

**The Milwaukee Story**  
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If you go by what you see in the media you'd think the education-policy story about Milwaukee is vouchers. Not really. It's about the strategy and politics necessary to change and improve an urban district. And it is full of implications for the policy discussion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

This was clear in what was said July 30 by five persons involved with policy in Milwaukee; in a discussion at the EdVentures meeting in Madison WI. The five are Howard Fuller, superintendent 1991-95; Ken Johnson, elected to the board in April; Jason Helgerson, education aide for Mayor John Norquist; Bill Reid, lobbyist for the Milwaukee Area Chamber of Commerce, and Bruce Thompson, chair of the Milwaukee board.

The two-hour discussion, here edited, went about as follows:

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**Moderator:** Basic facts, first. The city of Milwaukee is bigger than Minneapolis and St. Paul combined; though the metropolitan area is half the size of the Twin Cities area. The Milwaukee district has about 105,000 students; more than Minneapolis and St. Paul combined. About 37 per cent of the freshman graduate four years later. There're about 25,000 in non-public schools. Of the roughly 13,000 employees about half are teachers. Eighty per cent of the students are non-white; mostly African-American; about 10 per cent Hispanic. About 18 per cent are white. Twenty years ago 80 per cent were white. The teaching staff is still almost 80 per cent white.

The board has nine members; eight elected by districts, one at-large. The teachers union, the MTEA, is the National Education Association's largest local. The district spends about \$1 billion a year.

**Q:** Tell us about the April election. **Thompson:** Four district seats were up; and the at-large seat. Our reform coalition won all five. **Q:** How much was spent? **Thompson:** If we only knew! About \$250,000 by our coalition; \$180,000 on the at-large race. The union isn't reporting; claims it was "issue advertising". We now have a 7-2 majority.

**Q:** What will the new board do? **Johnson:** We dropped our superintendent, and appointed Spencer Korte, a principal. We're trying to get state aid for an additional person in the classroom; trying to cash out transportation aid to have more neighborhood schools. We'll favor school-level councils to help select the principal and teachers. We want the principal to run the school.

**Fuller:** As superintendent I had pushed for a whole package of options; for parents and for the board: decentralization, charters, contract schools. This caused the union to run a slate against me. We [[have]] to open up to innovation; have to move boards to policy and out of service-delivery.

This has been a 23-year struggle. It began with a desegregation plan that put the burden on black children. When we tried to ask about student achievement the district would not release the data: It did not want parents to know how poorly their children were doing. There was a suit to set up a metropolitan district. We thought this would not lead to better achievement. We proposed a separate, black, district for north Milwaukee. This passed one house. The district hired Bob Peterkin and Debby McGriff to "quell us".

Then Polly Williams proposed the first voucher program. Gov. Thompson signed the bill. Later the charter program came along. Now we have a coalition that works together for the broadest possible options. And we now have a board that sees itself as the agent for all children.

**Q:** What is the voucher program today? **Thompson:** In '95 it was opened to religious schools too; 15,000 students authorized. There're now about 8,000 enrolled. The litigation has ended; favorably, with our Supreme Court ruling favorably and the U.S. Supreme Court declining to review.

**Q:** What's the state's attitude? **Bob Wood,** Gov. Thompson's chief of staff: We saw a district where the average grade was D+; where half the teachers had their own kids in private schools. There was no way we were not going to risk change. We gave the district authority to close failing schools; gave the city and the universities the authority to grant charters.

**Helgerson:** Mayor Norquist is a Democrat; but on education he's on the same agenda. We have to advocate for change. **Q:** In every other big Great Lakes city the mayor went for takeover. **Helgerson:** We didn't think who-runs-it was the key. We wanted to empower parents with options. In supporting the reform slate this spring the mayor took some chances: He runs again in less than a year, and the opponents might come after him. So far the city is the only 'alternate sponsor' creating charter schools. The first opened fall '98.

