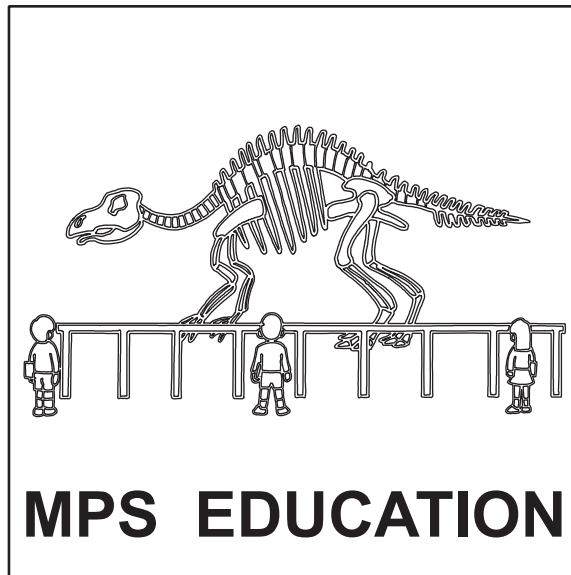


MILWAUKEE'S CHILDREN DESERVE A CHANCE TO BE BETTER

GEORGE LIGHTBOURN

Janice huddled in the front seat of the car, as close to the passenger window as she could. She made no eye contact with the man driving. They were headed to the address she had given him, the latest address that Janice and her family had called home. This was not home in the Currier and Ives sense. But it was a place Janice could identify when the form required a home address.



the door, Mr. Hamilton glimpsed inside the apartment. Janice's address on the form, the place that she and her sister called home, had no furniture—nothing.

The principal knew that Janice hadn't lived there long. He wasn't sure why her family had moved from their last place, but then the timing of the move probably had not been of their choosing. During the

Mr. Hamilton, the man behind the wheel, was the principal at Janice's school.¹ As soon as he got word of the problem Janice had in the classroom he acted. Janice had suffered an asthma attack so severe she had vomited, most of which now clung to her school uniform. Mr. Hamilton knew she needed to get cleaned up because he knew how careful Janice and her sister were about their appearance. Being clean and looking good were important to the sisters and so it was important to this inner-city principal. "These kids have enough working against them," he said, explaining why he thought it so important to take action.

What awaited them at the apartment shouldn't have surprised him but, "you never get used to it." When Janice's uncle answered

decades he has worked in Milwaukee schools, first as a teacher and now as a principal, he has always been devoted to his students—preparing them for the dozens of challenges standing before them. Like Hans Brinker, the little boy with his finger in the dike, Hamilton knew that his efforts were a long-shot. He knew the odds facing Janice just as he knew the odds facing every MPS student, and the odds are long indeed:

- 49% of MPS students are classified as habitually truant,
- The average MPS high school student is absent 20% of the school year,

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- 96% of the students in Mr. Hamilton's school are from families poor enough to qualify for free or reduced price lunch,

- 47%—less than half—of MPS high school graduates have aspirations to further their education beyond high school. This is far behind the 73% of the graduates in the rest of Wisconsin that plan on attending school after high school.

By now the plight of MPS students seems a tired story, having been repeated far too often to elicit shock or even mild surprise. Janice and her fellow public school students, emerge each day from lives cluttered with challenges. They emerge into a world far grittier than the world facing most Wisconsin children. And the reality is that they will struggle with school, attend sporadically and either stop going altogether, or graduate from high school with deficiencies. (One top official from UW-Milwaukee revealed that 70% of students from MPS require remedial coursework.)

The disconnect

Milwaukee philanthropist Marty Stein, in writing about Milwaukee's children said that "we are on a course for disaster. . . ." Clearly Stein was right. Yet we find none of our political leaders acting as though we are on a course for disaster. There is a troubling disconnect between the severity of MPS' problems and the actions taken by Wisconsin's leaders.

By his inaction, Governor Doyle has become a champion of the status quo. While he stumps the state espousing that children of poverty should be given hope that they might attend college, he has done nothing to change MPS. His preferred solutions for the problems of MPS steer clear of anything close to radical or even controversial. Instead, his plan for MPS trod a comfortable, well-worn path. The Governor's budget suggested tucking money into smaller classes, multi-lingual, multi-cultural programs and driver education. While each of these measures is well-intentioned, do we really think they are likely to make a difference?

