

# MILWAUKEE'S INCREDIBLE SHRINKING SUPERINTENDENT

CHARLES J. SYKES

In a year of extraordinary change, Milwaukee finds itself with three new leaders — in its government, its church, and its schools. All three face a daunting challenge: Milwaukee's new Archbishop Timothy Dolan has to pick up the pieces of the church's sex abuse scandal. County Executive Scott Walker presides over a county government still in turmoil from the pension scandal that sparked a citizen revolt and cost his predecessor and seven county supervisors their jobs. And when he was named superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, former middle school principal William Andrekopoulos inherited a system in which 38% of the schools are designated as failing.

Dolan's task is to restore the morale of an archdiocese still shaken by the revelation that his predecessor, Rembert Weakland, paid hush money to a man who says the archbishop had molested him. Walker faces a fiscal nightmare that will force him to find \$50 million in cuts from the county's budget.

But if anyone was asked to rank the three new leaders — Dolan, Andrekopoulos, and Walker — in order of most to least likely to



succeed, it would be the new schools chief who would almost invariably end up at the bottom of the list. Reforms take political will, stability, time, and an organizational structure that actually wants its leader to succeed. Arguably Dolan and Walker have at least some of those elements in their favor. Andrekopoulos has none of them.

In itself that's not unusual, nor is it a reflection on Andrekopoulos, because in most major cities the school superintendent begins his job with the lowest expectations of success, faced with the most entrenched status quo, and often in the shadow of his predecessors' disappointments

But even by that standard, Andrekopoulos's tenure was ill-omened from its inception. Andrekopoulos was named superintendent on a narrow 5 to 4 vote by what the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* described as a "deeply divided, grim and sometimes angry Milwaukee School Board."

---

*Charles J. Sykes is the editor of WI:Wisconsin Interest and a Senior Fellow of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. He also hosts a talk-radio show on AM 620 WTMJ in Milwaukee.*

Complicating his shaky mandate, all five of his supporters are up for re-election next spring, with the odds suggesting that at least one, and perhaps more could be defeated, resulting in another of regular pendulum swings of power on the board.

If Archbishop Dolan's tenure can be counted in decades and Walker's political horizon in years, Andrekopoulos may have less than seven months to make his mark.

### **Dashed Hopes**

The lack of optimism that greeted Andrekopoulos contrasts sharply with the high hopes that accompanied the accession of his predecessor Spence Korte, who was swept into office on a wave of reform in 1999. The spring elections that year marked a stunning setback for candidates backed by the teachers' union, all of whom lost to candidates who supported school choice. Propelled by the voter rebellion, the new board moved quickly to install Korte, the popular principal of Hi-Mount Elementary School. There was no pretense of a national search; Korte was known as an innovator, not afraid to buck the system.

The victory of the reformers and the selection of Korte generated optimism for the future of the city's schools that verged on euphoria. "You cannot come away from a conversation with Korte," the *Journal Sentinel* editorialized, "without thinking that behind his external serenity is a rock-hard commitment to excellence." The paper contrasted the new reform superintendent with his predecessor, the "low-key, hardly breathing Alan Brown."

Brown, a former superintendent from Waukegan, Illinois, had been handpicked by the union-controlled board apparently for his blandly compliant mediocrity. He did not disappoint. He lasted less than two years and left virtually no record of accomplishment. His buyout cost taxpayers \$400,000, but generated little controversy, an indication of how little his departure was lamented and how much good feeling surrounded Korte's appointment.

Emboldened by a strong 7-2 majority on the board, Korte in his first week promised

sweeping changes and a shakeup in the central administration. Referring to anxieties on the part of central office staffers, Korte quipped, "I don't mean to be flippant, but if you're running scared, you probably should be running scared."

Three years later, Korte quit, frustrated, disillusioned, ground down.

Despite the ballyhooed reform agenda, 38% of MPS schools were designated as officially "in need of improvement." The list of the 63 schools included nine of the fifteen largest high schools in the city and more than a dozen middle schools. Only 55% of fourth graders in the city's schools tested as proficient readers, far below the state average. The high school graduation rate still hovered at only about 50 percent.

Given the forces arrayed against even a strong leader — the teachers' union, a calcified bureaucracy, an array of vested special interests — a superintendent has little or no hope of success without the solid backing of the school board. Korte no longer had the support he needed.

Korte admitted he had no leverage to "get this kind of work done," and "I'm certain the board does not wish to grant me that kind of leverage." He cited a lack of consensus on the board "about the direction of the school district, which makes it really difficult for an administration to drive it."

