

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RAISING THE BAR

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



WISCONSIN
POLICY FORUM

Three decades after Milwaukee became a national leader in overhauling its K-12 education system, options for Milwaukee families in selecting a school have increased greatly. As our 2024 report [Roll Call: A Landscape Review of the Students, Financing, and Performance of Milwaukee's K-12 Schools](#) showed, however, too many children remain deprived of an adequate education in the city across all types of schools. In addition, the city's declining youth population alongside growth in the number of schools has created financial strain and competition for limited resources spread across a large number of school facilities, including some with longstanding maintenance needs. With public and financial pressure mounting and the future of Milwaukee's children at stake, what insights might help chart a new path forward for education in the city?

This report approaches that question by looking both inward and outward – that is, researching both bright spots within Milwaukee's existing schools and relevant lessons from other cities around the country that have made more educational progress than Milwaukee. Conceived as the second and final report in the series that began with *Roll Call*, and published in a moment of particular transition for Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), we hope it is valuable to policymakers and residents as they consider how to raise the bar for what we expect of Milwaukee schools and students.

Local Exemplars Share Common School-Based Levers of Success

Across the 29.2% of Milwaukee schools that exceeded the city's 2023 average for students' academic achievement and growth, several ingredients for success appear to hold constant. Key observations from our analysis of these schools' data and interviews with school leaders include the following:

- **Milwaukee schools with high growth and higher-than-average achievement share some characteristics, but none appear to be defining.** Compared to the typical Milwaukee school, the 69 schools exceeding expectations in 2023 were more likely to be racially and economically integrated, with a less disadvantaged student population. Approximately half (47.5%) of students attending these schools were educated within MPS, with 34.9% participating in private choice programs, and the remaining 17.5% at charter schools. One-third of the 69 schools operated as part of a charter or choice network, which may confer some advantages of scale and support. At least 17.4% were schools organized under a defined instructional purpose like Montessori, International Baccalaureate, or whole-school language programming, which may attract and unite students and staff. None of these characteristics appeared to be guarantees of success, however, as demonstrated by plentiful counterexamples of schools that did not share their growth or achievement results despite sharing demographics, sector, network status, or instructional purpose.
- **Exemplary schools serving high proportions of disadvantaged students share six drivers of success.** These drivers are listed in Table 1 alongside recent national research from the nonprofit TNTP. First and foremost, each school operated under a defined and unifying *mission*, which served as a foundation for the rest of its work and appeared to attract and retain both students and staff, reducing mobility in a city otherwise marked by transience. Once inside the school, students are held to *high expectations* paired with *nurturing supports* so that they can achieve success. For educators, this combination of expectations and supports manifests in a schoolwide commitment to *instructional excellence* and to continuously honing their craft via coaching, targeted professional development, and data-driven focus areas. *Families* are an important part of these schools' work, and not one that



staff take for granted; rather than waiting for families to engage, they reach out proactively and intentionally to develop relationships. Leaders also draw upon *partnerships* and *fundraising* to increase the resources available to their school. Finally, school leaders at these exemplary schools operated with a balance of *autonomy* to make decisions for their school, *support* in making those decisions, and a sense of *accountability* for their results.

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](#)"

- Exemplary schools also face challenges, which are likely exacerbated at Milwaukee schools featuring lower student achievement and growth.** Some frequent concerns cited by interviewed school leaders related to staffing (both hiring and retention), how adequately students were prepared for the next stage of their academic journey, and ongoing negative repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, including on family engagement, student absenteeism and mobility, and teacher behavior. Other concerns were more structural, including the degree to which neighborhood instability challenged schools' work, families' lack of access to high-quality early education and care, and school funding levels.

Addressing these challenges will be critical to expanding school success in the city. To do so, education leaders, policymakers, and advocates may wish to consider these questions:

- 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 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 different school types face that, if mitigated, could propel those schools to higher student achievement and growth?
- 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?

