**Fiscal Facts: Raising the Bar: Local and National Lessons for Milwaukee’s K-12 Schools**

With too few Milwaukee students receiving an adequate education across all school types, leaders in the city can look to high-performing schools in Milwaukee and around the country for a roadmap for improvement.

A new Wisconsin Policy Forum report is the second in a two-part series on Milwaukee’s education ecosystem, the first of which was published last year. The first report found that, despite a growing range of schooling options for families, educational outcomes for the average Milwaukee child have not transformed over the last decade -- and in many respects have worsened after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the city’s declining youth population alongside the growth in the number of schools has created financial strain and competition for resources spread across many school facilities.

Based on analysis of educational data as well as interviews with school leaders locally and nationally, the new report identifies and explores drivers of success for exemplary Milwaukee schools serving large shares of disadvantaged students in Milwaukee and in other large cities. We examined the 29.2% of Milwaukee schools that exceeded the city’s 2023 average for student academic achievement and growth. Among the subset serving a student population representative of typical Milwaukee schools, six drivers of success were identified:

* Unifying mission and stable staff and culture;
* High expectations paired with nurturing supports;
* Commitment to instructional excellence and continuous improvement;
* Proactive, intentional family engagement;
* Additional capacity through fundraising and partnerships; and
* School-level autonomy, accountability, and support.

Nationally, studying educational improvements achieved in other cities makes clear that, while Milwaukee faces some unique challenges, poor academic outcomes for its children need not be the norm. The Forum report draws on these findings, as well as consideration of Milwaukee’s specific context and needs, to lay out five areas for potential action:

**Lead boldly for the long term:** MPS is welcoming a new superintendent, in an immediate opportunity to make urgently needed changes. But other leadership opportunities also exist, including for elected, civic, and community representatives. They may take on the challenging work of setting a common standard of excellence across schools, communicating it to families, coordinating supports to schools, and encouraging tough decisions on school accountability or declining enrollment.

**Focus on a few high-impact levers grounded in local data, then track them:** Selecting priority focus areas ideally involves engagement with key stakeholders and reference to reliable data. For Milwaukee, possible areas of focus could include chronic absenteeism, student mobility, and remediating lead levels in schools.

**Foster collaboration to increase capacity and support community commitment:** Where Milwaukee schools can strategically partner with each other and with sectors outside of education, they can expand their access to resources like money, talent, and analytics.

**Recruit, develop, and retain educators who believe in our children and are equipped with appropriate skills and resources:** Stemming teacher and principal turnover through targeted support, greater autonomy, and coordination between existing programs could improve both school stability and educator quality. More data on educator distribution across Milwaukee may inform incentives to strategically place and retain great teachers.

**Support families and neighborhoods outside of school:** Outside the school system, additional efforts could help address challenges facing many Milwaukee students and families. These include public safety, housing instability, and racial and economic segregation. Additional measures could include enhanced interventions for the birth-to-five period of a child’s life.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*