement in student outcomes.

The study draws on these findings, as well as consideration of Milwaukee's specific context and needs, to lay out five areas for potential action. This report is the second in a two-part series on Milwaukee's education ecosystem, [the first of which](#) was published last year.

The first report found that, despite a growing range of schooling options for families, educational outcomes for the average Milwaukee child have not transformed over the last decade – and in many respects have worsened after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the city's declining youth population alongside the growth in the number of schools has created financial strain and competition for resources spread across a large number of school facilities.

The new report offers ideas for charting a path forward based on analysis of educational data as well as interviews with school leaders locally and nationally. "Other cities have seen seemingly immovable outcomes start to improve when pushed with a deliberate, concentrated will," the report finds. It further finds that "there are school leaders in Milwaukee who are already showing that outcomes could be different and more positive for children."

### Shared drivers of success and improvement

Locally, we examined the 29.2% of Milwaukee schools that exceeded the city's 2023 average for student academic achievement and growth. We found six shared drivers of success among the subset serving a student population representative of typical Milwaukee schools:

- **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**; and
- School-level **autonomy**, **accountability**, and **support**.

Nationally, studying educational improvements achieved in other cities makes clear that, while Milwaukee faces some unique challenges, poor academic outcomes for its children need not be the norm. Examples of impactful levers pulled by school systems as diverse as Washington, D.C., Chicago, and the Department of Defense schools include governance change to spark bold action and collaboration; evaluation and compensation systems to incentivize educator quality especially at the neediest schools; and ambitious, methodically implemented academic standards. Further highlights from Denver, Miami-Dade County, Boston, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg County flesh out our list of themes underlying growth and success stories from elsewhere.

### Five areas for action

After considering the school- and system-based levers for educational change in bright spots both within Milwaukee and around the country, five focus areas for potential action emerged as particularly applicable to Milwaukee's context, opportunities, and needs. They include:

**Lead boldly for the long term:** MPS is welcoming a new superintendent, who has an immediate opportunity to make urgently needed changes and sustain them. But, with no single governing entity responsible for Milwaukee's full K-12 landscape – including MPS, charters, and private choice – other leadership opportunities also exist, including for elected, civic, and community representatives. These groups may take on the challenging work of setting a common standard of excellence across Milwaukee schools, effectively communicating it to families, coordinating supports to schools, and encouraging tough decisions on school accountability or declining student enrollment.

**Focus on a few high-impact levers grounded in local data, then track them:** Effective leadership requires action that is not just bold, but strategic. Selecting priority focus areas ideally involves engagement with key stakeholders and reference to reliable data. For Milwaukee, possible areas of focus could include chronic absenteeism, student mobility, and remediating lead levels in schools.

**Foster collaboration to increase capacity and support community commitment:** Where Milwaukee schools can strategically partner with each other and with sectors outside of education, they can expand their access to resources like money, talent, and analytics. Schools also need to consider their existing resources, especially within the context of a declining student population in the city.

**Recruit, develop, and retain educators who believe in our children and are equipped with appropriate skills and resources:** Stemming teacher and principal turnover through targeted support, greater autonomy, and coordination between existing programs (including nonprofits, colleges of education, and K-12 schools) could improve both school stability and educator quality. More data on educator distribution across Milwaukee may inform incentives to strategically place and retain great teachers.

**Support families and neighborhoods outside of school:** Outside the school system, additional efforts could help address challenges facing many Milwaukee students and families. These include public safety, housing instability, and racial and economic segregation. Additional measures could include enhanced interventions for the birth-to-five period of a child's life.

Part of the funding for this research series was provided by the Northwestern Mutual Foundation. The Forum's overall education research portfolio has also received support from the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and the Lannon Stone Foundation. [Click here](#) to read the new report.

*The Wisconsin Policy Forum is the state's leading source of nonpartisan, independent research on state and local public policy. As a nonprofit, our research is supported by members including hundreds of corporations, nonprofits, local governments, school districts, and individuals. Visit [wispolicyforum.org](http://wispolicyforum.org) to learn more.*