

Milwaukee Public Schools
2025-2026 Legislative Agenda

Forward

The place of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) in Wisconsin is fairly unique – the largest urban school district in a relatively rural state. While it may be easier to point out differences between MPS and other districts, it is our similarities that dominate. Like most other Wisconsin school districts, MPS strives to accomplish the same basic objectives – to enhance student achievement, to increase educational opportunities for all children and to attract and retain the most qualified teachers.

As a community, our top priority should be education; high-quality schools are the foundation of first-class communities. The more successfully we educate our students, the healthier our community will become. Our children depend on us to provide them with the best education possible. We owe it to our children to fight for the resources and legislative initiatives necessary to make their public schools the best that they can be. Our children deserve no less.

Education as Fundamental Right

In July of 2000, the State Supreme Court of Wisconsin upheld the constitutionality of the state’s school finance system. In reviewing the appellate court’s decision in the education funding case of Vincent v. Voight, Justice Patrick Crooks, wrote the following:

“We further hold that Wisconsin students have a fundamental right to an equal opportunity for a sound basic education. An equal opportunity for a sound basic education is one that will equip students for their roles as citizens and enable them to succeed economically and personally. The legislature has articulated a standard for equal opportunity for a sound basic education in Wis. Stat. §§ 118.30(lg)(a) and 121.02(L) (1997-98) as the opportunity for students to be proficient in mathematics, science, reading and writing, geography, and history, and for them to receive instruction in the arts and music, vocational training, social sciences, health, physical education and foreign language, in accordance with their age and aptitude.

An equal opportunity for a sound basic education acknowledges that students and districts are not fungible and takes into account districts with disproportionate numbers of disabled students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with limited English language skills. So long as the legislature is providing sufficient resources so that school districts offer students the equal opportunity for a sound basic education as required by the constitution, the state school finance system will pass constitutional muster.”

“Passing muster” - Recent State History – An Era of Education Funding Stagnation and the COVID-19 Pandemic

As of January, 2025, the state has not provided per pupil funding that has kept pace with inflation for 16 years and Wisconsin’s funding for students has fallen dramatically in national rankings.

If the state is to live up to its constitutional obligation to appropriately provide for students in public schools, it must take action to create a sustainable and sufficient funding structure for Wisconsin's schools. The funding issues that have threatened the sustainability of this and other school districts in Wisconsin require immediate action. MPS is dedicated to serving the educational needs of the city's children while looking for creative and cost effective ways to work with the community to ensure that students have a solid foundation that assists high achievement in the classroom. Community leaders understand how housing, healthcare, safety, and the overall health of the broader community impact the successful education of children.

There is a clear need to pursue a legislative agenda that protects and empowers students and that seeks to have the students and citizens of Milwaukee treated fairly. There is no question that the system designed by the state to fund schools has discriminated against students based on district boundary lines that enforce policy decisions made in the early 1990s. Simply put, all public school students should have access to the same basic revenue limit per pupil funding and the educational resources that funding provides. In addition, this agenda takes a research-based and practical approach that focuses on improving teacher quality, enhancing support for students with disabilities and English language learners, improving student physical and mental health, improving safety and district stability, expanding before- and after-school programs, increasing access to high quality early childhood education, and other initiatives that will benefit students, the district and ultimately local and state economies.

The ongoing equity challenges are now coupled with an unprecedented era of underfunding public schools in Wisconsin. With a state surplus that was created in part by underfunding schools, opportunities to support children are plentiful and there are simply no financial excuses available to shrink from appropriately supporting public school students. If we as a society are going to thrive educationally as well and economically, there is a moral requirement to immediately bring fiscal and more general policies into place to support children and our citizens as a whole. This is the moment where we do more and in doing so become better as a whole.

Specific Agenda Items

As state budget development and the legislative session evolve, MPS will be committed to addressing, in an appropriate manner, any initiatives that may affect the welfare of MPS students and the district as a whole. The following are the key issues and proposals contained in the legislative agenda.

