

Governor Green, What's Your Answer for Milwaukee Public Schools?

by George Lightbourn

Whether you are a Democrat or a Republican; a teacher or a real estate developer; a farmer or a Milwaukee cabbie, a good deal of your economic well-being rests in the classrooms of Milwaukee Public Schools. The failure of thousands of poor, mostly minority children every year is the dirtiest little secret in Wisconsin.

Most elected officials simply want the issue to vanish. But it will not vanish. It is an issue as obstinate and headstrong as Terrell Owens' ego.

Two years ago, in researching a paper on the Milwaukee economy, my co-author and I were startled at the statistical link between learning and earning. Educational attainment makes a huge difference for the individual. It makes a huge difference for the local economy – and here's what surprised us – the economic benefits of education spill out across the region and across the state. More wealth in Milwaukee means more money in all of our pocketbooks, either through lower taxes or more business activity.

Unfortunately, as it currently stands, Milwaukee Public Schools are a drag on Wisconsin's economy.

Governor Doyle, in his four years at the helm, has treated MPS as though it were radioactive. Why would this be the case? In all likelihood the Governor heeded the advice that warned that urban education is akin to Viet Nam. So, even though educational failure is a blight on the landscape as we re-gentrify our cities, the smart political money warns to stay as far away as possible. It appears that Jim Doyle has heeded the political advice and so MPS is nowhere on his radar screen.

So the Governor didn't highlight MPS in his budget, hasn't talked about MPS in the context of his reelection campaign and only remotely addressed MPS in any of the materials Governors typically assemble to tout their accomplishments. The Doyle administration has proven to be an MPS-free zone.

But then, that's the two-edged sword that comes with incumbency. While incumbents have a leg up on their reelection, they have also created a record and it is clear that this incumbent has chosen not to take on the MPS issue.

A Green administration on the other hand remains largely unknown, as is the case for any non-incumbent. The peg he has put in the sand on education policy is to direct 70% of education spending to the classroom. While this is an admirable goal, it is unclear what difference this will make to the students of MPS. It is unclear how this will get the 72% of MPS high school students to stop skipping class or how it will get the 40% of students not to drop out of school, or how it will make boost the math proficiency for 90% of students who currently can't pass a math proficiency test.

Education in Milwaukee is in full-blown crisis. It might not have risen with the swiftness of Katrina, but it is equally devastating. It has proven an uncanny ability to parry incremental steps aimed at improvement. Nibbling, no matter how well funded or well intended, simply doesn't work.

As with Katrina, the crisis in MPS calls for sweeping, swift action. It might take the form of state takeover of the school system or ending social promotion at a Chicago Public Schools or sending hoards of VISTA-type Wisconsin college students into the MPS classrooms to lend a hand to overwhelmed teachers.

And why shouldn't state government claim ownership of the problems of MPS. After all education is a responsibility of the state, according to our Constitution. Furthermore, the \$747 million check the state will write to MPS this year is by far the largest single expenditure from the state treasury. Finally, state aid covers no less than 83% of the cost of running MPS. If taxpayers across the state were asked if it's OK just to continue sending the money with no expectation of increased performance they would undoubtedly shout a resounding NO!

So, we have seen that Governor Doyle has little interest in biting into the tough public policy issue that is MPS. How about you Governor Green? Will you be willing to take off the gloves and fight on behalf of the children of Milwaukee and on behalf of the state taxpayers? There are many in this state who await your answer.