



STATE OF WISCONSIN

BARBARA LAWTON
LT. GOVERNOR

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Lt. Governor Lawton Letter on MPS Reform

MADISON – Lt. Governor Barbara Lawton today sent the following letter to state legislators regarding MPS reform.

To my legislative colleagues:

I was a new bride in the early 1970s in De Pere when the De Pere and Green Bay Public School Districts became the last in the state to switch from mayoral-appointed to elected school boards. There was great excitement that the public would have a deeper connection to such important decision-making; the ballot was heavy with candidates. We saw progress in our democracy with the move to an elected board.

You are asked to consider going against that grain to give the mayor of Milwaukee partial or full control over hiring in the schools and budget decisions, reducing the school board's duties to community outreach and discipline oversight in the most radical of measures.

Governor Doyle announced his plan in August with a great sense of urgency; Mayor Barrett concurred. But when we examine the data trajectory related to student achievement gaps and graduation rates, for instance, we see that the urgency doesn't stem from sudden decline in student performance. All of us, leaders in the city and across the state, should have been feeling urgency on behalf of those children –and in concern for careful stewardship of tax dollars— for a long time now.

George Lightbourn, president of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, wrote in early November to support the notion of a mayoral takeover but makes the argument that it "is not some abstract concept. It is about flesh-and-blood characters....It is about a mayor assuming accountability." He goes on to say that if Mayor Barrett decides to run for governor, "the notion of mayoral control should be put on hold until the next Milwaukee mayor is chosen."

With that, Lightbourn underlines how ill-conceived this really is. Establishing a mayoral takeover of MPS that pivots on personality would be reckless at best. We need to rebuild a successful learning environment for Milwaukee's children, and that is a complex project that calls for expertise and focus and engagement of a broad community to support its success.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has repeatedly assured Congresswoman Gwen Moore that our state's success in getting our fair share of the Race to the Top funding does not depend on a change in governance for MPS. I agree with State Superintendent Tony Evers that the "status quo is neither sustainable nor acceptable." Let us work together, then, with a great sense of urgency, to address how we can turn that record of student performance around quickly. We must not water down a democratic institution with direct accountability to the voters when we have not even tried serious engagement with something on the scale of a Marshall Plan for Milwaukee.

Without engaging all parties who must be part of a successful turnaround in outcomes for the over 87,000 MPS students, nothing will truly change. I urge you to consider carefully the broad reach—and potential unintended consequences—of a radical change in governance for Milwaukee Public Schools that oversimplifies the challenge.

With respect and gratitude for your thoughtful consideration,

Barbara Lawton
Lieutenant Governor
State of Wisconsin