1) Establish a Sufficient and Sustainable Funding Model for K-12 Education

MPS continues to work with statewide educational organizations to create a more honest, transparent and sustainable K12 funding system in order to ensure and improve learning opportunities for students while protecting local property taxpayers. The state is obligated to provide students with the opportunity for a sound, basic education. Solutions exist that would position the state to be a leader in improving student performance and increasing overall educational achievement. From the Speaker's Blue Ribbon Commission on K-12 Education, to proposals put forward by Governor Evers and State Superintendent Underly, Milwaukee Public Schools supports school funding proposals that begin to answer the call of the State Constitution that demands an equal opportunity for a sound basic education.

As a matter of basic funding practice, state law used to provide for an annual per pupil adjustment relative to inflation. That practice ended in 2009-10 and has compelled districts to have to go to referendum to simply keep pace with costs. The state must, at a minimum reinstitute the practice of providing per pupil funding that keeps pace with inflation.

2) Equal treatment and funding of Wisconsin Students.

It is currently state law that not all students are to be treated equally in Wisconsin. A state-imposed per pupil revenue gap exists between pupils in MPS and students in surrounding communities as it does in other school districts, communities and regions throughout the state. In a fiscal environment for K-12 education with increasing, and in some instances very direct competition between districts to retain and recruit the best available teachers, per pupil revenue differences result in differences in buying power that create a distinct advantage for districts that have access to a higher per pupil revenue limit. If the call to place the best teachers in classrooms with the students who most need them is to be heeded, fiscal policy must be designed to assist with that effort. At a minimum, state law should not discriminate against students based on where they live.

3) Students with Disabilities - MPS seeks sufficient state funding to assist with costs related to special education.

Over the past three decades, when the state has failed to live up to its statutory obligation to assist school districts by providing categorical funding for students with disabilities, the state has simply rewritten the rules. In 1975, the statutory reimbursement rate was set at 75%. In 1984, the rate was reset to 63%. And in 1999, when the actual reimbursement rate had declined to 35%, the statutory language describing a reimbursement rate was simply eliminated. Today (FY23), the reimbursement rate stands at an estimated 30%. While public school students with disabilities are valued by the state at 30%, students with disabilities in private schools are valued at a minimum reimbursement level of 90% - often higher. MPS supports and demands fair funding for public school students with disabilities and calls on the state to provide a minimum of 90% reimbursement for students challenged with disabilities who attend public schools.

4) English Language Learners and Bilingual Education MPS seeks an increase in the amount of state funding to meet the growing costs of bi-lingual education.

Just as the reimbursement rate for costs related to special education has been in decline, so too has the reimbursement rate for what is termed Bilingual and Bicultural aid. In FY01, districts were reimbursed for 18% of the costs related to bilingual/bicultural education, by FY12 the reimbursement rate had fallen to 8%. Using a more common programming standard, the reimbursement rate is actually closer to 4%. According to expert policy analysis and testimony provided in June of 2018, Wisconsin is still likely the most deficient state in the nation when it comes to providing students support in this area.

5) Full Funding for All-day K4 Programming MPS seeks to allow school districts to count children as a full 1.0 FTE of funding for participating in all-day K4 programming.

Under the existing law, the maximum allowed revenue limit authority for all-day K4 programming is 0.6 FTE. As longitudinal studies come of age on this topic more and more research points to the fact that properly supported cognitive development in the earliest years of a child's life benefits not only that child, but leads to clear benefits for the larger community. MPS recognizes that there is a scarcity of private, affordable, high-quality care that can be accessed by parents in the Milwaukee area. By recognizing and fully supporting funding for early childhood education, the state could realize the economic benefit of this investment. Aside from the achievement gains tied to early education found in the research, a growing number of economists and institutions, including the Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota, have made the case that early childhood development programs are consistently under-funded and that the benefits they achieve far exceed their costs. Their work has shown that the return on investment for early childhood programs far exceeds the return on most projects that are currently funded as economic development. In taking the long view, the state could seize the opportunity to improve the academic and social lives of its students as well as its economic standing.

