

# What's Happening in Milwaukee?

When the community rejected a new student assignment plan, district leaders regrouped and established a timetable for school improvement, designed to generate high quality and support.

As Superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, I am often asked, "What's happening in Milwaukee?" I always hope that the questioners want to know about our restructuring efforts, school-based management, comprehensive staff and curriculum development, and teacher and parent empowerment programs. But I am clearly deluding myself. The question is focused on one issue and one issue alone: choice.

For those of us in large cities, parental choice—encouraging parents to select the schools that can best educate their children—has been a reality for several decades. These programs generally involve magnet or specialty programs, sponsored under voluntary or mandatory desegregation programs or urban/suburban metropolitan agreements. But the current focus of attention paid to parental choice stems from the question of whether or not public school parents will be afforded the option of sending their children to private schools.

## Milwaukee's First Choice Program

When I became superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools in 1988, the Board of School Directors established several goals for my agenda, including a modification of our student assignment program. In 1977 the system had entered into a voluntary school deseg-

regation program, settling a case brought by several plaintiffs. The most visible feature of this school desegregation effort had been the initiation of specialty schools or programs. These highly successful programs, most still in existence today, were designed to attract students on the strength of thematic programs such as gifted and talented, college preparatory, vocational and technical programs, and the performing arts. Of Milwaukee's 144 schools, 24 were set aside as specialty schools, and the remainder were opened for students on the availability of space and racial guidelines set specifically by the agreement.

**For those of us in large cities, parental choice . . . has been a reality for several decades.**

As with most systems desegregated in the 1970s, Milwaukee closed many schools in the central city and reopened them as specialty schools, thereby displacing the neighborhood minority (primarily black) students. Neighborhood children were then bused to other schools in predominantly white neighborhoods. The community, both blacks and whites, had begun to express significant concern about the school selection process and what they perceived as the unfair and unwieldy nature of the process of assigning students.

## Next, Controlled Choice

In 1989 the board identified 13 goals for a new student assignment plan. Chief among these items were mandates to:

1. Increase parental and student choice by allowing parents to make multiple school selections at all educational levels,
2. Enable parents to make informed educational decisions,
3. Enhance the quality of education in all desegregating schools of choice,
4. Facilitate the development of a more efficient and cost effective student transportation system,
5. Encourage the replication of successful schools in programs.

To facilitate the development of the plan, I asked Charles Willie and Michael Alves to serve as consultants. I

had previously worked with them in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the controlled choice program they designed was implemented successfully.

Controlled choice is a method of desegregating and improving schools at the same time. The assignment of students is based on space availability and racial guidelines that guarantee the desegregation of all schools. In Cambridge, controlled choice led to the total voluntary desegregation of the school system and the enhancement of the elementary schools in that district. Cambridge subsequently experienced significant growth in academic achievement, greater parental satisfaction, a higher percentage of students attending Cambridge public schools, and strong financial support from the citizens of Cambridge.<sup>1</sup>

The most important features of the controlled choice plan, which led me to consider it for Milwaukee, were the program's insistence on the improvement of all schools and the equitable treatment of all students. In February 1990, after extensive examination, Willie and Alves submitted their recommendations in the Long Range Educational Equity Plan for the Milwaukee Public Schools (LEEP). The main features of the plan were to:

1. Provide a timetable for the improvement of the Milwaukee Public Schools.
2. Establish specific racial percentages and representation for all racial groups.
3. Provide for parent selection of any schools within the two zones created in the plan (as Willie says, all the schools belong to everyone).
4. "Grandfather" all students into their present schools and suggest a timetable for student assignment.
5. Suggest specific plans for replication of successful specialty programs in the two zones and/or the creation of new programs to meet student needs

### **The Community Responds**

Over the next five months Charles Willie and I met with countless groups to explain the benefits of LEEP and to gather their consensus for my ultimate recommendation to the board. By June 1990, it was obvious that the

community did not support LEEP. This lack of support stemmed from many community perceptions, including (1) loss of access to quality specialty programs, (2) lack of faith that the school district would replicate or create additional specialty programs, (3) decreased rather than increased access

to schools of choice, and (4) fears of mandated transfers under the new student assignment plan.

The proposed plan would not have caused any of the above, in fact, quite the opposite. But the public perception and reaction were such that the board and I chose to pursue another

### **Private School Choice Is Wrong**

Herbert J. Grover

We in Wisconsin hold the dubious distinction of having the first private school voucher program in the nation. The Milwaukee Parental Choice law provides that the state will pay participating private schools about \$2,500 for each student they accept under the transfer program. This program raises important philosophical and policy issues about local school governance, public accountability, and the role of public education in our society. In my view, it fails each test.

The amount of money the state will give to private schools that accept public school students adds up to more equalization aid per pupil than that received by a majority of the 428 public school districts in the state. Yet the participating private schools need not be accountable for the quality of their educational program, staff, or services. There is nothing of substance in the program to ensure even a modest level of accountability.

