

Mayoral Governance Is Right for Milwaukee

Introduction: Overall achievement has stagnated in the Milwaukee district, and achievement gaps have not diminished despite honest efforts on the part of teachers and principals, the community, and the school board. Ultimately, the fragmented leadership of the school board has produced incomplete implementation of reforms, and so the Governor has proposed a change in the governance of the Milwaukee school district. The best research available suggests that this governance change would create accountable leadership and set the stage for improved student achievement. The bottom line is that a Superintendent backed by the Mayor is better positioned to implement reforms.

The Facts

- Only 40% of 10th graders in the district had achieved proficiency in reading in 2002; the number is the same in 2008
- In 2002, 34% of black 10th graders achieved proficiency in reading while 65% of white students achieved proficiency. These are the same numbers for 2008.
- Leadership of MPS has been inconsistent, with more than seven school board presidents in the last 10 years.

Superintendents backed by Mayors are Better Positioned to Pursue a Reform Agenda¹

The most rigorous research available shows the following returns from mayoral leadership:

- School systems led by mayors demonstrate improvement in reading and math scores at both the elementary and secondary levels. These gains occur for both high performing and low performing schools.
- Mayor-led has demonstrated significant improvements in spending patterns. These districts better allocate their resources. More money is spent on instruction, and less on the central-office and administration.
- Mayoral leadership has drawn administrative staff with high levels of experience from multiple sectors, and has led to strategic partnerships with organizations like New Leaders for New Schools, Teach For America, and the New Teacher Project.

Why Mayoral Governance Works

Mayoral governance places the responsibility for improved educational services on the shoulders of one leader who is more visible and accountable to the public than are school board members. More citizens vote in mayoral elections than in school board elections. In addition this heightened level of accountability, the Mayor is also better positioned than the school board to make big changes in a struggling educational system. Mayors can bridge the gap between schools and the business community and between schools and civic organizations and in doing so create expanded opportunities for student learning. Mayors are better equipped to deal with political pressures and to shield superintendents from those pressures to ensure that long-term agendas can be pursued and sustained.

¹ See “Mayors Can Be ‘Prime Movers’ of Urban School Improvement,” in *Education Week* October 14, 2009, by Kenneth W. Wong and Francis X. Shen.