**Fuller:** Once their litigation fails the opponents will try to 'help'; proposing to "prevent abuses" with regulations intended to restore the old bureaucratic model. **Reid:** We now see bills from longtime opponents, saying "We want to help charter schools be more successful"! **Fuller:** We've also had to fight the 'right wing' charge - the notion that African-Americans shouldn't work with business, and conservatives. There's no choice; since the 'left wing' offers the status quo. We have an amazing coalition. But it's always under stress.

**Q:** How does the board feel about this competition? **Thompson:** The old board was adversarial. But we want to get away from holding kids captive. Citizens don't have to send their kids to MPS in order to vote.

**Q:** Business always says education is important; but doesn't always play the role it does in Milwaukee. Explain. **Reid:** There was concern about offending the unions. But basically the CEOs understand competition. They know what lets their organizations change. **Fuller:** Here they're more radical than in most cities, where "fuzzy altruism" is often the rule. The Milwaukee CEOs have taken the flak about "You don't live in the city"; as if the NEA lives in the city! They have put up the money for the organizing; made the phone calls. Tim Sheehy, president of the Chamber, was very important. They aren't scared off when it really comes to the fight.

But it can't be done with money alone. It takes grassroots work. Ken was knocking doors for 10 months ahead of the election. There is a serious base here; this is not a paper coalition. You come here to challenge us, you are going to have a fight. People for the American Way scheduled a rally here to oppose choice; brought in Jesse Jackson, Jr. from Chicago. We scheduled a counter-rally: same day; same hour. They had 200 people; we had 500.

**Q:** Nobody's mentioned the media; the newspapers especially. **Fuller:** It helped enormously when Joe Williams became the education reporter. We spend a lot of time talking with people on the editorial pages, too. Also the

radio talk shows; especially to the African-American audience. **Thompson:** Before, all the reporting was like covering a Punch and Judy show: about people fighting. The reporting began to help people understand the issues at stake.

**Reid:** The state also has to do things for the district; where most of the kids will still be enrolled. **Helgerson:** The mayor also has a 'compact' with the district, to help. **Fuller:** Our coalition can't just say we're just going to help charters and choice. You've got to work both outside and inside. We always strategize from that perspective. It's not anti-union: There are reasons why teachers organized. We're opposed to the way this union deals with our children.

**Johnson:** I'm a journeyman electrician. I had to explain to the building trades why I was against the teachers union slate. I said we represent our people, but in the trades none of us would think it's the duty of the union to run the company. The teachers union was "running the company". The unions supported me. I won, 58:42 in my district. Teachers voted for me. I'd knocked on their doors. They knew I was for good schools.

**Q:** Will the new board heal relations with the union? What are board members doing that's different? **Johnson:** The president of the MTEA is in my district. I told her: "It's you who's making me out an enemy of teachers". I'm not. At the moment the union is not even coming to the board or committee meetings, which is amazing. I'm going to community meetings. I return all phone calls. I'm in schools where I'm told I'm the first board member they've seen. We will empower parents at sites. We will let some schools be autonomous. We will stay with policy; let the superintendent handle the personnel, building maintenance, etc.

**Q:** Isn't there a negative financial impact when kids go to other schools? **Johnson:** We have big waiting lists for our specialty schools; and when we turn parents away they don't go to MPS at all. We can expand those schools; and also get students from outside Milwaukee.

**Thompson:** We're really just at the start. Now we have to translate these changes into student achievement. We have to replicate the success of the schools that do far better than their demographics would suggest. **Fuller:** We have to be willing to reappraise our strategies as we go along.

We also have to keep finding new leadership. Old heads like me should not try to hold on. **Johnson:** Twenty years ago I was a freshman in high school; showing some initiative. (Howard) saw that, and invited me to a summer camp on leadership; told us this was our responsibility. Today I'm on the school board. **Fuller:** I don't want us just to complain there're aren't enough people of color in the discussions about education. It's my responsibility to do something about that. I decided to call a national meeting of 200 African-Americans, 25-35, about options. We'll do it again next March. I want us to go into these discussions with an effective presence. I want to get more black elected officials involved. Look at the poll data: It's in the African-American communities and among young people that support for choice is rising most rapidly. They're the least tied-in to the existing system.

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