6) Funding for K3 Programming

Research presented in the Journal of the American Medical Association demonstrates that, "The influence of poverty on children's learning and achievement is mediated by structural brain development. To avoid long-term costs of impaired academic functioning, households below 150% of the federal poverty level should be targeted for additional resources aimed at remediating early childhood environments" (Association of Child Poverty, Brain Development, and Academic Achievement – JAMA, 2015). With increasing proficiency standards and the state effort to ensure a student's ability to read by third grade, and for the same reasons that funding for K4 students represents a wise investment, MPS calls for full funding to support successful education programming at the three-year-old level. In addition, the district is bound by law to identify students with disabilities as early as age three. The call for funding at this level is therefore consistent with current law and research on early childhood development.

7) Responsible and Best Practice Funding and Programs for High-Quality, Birth to Five Childcare and Education.

According to, *No Time to Lose: How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State*, a 2016 report from the National Conference of State Legislatures, the number one policy element for best in the world countries is: "Children come to school ready to learn, and extra support is given to struggling students so that all have the opportunity to achieve high standards." According to the groundbreaking, 2015 report, *Association of Child Poverty, Brain Development, and Academic Achievement*, "specific brain structures tied to processes critical for learning and educational functioning (eg, sustained attention, planning, and cognitive flexibility) are vulnerable to the environmental circumstances of poverty." As one part of this effort, through a combination of policy design and funding efforts, MPS will work to ensure that all families have access to a NAEYC level or 5 star rated care under the Wisconsin, Young Star program.

8) Prioritizing the state's constitutional responsibilities to support public schools.

Given the State of Wisconsin's constitutional requirement to fund public schools and the state's recent and continuing underfunding of public schools. The district supports education and funding policies that support those constitutional funding requirements rather than inhibit them.

9) Voucher and Charter School Tax Transparency

In working with the City of Milwaukee, MPS has been successful in providing voucher tax information to taxpayers in the form of the tax levy insert document that is included with the annual property tax bill. MPS also supports efforts that would allow for the inclusion of the cost of the Milwaukee Parental Choice and Special Needs Scholarship programs on City of Milwaukee property tax bills and other relevant tax documents.

10) Accountability System for All Publicly Funded Students

MPS supports a statewide accountability system for all publicly funded students. State law now requires all publicly funded students to take a uniform state assessment. It also includes assessment and demographic data in a new student information system that allows the State Department of Public Instruction to fulfill the requirement of publishing a school accountability report for all publicly funded schools, including those participating in the state's various voucher programs. Proposals that would move the state away from a common system of assessment are not in the public interest.

11) The Milwaukee Pupil Achievement Grant

MPS strongly supports the reestablishment of funding for the Pupil Achievement Grant which supported the successful Milwaukee Mathematics Partnership. With increasing accountability and proficiency standards, there will continue to be a need to target sufficient resources to improve teaching and learning. Targeted funding for unique student needs would not be specific to Milwaukee. Currently, students and school districts in rural parts of the state receive significant categorical funding in the form of "Sparsity Aid" that is targeted to assist with the unique needs of those districts. Research makes clear and best practices consistently confirm, that resources must be dedicated to make sure that the students who most need them have access to highly accomplished teachers.

12) Transparency in State Budgeting – School Levy Credit

MPS supports policy changes that would increase transparency in the school funding system and that would direct aid that is purportedly going to support schools, to actually go to support schools. The School Levy Credit is a clear example of a policy in need of such change. Although the word 'school' is used in the name, the School Levy Credit is a tax credit that goes directly to property taxpayers while providing no revenue for schools. Despite that fact, and the fact that the federal government does not recognize the tax credit as funding for schools, over \$1 billion in funding is described under state law as part of the package of total education funding. In order to ensure greater truth in state budgeting, the tax credit funding should be moved into the equalization aid column, where it could be used to fund schools, support increases in per-pupil revenue limits, hold down property taxes at the state-wide level, and empower school boards as they build their district budgets.