Despite a promising beginning, Korte had seen his political support on the school board erode in his first two years. Disappointment with the pace of change and strong opposition from unions led to a sharp reversal of fortune. In 2001, two of Korte's backers were defeated by two bitter critics of his administration, Peter Blewett and Jennifer Morales. For months the board was deadlocked 4 to 4. The new board failed to give him a new contract, which put him in limbo, and he was forced to watch the increasingly fractious board degenerate into chronic squabbling. Last spring the election of Barbara Horton, herself a former interim superintendent, seemed to give the reformers

and Korte a working majority, but the institutional frustration had by then already taken its toll, and Korte announced that he had enough.

As he resigned, Korte said that he and the board had grown “distinctly further apart” over the last three years.

### **Revolving Door**

As disappointing as Korte’s failure was, it was hardly unusual. The average superintendent of a big city school system has a professional lifespan of only two and a half years. Andrekopoulos is the eighth superintendent to warm the seat since 1986. Although greeted with varying degrees of optimism when they took office, the superintendents make up a roll-call of diminishing expectations: Robert Peterkin; Hawthorne Faison (interim), Howard Fuller, Robert Jasna, Barbara Horton (interim), Alan Brown and, finally, Korte.

Most of them followed a predictable parabola of hope and frustration. Peterkin used his superintendency to burnish his resume and departed for points east before achieving any of the major goals he had laid out. Howard Fuller mobilized the widest base of political support, winning the backing of inner city reformers and the city’s business community. But even the most charismatic and effective MPS chief resigned when a spring election weakened his support on the board.

School board elections in Milwaukee tend to be low-voter-turnout affairs, held in off years. While that tends to magnify the clout of the teachers’ union, the unpredictability of the turnouts adds a permanent element of instability, compounded by the near-anonymity of the candidates. Despite some renewed attention to longstanding complaints about the board’s tendency to micromanage after Fuller’s resig-

nation, there were no serious efforts to reform the system. Korte inherited the same political instability that crippled Howard Fuller and passed it on intact to Andrekopoulos.

Even though Milwaukee became the epicenter of education reform, with the nation’s first school voucher program and a growing charter school movement, there has, in fact, been little debate about the governance of MPS. In a sense, the entire question of how MPS itself should be run was put on the back burner as reformers and advocates of the status quo expended most of their heavy ammunition on the fight over school choice.

While the administrative morass inside MPS deepened, school board elections became proxy fights between supporters and opponents of choice. As important as that debate was and remains, it tended to overshadow discussions of how to fix the governance of the public schools.

The result is that even though Milwaukee remains a laboratory of educational experimentation in some respects, in others it seems increasingly out of step. When, for example, it sought a replacement for Korte, MPS made no real effort at a national search and had no serious discussion about looking outside of educational circles for a superintendent. Instead, it held focus groups and picked a middle school principal, whose tenure now hangs on a single vote on a divided school board.

### **Mayoral Clout**

Contrast that with the approach of other major cities that are also wrestling with educational failure. This year the mayor of New York joined his counterparts in Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, and Baltimore in assuming direct control of his city’s schools. The

---

*Korte inherited the same political instability that crippled Howard Fuller and passed it on intact to Andrekopoulos.*

---

trend is not isolated. Between 1988 and 2000, some forty school districts had some portion of their operations taken out of their hands. A number of cities have also opted for nontraditional choices to head their school system. In Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Diego, Seattle, and New York, non-educators have been recruited. In Seattle, a former general, John Stanford, was named superintendent. His successor, Joseph Olchefske, worked in public finance at Piper Jaffrey for eleven years before he was hired by Stanford as his chief financial officer. San Diego hired a former prosecutor. Los Angeles picked Roy Romer, the former governor of Colorado, to run the city's sprawling public school bureaucracy.

The trend toward greater mayoral control of urban education reflected the widespread disillusionment with school boards who were notorious for micromanaging, political turf-guarding, and treating their systems as patronage entitlements. The movement picked up momentum in the late 1980s, when a growing number of mayors recognized that their cities could not prosper without fixing the schools. Their willingness to take control and responsibility was a sharp reversal from their predecessors' conventional wisdom that schools were simply too messy to risk spending political capital.

Unlike superintendents caught in the professional merry-go-round of fickle school boards, the mayors had the political clout to build coalitions and mobilize support for far-reaching initiatives. Where the turnover of superintendents made continuity impossible, mayoral control provided a measure of stability. The mayors were able to mobilize stronger business involvement while lessening the clout of other interest groups who had resisted change in the past. Mayoral control also made it easier for the schools to coordinate their programs with other government agencies.