Will these weak gestures from Wisconsin's chief executive attack the realities facing

Milwaukee's children? In reading, we find 63% of Milwaukee's third graders are rated as proficient or better? For the rest of Wisconsin the number is 83%. At this early stage we see a disturbing gap.

Let's move forward to the eighth grade. How many children are proficient or better? In Milwaukee the number is only 41%. In the rest of Wisconsin the number is 80%. The longer the child remains in MPS, the wider the gap becomes.

In the high school years, an average day will find 80% of MPS students in attendance. As Alan Borsuk of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported, the average student who attends school 80% of the time is missing seven weeks. The average high school student in the rest of Wisconsin misses a little less than three weeks.

Milwaukee's drop-out rate fluctuates between 35% and 40%. In the rest of the Wisconsin the drop-out rate is 10%. If Milwaukee could somehow be like the rest of Wisconsin, there would be two thousand more high school graduates each year.

A chance to be better

Why isn't more being done to attack this crisis? Perhaps it is because the problems facing MPS are so complicated and so foreign to our own experience. For most Wisconsin students, education is stitched into their hopes and dreams. When they leave the hospital, swaddled in pink and blue blankets, just as surly as they know they are headed for home, so too they are headed for school. It will be a key step in their maturation, a necessary ingredient in their happiness. There is no debating. No convincing is needed. Going to school, studying and getting good grades is the job assigned to Wisconsin children.

Every day these Wisconsin children see what education has done for their parents, neighbors, aunts and uncles. They know the stigma associated with not finishing school. They might protest from time to time, but they understand that it will be nose-down hard work, not winning American Idol, that will be

their ticket to the American dream. We have all heard the bromide that wealth cannot buy happiness, but the fact is that it can put a good deal of distance between us and misery.

Part of why we value education is undoubtedly a residual of a work ethic passed down from our ancestors. Work has historically been meritorious, regardless of our lot in life.

But we also understand the reward we reap from school. We know that we will have more money in our pockets if we are educated. We see pictures of first-generation college students standing between parents who are beaming with pride. Those smiles are there because those parents understand how much better off their children will be now that they are equipped with a diploma.

The value of education is fundamental to who we are. It is reinforced in all aspects of our lives. And it holds a special place for Americans. French existentialist Albert Camus provided a glimpse into the soul of America when he said, "Freedom is nothing else but a chance to be better." And in that simple phrase we can understand why education is a fundamental value for America. Our parents pack us off to school so we can be better. We study grammar and multiplication tables so that we can be better. We stay at our desk or the kitchen table until our homework is done so that we can be better. That is our fundamental freedom; to be better.

It is disturbing when we see freedom squandered. And that is the tragedy of MPS. Those schools represent a ticket to a better life. Yet thousands of Milwaukee's children are turning their backs on freedom. We see a clear picture of the freedom squandered when we juxtapose the Milwaukee children against others who have fought and struggled for the free-

dom to be better. We see it in the inspiring story of Ali Ismail Abbas, the young Iraqi boy who lost both of his arms when an errant rocket leveled his home and killed his family. Through his suffering, the world media has documented his thirst for a better life. He has learned to paint and to write using his feet and has recently authored a published children's book.

We saw it in 1957 when Elizabeth Eckford, one of nine black students, challenged the segregation of the schools in Little Rock Arkansas. Elizabeth was willing to endure the venom of her fellow Little Rock teenagers and the Little Rock establishment to gain access to schools that she and her family knew would lead to a better life.

Elizabeth, Ali and thousands of other children have overcome huge obstacles to gain the freedom that education ensures. And each year, many Milwaukee students overcome the obstacles placed in their way. Mr. Hamilton is quick to list his former students who have gone on to higher education and become successful in life. But he knows that these are the exceptions. There

are simply too few such stories, especially when compared to other schools in Wisconsin.

Tear down the status quo

And what are the obstacles impinging on the freedom of Milwaukee's children? Mr. Hamilton knows them all too well and rattles them off without being asked. Teen pregnancy, parents without parenting skills and a shortage of male role models are high on his list. These are the tools that have been wielded to tear down and devalue education in Milwaukee.