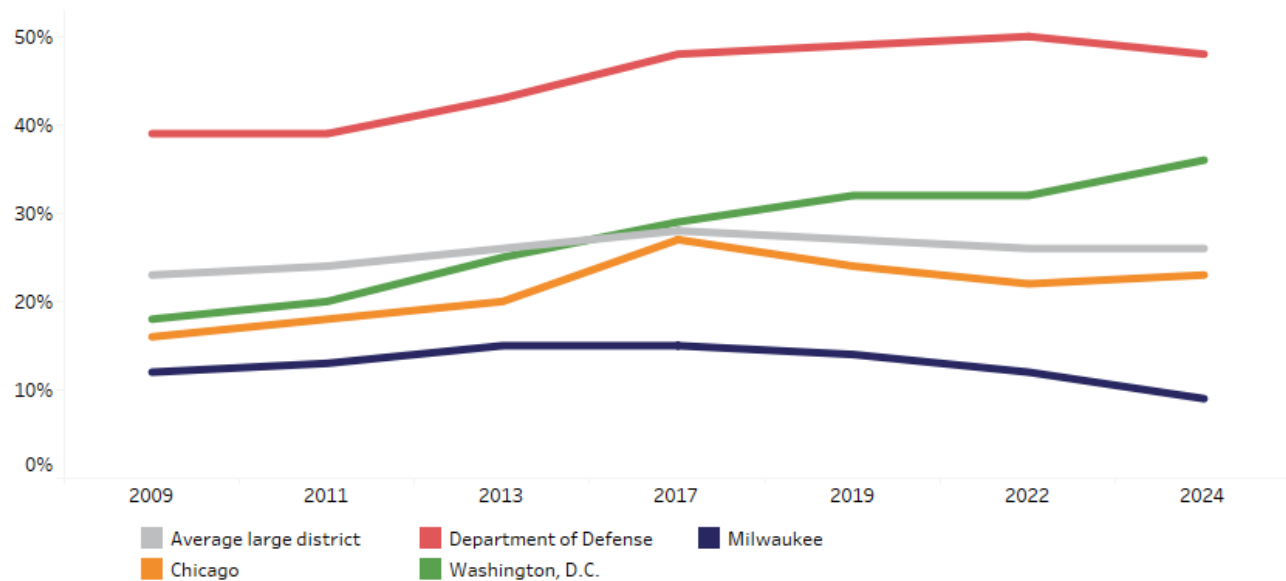
National Examples Point to System-Level Improvement Opportunities

Not only exemplar schools within Milwaukee but also other cities’ educational improvements strongly indicate that the overall low academic outcomes for Milwaukee’s children need not be the norm. We used nationally normed student achievement data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to select three case studies and four additional highlights from around the country to find common themes underlying growth and success elsewhere. Key observations from our analysis of the data and interviews with key informants include the following:

- **Milwaukee faces exceptional levels of child poverty. While insufficient as an excuse, this reality must be taken into account along with the lessons from other cities.** Milwaukee has one of the highest poverty rates for school-age children of any large urban center nationally. Among the 20 districts that have reported their NAEP data since at least 2013, only Baltimore, Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Detroit have higher child poverty rates. All five cities have struggled with low student outcomes, which aligns with existing research tying student performance to poverty. This important context led us to approach the experiences of other, higher-income cities with caution. However, even Philadelphia and Cleveland have shown more signs of educational progress over the last 15 years than Milwaukee, suggesting that high poverty rates – while deeply challenging – are not insurmountable.

Figure 1: 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.

- **National examples of improvement elsewhere reveal six common themes.** Using NAEP data, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and the Department of Defense schools stood out as case studies for Milwaukee to potentially learn from, thanks to their impressive growth over time (see



Figure 1) and similarities to Milwaukee in their demographics, school governance conditions, or student mobility. Highlights from four other urban centers – Denver, Miami-Dade County, Boston, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg – offered additional insights into effective school improvement work across the country. Table 2 summarizes themes and provides illustrative examples from the experiences of these seven locations.

