

## Teacher Residency: What a Shame

by Scott Niederjohn

It's rare these days when a policy supported by WEAC as good for teachers also turns out to be good for students. It's even rarer to find a policy proposal with the potential to improve educational outcomes in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) without a substantial price tag attached to it. In fact, the policy I'm referring to would actually save a nominal amount of money for the state's largest school district, which is strapped with financial problems.

The policy is the residency rule for MPS teachers, which received some debate, and a vote, in the Joint Finance Committee last Tuesday. Ultimately, its elimination was defeated, with all of the Democrats on the committee, as well as Republican Senator Luther Olsen, voting against removing this rule beginning in the 2009-2010 school year. Interestingly, this motion was put forth by three Republican legislators: Representative Rhoades, Representative Kestell, and Senator Darling.

Surveys of MPS teachers place the elimination of this rule among their highest union bargaining priorities. Further, the WEAC web site states, "[R]esidency requirements for educators in the Milwaukee Public Schools should be repealed." It's interesting that this rule, in conflict with WEAC's wishes and the Milwaukee Teacher Education Association (MTEA) members; and, with the potential to improve the education provided to urban Milwaukee kids, would be opposed by the entire slate of Democrats on this committee.

A recent Wisconsin Policy Research Institute report that I authored with Dr. Mark Schug illuminated many of the problems with this antiquated rule. Our findings concluded that the MPS teacher residency requirement, one of only two left in the entire nation, has failed to accomplish any of its goals. In summary, we found that:

- MPS teachers are less credentialed and have less experience than teachers in other districts in the state.
- The turnover rate among MPS teachers is high.
- Local teachers-in-training are reluctant to apply for jobs in MPS.
- Many teachers—teachers who loved teaching in MPS—have left the city due to the residency requirement and accepted teaching positions in Milwaukee-area suburbs.
- MPS teachers live predominantly in distinct pockets of the city and on the periphery; very few live in central-city neighborhoods.
- Nearly 30 percent of MPS teachers who are parents send their children to private schools.

To improve property values and foster economic growth in the Milwaukee area, Milwaukee's goal should be to improve MPS, not to retain an ill-considered teacher residency requirement that contributes to the erosion of teacher quality.

These findings regarding the failure of the residency requirement, while not often discussed openly, are not surprising. They merely confirm and elaborate what many MPS insiders have known all along—that the MPS teacher residency requirement contributes to reducing the quality of education in MPS and fails to deliver the benefits touted by its proponents. Since these matters come as little surprise, they invite an obvious question: Why does the residency requirement remain in place?

The answer to this question is likely the same as the reason that the Democrats on the Joint Finance Committee voted against rescinding it last week. While the teachers in Milwaukee don't like this rule, their union loves it. It locks into the City of Milwaukee thousands of teachers; most of whom vote for union supported candidates influencing school board races in the MTEA's favor. This has the ancillary benefit of helping other Democratic candidates in the city of Milwaukee gain votes. It's unfortunate that these legislators have once again chosen politics over helping the students and teachers in the MPS improve the district for the future.