13) Recognition of Barriers to Achievement in State Funding Formula

MPS supports policies that build financial support for students in poverty into the state's school funding formula. MPS supports increases in aid and reimbursement that assist students with disabilities and English Language Learners. Just as the State Supreme Court has recognized that students in school districts are not fungible, the state's funding formula must take into account districts with disproportionate numbers of disabled students, economically disadvantaged students and students with limited English language skills.

14) Support for Teachers in Areas of High Need

MPS, through additional state funding, seeks to create more incentives to attract new teachers and retain current teachers in areas of high need. Efforts to attract and retain teachers could include establishing a loan-forgiveness program for those who teach and assist students in the areas of mathematics, science, special education, bilingual, Montessori, and IB, as well as in other areas of need in MPS or in districts where a substantial number of students are challenged by poverty and where there are legal and civil rights requirements that must be comply with. MPS supports the creation of a state-based grant program for high poverty, public, middle and high schools, to attract and retain highly qualified teachers in schools with the greatest needs. It also urges the appropriation of resources and other incentives to institute Grow-Your-Own Programs that include pathways for teaching in the areas of dual language and bilingual education. The State is constitutionally required to provide an education to its children, no citizen, however, is constitutionally required to become a teacher. It is incumbent upon the state to create the conditions to ensure that there are, and that students have access to, a sufficient number of trained and accomplished professional educators.

15) "Tax Freeze" and Taxpayer's Bill of Rights (TABOR)

MPS maintains its opposition to legislative action that diminishes local control over school funding and legislation that places arbitrary caps on the ability of school boards to properly fund programs and run schools.

16) Truancy Reduction – Chronic Absenteeism

MPS seeks the continued reduction in truancy among MPS students and will pursue appropriate policies to ensure that students stay in school. The importance of focusing on policy solutions related to this issue has increased given the fact that the state now includes a five point deduction in the overall report card score related to a measure of "chronic absenteeism."

17) Local Control of School Commencement

MPS seeks to reestablish local control over the setting of the school start date. 2001 Wisconsin Act 16 (2001-03 biennial budget bill) eliminated the provision which allowed a school district to commence its school term before September 1 in any year that it held a public hearing and adopted a resolution to do so. Act 16 provides that a school district may only commence its school term before September 1 if the school board makes a request (including the rationale) to the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). The DPI may only grant a request if it determines

that there are extraordinary reasons for granting it. Opportunities for start date exemptions are limited under current law.

18) Increased Authority for Funding for School Safety

MPS maintains its support for legislation that will provide school districts the resources and ability to better maintain and improve school safety. School safety is central in providing a proper learning environment for students. However, school districts should not be put in a position where costs associated with maintaining a safe learning environment deplete the funding available to provide quality education in the classroom. Therefore, MPS supports legislation that will provide school districts the resources and ability to better maintain and improve school safety. As a district that supports 265 school safety positions, MPS supports the reinstatement of access to revenue limit authority in order to assist in funding school safety efforts.

19) Community Learning Centers

MPS seeks to establish a balanced and diversified funding base to sustain and increase Community Learning Centers (CLCs). Since 1998, the MPS Community Learning Centers (CLCs) have been an invaluable resource for thousands of the district's neediest students. These students have received academic assistance, leadership and youth development activities, as well as the support of caring adults during non-school hours. Direct federal grants from the Department of Education have expired, with federal dollars for CLCs now flowing through state departments of education. Authors of CLC legislation at the federal level have had an expectation that school districts will turn to all stakeholders (state, federal and local communities) for ongoing support and funding to sustain CLCs.

20) Community and Governmental Partnerships

MPS seeks to establish and maintain partnerships with other advocacy groups and governmental agencies that address the needs of MPS students. In an effort to stabilize neighborhoods and increase student achievement, MPS has partnered with numerous agencies and community programs. Work to continue and improve upon these collaborative efforts will be needed in order to continue to be successful in addressing the needs of our children.

21) Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics - STEM

MPS seeks increased support for science, technology, engineering and mathematics programs. MPS has made great strides in providing an increasing number of students the opportunity to become fully engaged in STEM programs. The economic development opportunities related to STEM programs have helped the district to more fully engage with the district's community business partners as it is clear that a student body with a solid foundation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics education has the potential to help propel future development in Milwaukee.

22) Student Health Initiative

MPS seeks to increase the scope of wellness and health care coverage for students. Children's health has a direct effect on their academic success. MPS understands that in order to

effectively educate students, the district must help to ensure that their basic health needs are met, especially those who are without a regular doctor and medical home. MPS also recognizes its role in the wider effort to stabilize and improve the health and health care of children in the Milwaukee community. Increased preventative care will lead to gains in achievement, reduced costs related to 504 and IEP requirements, and reduced costs related to emergent needs in the health care community. Due to intensified efforts and greater cooperation throughout the City of Milwaukee, the district has been part of a successful partnership to reduce teen pregnancy. In continuing support of that effort, the district will continue to implement and advocate for research-based, best practices in the area of human growth and development.

23) Student Count: All Students Within an Local Education Agency (LEA)

Jurisdiction MPS supports enactment of legislation to allow school districts to count, for enrollment, tax levy, and state aid purposes, all students in the Local Education Agency (LEA) jurisdiction. Such legislation should include: 1) Provisions to allow districts who provide transportation and LEA services — including, but not limited to, special education services — to count, for enrollment, tax levy, and state aid purposes, all students within the LEA’s jurisdiction and 2) Provisions which allow districts that have a publicly funded voucher program within their LEA jurisdictions to count, for enrollment, tax levy, and state aid purposes, all students within the LEA’s jurisdiction.

24) Value-Added - State Assessment and Accountability System

MPS supports the use of value-added measures within the state’s accountability system. Using value-added analysis of state assessment data would contribute to the learning process and to efforts made to ensure that measurements of data are culturally fair, reasonably accurate, and reflective of MPS goals and standards. A state-wide value-added system would significantly enhance the MPS system, permitting comparisons throughout the state to better identify high-performing schools.

25) DREAM Act

MPS supports passage of the DREAM Act. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, would allow immigrant students who have grown up in the U.S., graduated from high school, and no criminal record the opportunity to apply for temporary legal status with the goal of becoming permanent citizens.

26) Student Identification Cards as Voter Identification Cards

MPS supports efforts to ensure that students, as voting-age citizens, have unfettered access to participating in their democracy and to exercise their right to vote. MPS supports efforts to ensure that various forms of identification, including school/student identification cards, can be used so that students have appropriate access to the polls.

27) Automatic Voter Registration

The State of Wisconsin currently requires students to pass a Civics/Citizenship exam in order to be able to successfully graduate from high school. Given that the ability to vote is at the core of our democracy, MPS supports efforts to strengthen an individual’s access to the ballot box,

abhors any and all efforts to suppress the right to vote and as such supports Automatic Voter Registration, which strengthens our democracy by automatically registering individuals to vote thereby securing and strengthening their essential right.

28) Concealed-Carry Legislative Refinement – Reduction of Gun Violence

MPS supports efforts to ensure the safety of students and of the children of the City of Milwaukee. Toward that end and where appropriate, MPS will engage in efforts to help protect students from gun violence and the tragic effects that such violence has on the city's community of children and their families. MPS students have been the direct victims of such violence and wherever possible, including changes to state law, efforts must be made to create a safer environment for children.

29) Support for Common Education Agendas

MPS will work in partnership with its education partners, including the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators, Wisconsin Rural Schools Alliance, Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools, Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance and others, to support legislative agenda items of common concern and of common benefit to the district and the students of Milwaukee Public Schools.