In 1995, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley won control of the city's notoriously failing public schools. His administration expanded summer schools, ended social promotions, and built or renovated dozens of schools. Although

the system is hardly a national model, tests and graduation rates have shown improvements. Arne Duncan, named by Daley as CEO of the city's school system: says:

I think the reason for the crisis in American education is that no one was accountable.

Mayors could throw rocks and criticize but they couldn't do anything about it. If you have a mayor who says he's in charge of the schools, he's the one on the line, and he has to get results or he'll be voted out.

He cites improvement in the schools' ability to work with other city agencies. "When there's a security problem, I can pick up the phone and talk to the police chief. I don't have to wait a week for a call back."

The most recent — and dramatic — mayoral takeover occurred in June when the New York legislature turned over control of New York City schools to Mayor Michael Bloomberg. With the new power, says Robert Berne, senior vice president for academic and health affairs at New York University, the mayor "has no excuse anymore that he doesn't control the classroom. He has as many more levers at his disposal than anyone heading an urban system."

On paper, New York's school system — with 80,000 teachers, 1.1 million students, and 1,100 schools — looks nearly unmanageable. But the schools have the full attention of the city's mayor.

"Education will become for Mr. Bloomberg what crime was for Guiliani," says Berne, "a litmus test of his success."

Bloomberg has moved quickly to put his own mark on the schools, going outside of the system and the educational establishment to name Joel Klein, a former Justice Department lawyer, as superintendent. One of Klein's first major moves was to add two school days to the new academic year by taking time set aside for teaching training and putting teachers back in classrooms. Klein also ordered schools to open 20 minutes earlier each day, adding about 100 minutes to teacher workweeks.

The teacher training days were not widely mourned. Last year, some high school teachers were assigned to spend the day in workshops in yoga, birth-watching, and aromatherapy. Observers noted that the changes were not earthshaking in the major scheme of things, but they were symbolically important because they marked Klein's first major policy changes. They emphasized his desire — and the policy of Mayor Michael Bloomberg — to put the education of children in the classroom at the top of the system's priorities.

Even so, the trend toward mayoral control is still very much a work in progress.

Mayoral takeovers provide "a big one-time jolt," observes Stanford professor and education expert Michael W. Kist. Mayors have been able to come in and get the schools repaired, straighten out the budget, and get books delivered, at least in the short run. But it's an open question whether the structure provides real benefits over the long run.

Indeed, not all mayoral ventures into education have been successful.

In Baltimore, despite a promising start, Mayor Kurt Schmoke was unable to break the hold of bureaucratic/political insiders who used the system as a patronage machine and resisted needed reforms. Baltimore's failure led to a state takeover of the system.

### **A Failure of Leadership**

In Milwaukee neither a mayoral or state takeover seems even remotely likely. While Mayor John Norquist was an outspoken advocate of school reform and a key backer of school choice, he has been badly weakened by his own scandals and is already a lame duck. No prospective candidates to succeed Norquist

have as yet evinced any special enthusiasm for taking on the problems of MPS.

For his part Andrekopoulos says he is "excited and ready to forge ahead" to meet the challenges of the system. He has already laid out his core beliefs:

Children come first. Parents are valuable partners. Community partnerships add value. The classroom is the most important place in the school system. Central Services supports student achievement. Leadership and accountability are key to our success.

He touts what sounds like an ambitious agenda of school "empowerment," "restructuring for freedom," and "restructuring for performance."

He sounds, in other words, very much like all of his predecessors. But if history is any guide at all, he will have only a few months to act on his agenda before he is shown the door.

Maybe then, with expectations and illusions dashed again, Milwaukee will begin to ask the same question as many of its counterparts: Is it time to

get rid of the school board?

A radical restructuring that puts the mayor in charge and brings in non-educational change agents would not, of course, be a magic bullet. Far more important will be changes in the curriculum and in the classroom that translate into students who can read and do math at grade level. That, in turn, will depend on the ability and willingness of schools to innovate and to adopt the work from successful models like Milwaukee's Clarke Street School.

Getting rid of the school board and the revolving door superintendency does not automatically translate into any of those changes.

---

*Far more important will be changes in the curriculum and in the classroom that translate into students who can read and do math at grade level.*

---

But what Milwaukee has been slow to recognize is that those conditions are also unlikely to emerge out of a system that seems to have institutionalized instability and virtually assures the failure of its latest leader.