

Don't Cry for the Milwaukee Public Schools
By Glenn Grothman

During the past few weeks there have been several headlines in the Milwaukee newspaper about the desperate financial plight of the Milwaukee Public Schools. These stories are not unusual for this time of year as school districts begin to plan their budgets. The significance is greater with the Milwaukee public schools. Being the largest school district in the state with over 97,000 students (11.1 percent of the state student population) it would be bad news if this system were really under-funded.

Let's look at the facts. In the four-year period from the 1999-00 to 2002-03 school years the Milwaukee Public schools lived under the state spending caps, which the school establishment frequently complains about as being too stringent. During this four-year period the number of full time equivalent students dropped from 99,729 to 97,293. The reduction in students is about equal to the total number of students in the Slinger School District. One would expect a substantial cut in staff with such a big cut in enrollment. Reports from the Department of Public Instruction in Madison show MPS actually responded by adding 480 teachers!! They also reported adding over 200 full time equivalent administrative program aids and 32 new positions in administrative staff. This is at a time when MPS claims they have a difficult time finding qualified staff and have to hire people not fully certified.

Comparing the amount Milwaukee Public Schools spend to some Washington County School Districts is also illuminating. One would assume Milwaukee Public Schools would spend less per pupil. They should have greater economies of scale than the Washington County area. Since their enrollment is declining they don't have to build new schools and should have less debt service. In a less rural district their busing costs should be less.

In 2002-03, while West Bend was spending \$8,900 a child and Slinger was spending \$9,100, Milwaukee Public Schools came in at a whopping \$10,874. When you leave out transportation, facilities and food, the difference is just as shocking – \$7,022 for Slinger, \$7,822 for West Bend, and \$9,464 for Milwaukee. The choice schools in Milwaukee of course operate at a fraction of this – thereby saving taxpayers thousands. The average per pupil increase in this four-year period is 5.1% while inflation was averaging 2.2%.

The Milwaukee Public Schools clearly have more than enough money to educate children. Next year they anticipate a drop of another 1,400 students. One would expect employment to drop. Given the natural turnover in the schools, no one would lose their job – simply not replacing people will solve the problem.

One major problem is the huge fringe benefits package, which is equal to 61% of the base salary. The administration is now threatening to drastically cut library, art, and physical education programs. This shouldn't be necessary. The newspapers should be reviewing MPS's payroll over the past four years and find out why the schools managed four years ago with less employees and more students.

I've got one story about the Milwaukee Public Schools from a source that has been impeccable in the past. An independent consultant showed up at Milwaukee's central office with a fist full of un-cashed checks. The consultant asked that MPS stop sending him checks because he hadn't worked for them for months. MPS must improve. But don't believe it when you hear they don't have enough money.

Please let me know what you think on this issue. Contact me here in Madison---please call 1-888-534-0058, or in any of the following ways:

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