Private school choice misses the mark because it addresses poor academic achievement in the urban public school as if it were simply a result of the school's failure. But poor achievement is more than that; it is a result of the urban condition itself. Sixty percent of Milwaukee pupils come from low-income families. In addition, 28 percent of minorities are unemployed, the teen pregnancy rate is double the national average, 7,700 cases of child abuse are reported annually, 2,500 children are homeless, and 35 percent of the pupils change school each year because of family housing or employment situations. How can children learn when their lives are in such turmoil? Against these problems, private school choice is a sugar pill that doesn't deal with the real challenges of urban education.

It all comes down to a fundamental attack on the common school. We are so intoxicated with the notions of competition and deregulation that we fail to ask the basic question, "Will a private voucher system guarantee a high-quality and equal educational opportunity for all children?" I think not. I agree with California State Superintendent Bill Honig, who says, "What this nation should be discussing is how best to . . . accelerate reform—not how to dismantle public education."

Minority group proponents of this program argue that the participating racially isolated private schools are the answer. But private schools were not the answer when some whites fled the public schools after *Brown v. the Board of Education*, and private schools are not the answer now. We simply cannot abandon the institution best able and most likely to provide an equal educational opportunity for all children.

If you look closely, you can see the social fabric of America beginning to unravel. Private school vouchers permit us to flee one another, to surround ourselves with those who look and think like we do, and—in so doing—to abandon our commitment to pluralism and diversity. This was not what Horace Mann had in mind, and it decidedly is not my vision for education in the America of the 21st century. Our social institutions (and our public schools in particular) must be the instruments that bring us together.

I will support and vigorously defend public education. I know it's not perfect; it must continue to improve. But public education is where our future can and must lie.

**Herbert J. Grover** is Wisconsin State Superintendent, P.O. Box 7841, Madison, WI 53707-7841.

strategy to accomplish our goals. Despite the media's assumption that we had abandoned the controlled choice plan, we decided, instead, to put the "horse before the cart" by establishing a timetable for school improvement before adopting a change in student assignment. In the FY '91 Budget, the board established a substantial equity fund whereby schools could apply to restructure their schools or to develop new programs. Approximately 70 school applications were accepted under this fund, and they received grants to implement the programs during the 1990-91 school year.

By insisting upon school improvement prior to modification of student assignment, we hope to build a base of support by generating high quality in all the schools of Milwaukee. In this fashion we will strive for the excellence and equity that reflect the long-standing goals of the district.

### A New Twist

All of the above pales in comparison to the newly passed state legislation called the Milwaukee Choice Plan, which permits parents to select private schools, to be funded by state aid reimbursements. The new legislation will permit up to 1 percent of our approximately 98,000 students (or 980) to participate as long as they meet low-income guidelines. The receiving schools will receive \$2,500 for each student accepted; each school may accept only enough students to constitute no more than 49 percent of the school's population. Thus, Wisconsin has become the first state to pass a public/private choice—voucher—program.

In the summer of 1990, the Milwaukee Choice Plan was challenged in Dane County Circuit Court by the Wisconsin Educators Association Council, the state's largest teachers union, and

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, among others. The court ruled that the program did not violate the Wisconsin Constitution and that it should go forward. Calling that decision "a disgrace," Herbert Grover, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, said, "Wisconsin is the first to get private school choice. People ask me: Has the citizenry in Wisconsin lost its common sense?" Subsequently, those who brought the suit vowed to appeal.

For years, the Milwaukee Public Schools have contracted with private schools for services to specific groups of students; for example, with community-based alternative schools for 500 at-risk high school students and with private daycare centers for 400 all-day kindergartners. We offered our own version of a choice plan to the legislature, which was considered briefly as an alternative to the bill that eventually passed; the MPS version would have expanded this relationship to include grades 1-8 at specific, private, community-based schools through contracts with MPS. The district would have set basic educational standards and accountability; the schools would have had to guarantee access to all students.

## Teach Positive Action . . .

. . . the K-8 self-concept curriculum and school climate program that strikes at the root of the drug and alcohol problem.



*"For every thousand hacking at the leaves of evil . . .*

*. . . there is one striking at the root."*  
—Thoreau

## It Works!

For free information, introductory video, and/or preview kits, call 1-800-345-2974.

**Positive Action Co.**  
321 Eastland Drive  
Twin Falls, ID 83301

### What We Have to Do

Creating an unlikely alliance of free enterprise advocates, political wheel-dealers, and the poor and disenfranchised, choice promises to be "the" issue during the '90s. As educators struggle to reform urban education, we will not be able to ignore the rapidly escalating cry for choice. We must plan extensive programmatic offerings of high quality within the public school sector as the linchpin of our reform efforts, and those initiatives must be coupled with equity of access for all students. This is what our efforts in Milwaukee are all about. □

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed description of the Cambridge Controlled Choice Program, see J. Nathan, ed., (1989), *Public Schools by Choice*, (Bloomington: Meyer-Stone Books).

**Robert S. Peterkin** is Superintendent of Schools, Milwaukee Public Schools, 5225 W. Vliet St., Milwaukee, WI 53201-8210.

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.