



MILWAUKEE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**November 6, 2007**

#### **MPS Board President Peter Blewett's Statement about the 2007-08 MPS Budget**

Last week I voted against a budget that will raise the MPS tax levy by more than 9%.

The MPS board has been put in an untenable position because the state of Wisconsin has failed to meet its responsibility to fund the state's largest school district and has legislated that Milwaukee property tax dollars fund private school vouchers, diverting funds from MPS and increasing local property taxes.

State aid to MPS was slashed in the current budget by \$19 million. The state aid formula's design violates the state's constitutional commitment to provide all children with an adequate education. I voted against the MPS budget proposal, because I was not elected by the citizens of this community to preside over the dismantling of Milwaukee Public Schools or to drive people living on a fixed income from their homes.

The Board approved my motion that the MPS Board President and Superintendent immediately invite the Governor and leaders of the state legislature to meet so that we can address this crisis through proactive measures before the next state budget.

Although MPS approved its 2007-08 budget in a timely manner, the state dallied until it was far too late. Then, behind closed doors and without input from the public, state leaders funneled money out of the equalization aid formula in a manner which penalized Milwaukee by another \$1.6 million.

By steadily cutting funding for MPS over the years, state officials have unfairly shifted the burden of supporting the state's largest school system onto Milwaukee homeowners.

The state also mandates a private school voucher program that in 17 years has not improved the educational performance of Milwaukee children as its advocates claimed. The cost of vouchers has meanwhile ballooned from less than one million dollars in 1990 to approximately \$54 million for FY08. Last year's agreement to expand the program increased the cost to more than \$50 million annually.

In return, many of these private schools have abdicated their responsibility to the students with the greatest needs, and the greatest costs, sending them back to MPS, which has a special education population of approximately 17%.

The unfairness and irregularities of the budget process have led our Board to authorize the district to pursue all legal avenues including suing the state of Wisconsin for its failure to provide Milwaukee children with an “adequate” education.

I believe that MPS must also ask the courts to redress the injustice of using public revenue to fund schools that discriminate against students with special needs.

Although politicians and business leaders talk about regional cooperation and economic development, now is the time to turn words into action. We must invest in the children who attend Milwaukee public schools. We must invest in smaller class sizes and adequate supplies, and we must have highly-qualified educators teaching our students.

Milwaukee has the 7<sup>th</sup> highest poverty rate in the country. If our political leaders are serious about solving the state’s labor shortage and growing the economy, they need to invest in Milwaukee’s children.

Milwaukee is the state’s economic engine. Wisconsin’s ability to compete in the global economy depends on a vibrant Milwaukee. A vibrant Milwaukee depends on providing our children with the skills they need to help our businesses and economy prosper.

The current system of funding public education in Wisconsin is broken. I will not support large increases in property taxes when the state is failing to meet its constitutional duty to provide all Wisconsin children with a free and equal education.

Nor will I allow the children of this district to be shortchanged by game-playing politicians. The structural problems that MPS faces must be addressed immediately.

Now it is time to get to work. That is why the public elected us.

Here’s is what I am doing to address the problem:

- ✓ I have sponsored a resolution for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, asking for school boards to join MPS in asking for transparency and fairness in corporate taxation. The resolution will be taken up in January 2008.
- ✓ On November 3, 2007, I met with four legislators who pledged to work for a new school finance system BEFORE the next state budget.
- ✓ I will submit testimony to the state legislature as it considers Senator John Lehman's bill to fix the tax levy problem that shunted more than a million and a half dollars from MPS to wealthy districts that did not ask for the extra funds.

- ✓ In the next few months, I will be calling for a series of work-sessions and meetings on taxes and school financing.
- ✓ I invited our superintendent to work with me to address this crisis.

In the wake of this crisis, school board members from around the state, from Altoona to Edgar, from Middleton to Turtle Lake, have agreed to work with me for school finance reform. I invite all elected officials who are serious about addressing this problem to join with me in pushing for fair tax policies and for equitable school funding. It is time for local civic leaders to put aside personal agendas and fight for our future.

In the meantime, MPS will aggressively explore all legal options available to the district.