

Last week, WEAC Officers announced a proposal for Milwaukee only. It states:

“Effective July 1, 2015, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) shall be dissolved and replaced with four to eight Milwaukee public school districts.”

“Each new school district must be governed by a school board consisting of seven members elected from within the district for three-year terms.”

The collective union of Milwaukee’s professional educators, the MTEA, absolutely opposes this idea.

On the other hand, the status quo is unacceptable to Milwaukee educators, parents, students – the entire MPS community. Fundamental changes must be made to close the achievement gaps between the students in Milwaukee and the rest of the state.

But there is a huge obstacle to undertaking transformational change. Root causes - the poverty and racism, along with the lack of family sustaining jobs and inequitable funding for city schools, inadequate for schools - that have plagued Milwaukee families for decades – are completely ignored.

Instead, in today’s political and economic climate, an endless parade of counterproductive “bold” solutions are proposed to “fix the Milwaukee problem.” Carving up MPS into smaller districts. Eliminating the elected school board governance structure. Decimating the rights and benefits of employees. These are ideas based on blame and punishment – not meeting the basic needs of children and families.

Milwaukee educators have a responsibility to advocate for changes that will make a difference for our students, such as:

Smaller class sizes.

Art, music, and physical education for all students.

The services of library-media specialists, guidance counselors, school social workers, and other services our students need.

These changes will require a fair funding system for the entire state – not just MPS.

Other changes are needed, and city educators have shown there are better ways. For years, our union and district have been national models for:

Peer assistance through the joint Teacher Evaluation and Mentoring Program.

Mentor support programs for new teachers.

School interview teams, which include parents, to fill teacher positions (without regard to seniority).

More changes are needed now. Since Dr. Thornton took office on July 1, the MTEA has worked closely with his administration to address several issues as partners. Through frank, respectful, and sometimes difficult discussions, changes have already been made:

- A groundbreaking contract which includes a pay freeze, employee contributions to district health insurance costs, and other benefit changes that MPS has projected will save \$30,000,000 in next year’s budget.

- Systemwide professional development to engage educators in district initiatives including the Comprehensive Literacy Plan.

Some collaborative efforts have been relatively easy. For example, our union and district worked together for months to win a \$20.4 million grant from the General Electric Foundation for improvements in science and math instruction. This is the largest private investment MPS has ever received.

For several months, representatives of our union and the School Board have been engaged in shaping a new evaluation system for teachers systemwide and a pilot program for incentives to attract and retain highly-qualified teachers at schools with the most severe needs. Both initiatives are supported by three-year federal grants – totaling over \$52 million.

The two statewide education reform proposals unveiled by WEAC last week include elements of the change experiments which have been initiated during the past decade in public schools across the country.

Few states and school districts have achieved significant results. The stakeholders involved have learned that developing a new system to precisely, objectively, and fairly assess teachers is difficult, complex, and time-consuming work.

Both of WEAC's statewide proposals contain positive elements which draw upon the experiences of other states and school districts. But, research shows this is not one size fits all. The critical factor is how well local teacher unions and school boards can collaborate to develop and implement changes that improve student achievement in each district.

Our union remains committed to working together with our district's leaders; with parents; community and business leaders; and with local, state, and national political leaders. We continue to stand up for changes that will benefit our students, families, and the entire community.