Hamilton has also given thought to what it will take to give more children a better shot at overcoming the obstacles set in front of them.

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Schools need a blend of toughness and nurturing to reach the children of Milwaukee; toughness to maintain discipline and high expectations; nurturing to provide an element that too few of his students find at home.

Freedom is nothing more than a chance to be better. But the children of MPS do not have the same freedom to be better that other Wisconsin children have. Yes the children of Milwaukee have access to schools, schools that could provide the key to a better life. But the reality tells a different story. The data are unmistakable. When these children begin school they are behind. As they proceed through the grades, they fall farther behind. Many leave school before completing high school and those who do complete it often have glaring academic deficiencies. And when these children of Milwaukee enter the workforce, they are too often equipped with ill-developed skills.

That the freedom to be better has been an unattainable goal to generations of Milwaukee's children is unmistakable. Less clear is the impact their lack of freedom is having on the rest of Wisconsin. But the impact is there. The impact is felt by Milwaukee's high-end manufacturers who are frustrated by having to sort through hundreds of job applicants to find a handful who might be capable of filling their high-paying manufacturing jobs.

The impact extends throughout Wisconsin. Those living in the far reaches of Milwaukee are also stung by the failure of Milwaukee schools. Where Milwaukee at one time sent more tax dollars to Madison than it received, we now see a city that is taking far more out of the state treasury than it is contributing. As a result, all of Wisconsin pays higher taxes.

We know something is seriously wrong, yet we accept each new report of damaged students. Always lurking in the background is the reality that damaged students flow into a damaged workforce. And we lower our expectations of the potential of Wisconsin's only first class city.

What is troubling is the acceptance from our leaders. Why are they not more outraged?

Why are they so willing to accept things the way they are?

Governor Doyle knows that whatever MPS is doing is not working. Yet he apparently expects the current approach to education, the approach that has failed generations of Milwaukee children, to miraculously recover and yield the same hope it yields for other Wisconsin children.

We watch as our political leaders seek refuge in the time-worn politics of education. Governor Doyle and others on the political left guiltily acknowledge all of the failings of urban education. But there are no reformers among. Instead, they reflexively argue for more money. Whistling past study upon study that has disproved any link between spending and performance, they insist on stuffing more money into budget pockets they once had hoped would yield results, but which have never lived up to expectations.

So, once again it is left to free market advocates to lead the charge for reform. While those on the left would paint free market thinkers as self-interested scrooges, they fail to understand that there is not one of us among the free market advocates who doesn't admire the humanitarian gesture of Mr. Hamilton in caring for Janice and every other student who needs a hand. And there is not one among us who does not want Janice to succeed; to enjoy the freedom of a chance to be better. But there is also not one among us who is interested in investing more money in the status quo.

We are looking for radical reform: the kind of reform that seeps into the living rooms and kitchens of Milwaukee, the kind of reform that makes Janice understand that she has the freedom to be better, the kind of reform that links those living in Milwaukee's inner city with families throughout Wisconsin.

We are willing to tear down the status quo. We know that we must approach the success of the next generation of Milwaukee's children with the same urgency and commitment that landed a man on the moon and created the derived stem cell. And if we have no such

commitment to reform, we should expect little to change.

What do we intend to change? Everything! We must address why so many children come to and from homes where there is little support and reinforcement for schoolwork. We must address what is being taught and how it is being taught to urban children. We must address the capabilities of our urban teaching corps and how well our university schools of education prepare them to teach the neediest children. And we must be willing to replace the underlying structures that support and enable the system that has failed so many urban children. This means that, among other things, we have to be prepared to overthrow the current system of governance and finance.

The time has come for a New Wisconsin Idea. If another generation of Milwaukee children is to be saved, Wisconsin will have to marshal its intellectual and political capacities

to attack the underlying causes of failure. This is an enormous undertaking because we have allowed the problem to become so massive. Is it a problem that can be solved? That remains to be seen. But it is a challenge that will never be conquered unless we resolve to overturn every vestige of the status quo and commit to making whatever changes are needed.

Only then will Janice, and all of the children of Milwaukee, have the freedom that comes from knowing they have a chance to be better.

Notes

1. Mr. Hamilton is a principal in Milwaukee Public Schools. Janice is one of his students. Both have been given fictitious names in this essay to avoid identifying the girl.