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## Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

# 4 initiatives seek to raise student proficiencies

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Leaders and backers of the handful of high-energy "no excuses" schools in Milwaukee are launching efforts aimed at tripling the number of children attending such schools in the city.

The goal proclaimed by leaders of four efforts that have sprung up almost simultaneously is to raise the number of students in such demanding schools from about 6,000 now to 20,000 by 2020.

If the efforts succeed, they will dramatically change the education landscape in Milwaukee and, backers hope, make widespread the high achievement levels of the schools that are at the center of the new effort.

But for the effort to succeed, major political, institutional and financial hurdles will need to be jumped. People on both sides of the longstanding, giant chasm between partisans for Milwaukee Public Schools and partisans for charter schools and private voucher schools will need to cooperate and focus on matters of improving the quality of education where they might actually find common ground.

The question all the new efforts are beginning with is: How can the success of schools such as Milwaukee College Preparatory, 2449 N. 36th St.; Bruce-Guadalupe, 1028 S. 9th St., and St. Marcus Lutheran, 2215 N. Palmer St., become more widespread?

All three have programs that include longer days than most schools, rigorous curriculums, demanding disciplinary environments, strong intervention with struggling students, and a relentless focus on achievement. All three also have principals recognized for their excellence. College Prep and Bruce Guadalupe are charter schools, authorized to operate through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and St. Marcus is a religious school that is part of the publicly funded voucher program. None of the three screen students to admit only those likely to do better, and all three have consistent records of strong results.

### Four initiatives

The four new efforts are overlapping and appear not to be competing with each other. They are:

- &enspThe founding of an organization, Schools That Can Milwaukee. St. Marcus, Milwaukee College Prep and Bruce-Guadalupe are members of a national coalition of independent schools serving low-income communities called Schools That Can. Participating schools must meet benchmarks such as having at least 75% of students rated as advanced or proficient in standardized tests. The new organization is an affiliate of that, and leaders are aiming to help existing schools reach the group's standards, help make possible the opening of new high-performing schools, and attracting more nationally recognized school operators to Milwaukee.

- &enspThe launch by PAVE of a program to work with 11 schools to improve their quality or expand their size or both. PAVE - a long-standing support organization for private and charter schools in Milwaukee - seeks to help schools strengthen such things as governance structures and use of student performance data, as well as to help them raise money for building needs, says its president, Dan McKinley.

- &enspCreation of a charter school advocacy committee, made up of many of the leading charter school figures in the city and chaired by former legislator Dennis Conta. The group has been meeting monthly, with the goal of increasing the quality of charter schools in the city, including closing low performing schools.

- &enspThe formation of an organization of voucher school leaders focused on improving educational quality. Leaders of about 50 voucher schools - a bit less than half of the schools involved in the voucher program - have joined, said Henry Tyson, principal of St. Marcus and president of the group.

Behind the new efforts lie two dominating facts: After more than a decade of rapid growth, the voucher and charter movements have not demonstrated they are getting any better results overall than MPS. At the same time, a small group of those schools are demonstrably high performing.

McKinley said the goal of the charter and voucher movement was to raise citywide quality.

"We confront the idea that it hasn't," he said.

## **The MPS role**

McKinley, said leaders of the effort want to cooperate with MPS leaders.

"It's just an outrage that we can't have more good schools," McKinley said. "We know how to do it. Let's break down the old political barriers and get it done."

Several MPS administrators and principals have been involved in some aspects of the effort. But especially at a time when a new superintendent is arriving and the financial situation of the system is stressed, the prospects for cooperation are uncertain, at best.

Some School Board members are dismissive of the record of "no excuses" schools around the country and have opposed efforts to bring in nationally known charter school operators. Some of the operating practices used at the hard-charging schools conflict with existing rules established in MPS labor contracts.

But MPS involvement and cooperation may be the key to whether the ambitious goal of 20,000 students by 2020 can be reached. The voucher program is nearing the 22,500 cap in enrollment set by the Legislature - highly likely to become a controversial issue soon. And MPS and UWM are nearing the

caps they effectively have set on charter school operations, leaving only City Hall as a likely prospect for expansion of independently operated schools in Milwaukee as of now.

On the other hand, the three schools at the core of the new drive - Milwaukee College Prep, St. Marcus and Bruce-Guadalupe - are undertaking expansions.

How dramatic are the differences between the program and success of a school such as Milwaukee College Prep and other schools in the city?

Consider one example: In the test results recently released by the state, 85% of fourth-graders at College Prep were rated as proficient or advanced in reading.

Three blocks away is Metcalfe School, opened by MPS a decade ago with hopes it would be a model for success. This year, 26% of Metcalfe fourth-graders were proficient or advanced in reading.

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