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Alan J. Borsuk | On Education

In education, much has changed, much has stayed the same

Job market, poverty, demographics different but school culture unchanged

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Things just aren't the way they used to be, right? A talk I gave recently put my mind to wondering how true that really is when it comes to kindergarten through 12th-grade education.

So here are seven things that have genuinely changed since, oh, say, 1970, and three things that really haven't. Some are specific to Milwaukee, some are much more general, and no, this isn't everything that could be put on the list.

These long-term trends illuminate a landscape that genuinely has changed and shed light on why pressures on school have grown so high. They also put an intense light on the last point on the list, but I'm getting ahead of myself. First, the seven things that have changed:

- **The job market.** Go back a couple of generations and you could make a good living without a high school diploma. Go back a generation and you could do OK with only a high school diploma. Increasingly now, educators (and employers) look at a bachelor's degree or at least completion of a two-year post-high school program as the entry level for decent job prospects. It's a different economy, and that puts great pressure on both students and schools.

- **Poverty in Milwaukee.** The fourth-poorest large city in the United States - who would have thought 40 years ago we'd get that title? The effects of poverty show up in powerful ways in schools. Kids from low-income homes can succeed, schools with large numbers of poor kids can be successful and overall Milwaukee educational outcomes just don't have to be as weak as they are. But the impacts of poverty greatly intensify the challenges for schools.

- **Computers, television and the way kids communicate.** These are international trends, of course. And there is relatively little known concretely about the impact on kids and learning. It's unknown what will ultimately be shown to be pluses (fabulous access to information) and minuses (my

guess: more resistance to more thoughtful academic work and recreational reading). But the text-messaging, Facebooking, laptop-loving world is a different place than the plodding 1960s when it comes to teaching and learning.

- **The percentage of special education students.** This is a huge factor, often underestimated and definitely not limited to urban centers. In the 1970s, when the first federal law on special education was passed, the prevailing assumption was that the percentage of students covered would be in the middle single digits. Now, it's in the mid-teens. The implications for life in schools and for school budgets are deep and broad.

- **Family life.** The divorce rate has stopped going up rapidly, but the change in the fabric of family life since 40 years ago has major impacts. Nationwide, more than a quarter of children are raised in single-parent homes. Blended families are common and often turn out to be great. But the level of tumultuousness in children's lives overall is much higher now than in the past, and that shows up in school. Not to mention the changes in broader patterns of family life (over-hecktic schedules, rarely eating dinner together, parents and children barely crossing paths in a typical day, etc.)

- **The racial makeup of schools.** In 1976, when federal Judge John W. Reynolds ordered MPS to be desegregated, about two-thirds of students in the system were white. This year, the total is less than 15%. The percentage of Hispanic students in MPS in the 1970s was in the low single digits. This year, it is 23%.

People should be proud of their race, ethnicity and heritage. But we have not achieved a world where racial and ethnic dynamics don't affect life in a school. And in an increasingly diverse metropolitan area, the disparities in educational success by race bode ill for the future. The continuing almost-all-white makeup of some suburban schools merits attention also.

- **Voucher and charter schools.** Milwaukee has become one of the nation's centers for educational choice. Private schools in the voucher program and charter schools that operate with relative independence from the main school system enroll more than 25,000 children in Milwaukee. Neither type of school existed before 1990. Charter schools are growing across the state and nation. All this has effects not only on the students in choice schools and on parents, but on school finance and politics around education.

Now consider three things I suggest haven't changed much:

- **Kids.** For all the different forces today and for all the styles and fads that come and go, the fundamental nature of kids doesn't really seem to have changed much. Friends, social life, school work, how I look, sports - when I observe kids in school now, I don't have trouble recalling my school days.

- **Teachers.** The world of teaching is changing, of course, as the series of stories running in this newspaper shows. But, as with kids, it doesn't seem like teachers overall are that much different from teachers of 40 or 50 years ago.

- **What goes on in classrooms.** This is the big one. Even with all the changes in communication, the social fabric around kids, the demands of the economy and so on, you'd have little trouble feeling like you were back in your childhood if you sat in most classrooms, no matter how old you are now.

Is it time to make serious changes and on a broad basis in what goes on at the heart of education - how kids progress through school, how teachers and students interact and use their time, what the experience

of education is like for students?

There is serious work being done to pursue that question, some of it right among us, and with some suburban school leaders as strong advocates of change. We'll look at what they envision in an upcoming column.

Alan J. Borsuk is senior fellow in law and public policy at Marquette University Law School. He can be reached at alan.borsuk@marquette.edu.

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