Table 2: National School Improvement Levers Exemplified in Case Studies

Common National Actions for Improvement	Select National Examples
<i>Lead</i> boldly for the long term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miami-Dade’s superintendent led the district for 13+ years with urgency, counterbalancing rapid policy, financial, and school model changes with leadership stability and stakeholder relationships • School governance models dramatically changed in Boston, Chicago, D.C., and Denver to leverage mayoral leadership and positive working relationships between the mayor and superintendent for the sake of making politically difficult decisions. These included overhauling educator evaluation and compensation systems, school closures, and new school support and accountability measures. • Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s elected and civic community reacted swiftly and collaboratively to research showing their negative economic mobility outcomes, leading to positive gains within a decade
<i>Focus</i> on a few high-impact levers identified through <i>data</i> and implemented with <i>fidelity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Defense took six years to methodically raise academic standards across all schools, leading to stronger instruction and solving for high student mobility • Chicago raised high school graduation rates by targeting Algebra One pass rates, which local research identified as a primary predictor of graduation success
Recruit, develop, and retain <i>talent</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D.C. set up a teacher feedback and evaluation cycle that ultimately incentivized its best teachers to work in its neediest schools • Chicago worked with colleges of education, philanthropic groups, and nonprofits to better align teacher and principal preparation to the needs of its classrooms
Offer school <i>support, accountability,</i> and <i>data transparency,</i> including in environments of school choice and autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • D.C.’s unified enrollment system and citywide school performance framework made it easier for families to choose schools (regardless of sector) and informed both district and charter authorizer actions • Miami-Dade held quarterly data summits to ensure district principals both received needed supports and were held accountable to results
Increase and equitably distribute school system <i>resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chicago partnered with universities, businesses, philanthropy, and nonprofits to bring more money, talent, and data insights into schools • D.C.’s educational improvements attracted more white and affluent families into the city, increasing its resource base and likely affecting test scores and other outcomes
Support <i>families</i> and <i>neighborhoods</i> outside of school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Department of Defense school families include at least one employed parent with housing and health care benefits • D.C. lightens the load on schools through agency collaboration on facilities, summer programming, and combatting chronic absenteeism



It is difficult when examining these other locations to definitively separate out specific reforms that spurred positive change, especially in cases in which demographic change occurred at the same time that student outcomes began shifting. The experiences of these national exemplars may also not be immediately or wholly applicable to Milwaukee based on differences in conditions and challenges. The consistency of the above-named themes, however, suggests that they constitute a reliable starting point for any attempts to meaningfully change educational outcomes in a struggling city like Milwaukee.

Milwaukee's Opportunities to Raise the Bar for Its Children

After considering the school-based and system-based levers for educational change present 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. These are summarized below.

- **Lead boldly for the long term.** The appointment of a new MPS superintendent offers an immediate opportunity on this front, both for her to lead and also for other key stakeholders to encourage her work. However, no single governing entity within the city is responsible for its full K-12 landscape, including MPS, charter schools, and private choice programs. For that reason, other important leadership opportunities also exist, including those that would engage elected, civic, and community representatives more directly. Such leadership could take on the need to set a common standard of excellence across Milwaukee schools, advocate for additional resources, communicate school quality clearly to families, offer support to struggling schools while also holding them accountable to results, and grapple with the implications of the city's declining youth population, including potential school closures. Tracking commonly defined metrics (a difficult task given the differences in data across sectors) would be key to informing these leaders, as would bringing along key stakeholders to build trust and sustainability.
- **Focus on a few high-impact levers grounded in local data and then track them.** Effective leadership requires not only bold but also strategic action. Selecting priority focus areas ideally involves both engagement with key stakeholders and reference to reliable data. In Milwaukee, the data point especially to chronic absenteeism, which remains shockingly high in the wake of the pandemic. Student mobility, on which we currently have little data to help inform possible in-school or out-of-school interventions, would also be an important area of focus given how it undermines many school-based improvement efforts. Finally, remediating lead levels in school facilities will be critical for protecting student health and safety and safeguarding families' trust.
- **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 such as money, talent, and analytics. Higher education, nonprofits, and businesses all have potential roles to play. Joint advocacy on shared interests at the state level, including funding in areas such as special education, 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 holding high expectations for children and supporting educators with a growth mindset toward their own development, creating a positive culture that fosters staff stability. These schools are outliers in an education landscape otherwise often characterized by high teacher turnover, vacancies in key subject areas, and little intentional pairing across the overall system of the best teachers with the neediest students. More data on how educators are distributed across Milwaukee schools by years of experience or quality of teaching could inform new incentives to strategically place and retain great teachers. 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 underused lever for school improvement in the city.
- **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.

Together, these actions represent a blueprint for changing Milwaukee’s educational trajectory – a trajectory that, for 30 years, has bent marginally if at all toward better outcomes for children at publicly-funded schools within the city. 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.

