

Business leaders helped bring voucher schools to Milwaukee 30 years ago, funding them is their next fight

By

Lauren Anderson

-

Feb 27, 2023 4:00 am



St. Augustine Prep's new elementary school building will be complete by the 2023-'24 academic year.

Last updated on February 28th, 2023 at 09:59 am

Nearly 30 years ago, Milwaukee's business community threw its weight behind a hoped-for solution to improving educational outcomes in the city.

Stagnating graduation rates in Milwaukee Public Schools and even lower college completion rates pushed for-profit leaders to wade into the contentious political waters of school choice.

"There was just a tremendous challenge in finding the talent (business leaders) needed, and there was a dearth of students going on to two-year and four-year institutions," said Tim Sheehy, president and chief executive officer of Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce. "So, we engaged because we felt that giving parents a choice would open up more quality education options for their students."

MMAC lobbied for a state law providing public funding for students enrolled in private voucher schools, paving the way for the expansion of school choice beyond the original Milwaukee Parental Choice Program pilot initiated by state legislator Polly Williams. The

group later advocated for the inclusion of religious schools and the lifting of enrollment caps in the choice programs and the creation of local authorizers for independent public charter schools.

“At a critical moment in time, the MMAC stepped up and provided financial support to hire organizers that were key to bringing parents and community members to the table to support the passage of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program,” said education reform advocate Howard Fuller.

The decades since have brought the proliferation of charter and choice schools in the city, with those sectors now accounting for about 40% of enrollment in Milwaukee schools. If trends hold, it’s expected that within a few years the city could have more children enrolled in those alternatives to traditional public schools than in MPS itself.

Against the backdrop of a different education landscape, however, the business community today faces a similar set of circumstances as it did in the 1990s: Less than 15% of public-school students are going on to earn a two- or four-year college degree after graduation. With 40,000 openings among the top ten high-demand jobs in the metro area, Milwaukee faces severe talent pipeline challenges. Urgency among employers today is again coalescing into advocacy for a policy change that they hope will boost high-performing schools and, ultimately, graduation rates in the city.

A growing coalition of business leaders say an increase in funding for choice and charter sectors is needed for good schools to sustain and expand their operations.

In 2022, Milwaukee Public Schools received \$14,987 in state and local per-pupil funding annually, compared to \$9,423 for public charter schools, \$8,336 for K-8 private schools and \$8,982 for 9-12 private schools. Choice and charter schools fundraise to make up the \$5,000-\$6,000 difference between them and their MPS counterparts, a solution that some education and for-profit leaders argue is unsustainable.

“We are asking schools to climb a Mt. Everest-sized challenge, to serve disadvantaged students, and to do so without the oxygen of resources,” MMAC said in its recent K-12 education agenda.

Dr. Howard Fuller Collegiate Academy, a public charter high school serving about 300 students on Milwaukee’s north side, raises at least \$600,000 annually to cover bare-minimum operating costs, said Fuller. At near west side public charter high school Milwaukee Academy of Science, with 1,350 students, the funding gap is roughly \$6 million. St. Marcus, a K-8 private voucher school, sets a \$1.28 million fundraising target annually to make up its funding gap.

“The funding disparity (among sectors), that funding inequality, threatens the existence of the education ecosystem that has been built over all these years because it’s not sustainable,” Fuller said.

While there are high- and low-performing schools in each school sector, data published by City Forward Collective shows 80% of Milwaukee public charter schools and 81% of private voucher schools meet or exceed expectations, compared to 48% of MPS schools, based on state-issued school report cards. That same CFC report shows only marginally higher performance overall among students in charter and choice schools, compared to MPS, however.

The founding of K-8 private voucher school St. Augustine Preparatory Academy in 2017 was made possible by a roughly \$50 million investment by Husco International chairman Gus Ramirez and his family. The philanthropic infusion got Aug Prep off the ground, but ongoing fundraising is also needed to sustain operations, said Abby Andrietsch, president and chief executive officer of the school.

Raising additional funding allows the school to have arts, athletics, STEM programming, five social workers this year and seven next year, she said.

“It’s thinking about the whole child. If we don’t have students who are able to be healthy and present in the classroom, they’re not able to learn,” Andrietsch said. “For us, that additional investment is a critical part of how we get success.”

The school, which serves largely low-income and Hispanic students from Milwaukee’s south side, has received five-star ratings from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and is on track to become the city’s largest single-campus school when it opens a standalone elementary school later this year.

“In the short-term, the business community has stepped up and we need it to continue to step up to support great schools across Milwaukee,” Andrietsch said. “... But one of the most important things we can ask business leaders and their associates to do is to advocate for that equalization of funding. The value of one student is not greater than the value of another, and we need the business community, who has a lot of influence on both sides of the aisle, to be part of voicing that effort.”

Boosting charter and voucher school funding would lessen the burden on the philanthropic community, business leaders say.

Ray Manista, executive vice president, chief legal compliance officer and secretary of Northwestern Mutual, said equal funding is a “top priority” for the life insurance company. One of the top corporate donors to Milwaukee schools, Northwestern Mutual, through its foundation, has invested \$50 million over the past 25 years.

“While we encourage other corporations that call Milwaukee home to invest in quality education along with us, the model in which schools must continuously rely on philanthropy and private funding to simply meet per-pupil education costs is not sustainable,” Manista said.

MMAC's 2023 policy agenda calls on the state to close the gap, which would equate to approximately \$278 million in additional per-pupil funding support. In addition, the group advocates for an across-the-board increase in funding for all sectors equal to at least the rate of inflation, which would be a roughly \$288 million investment.

Sheehy said he expects the state Legislature to take action this year that would begin to narrow the funding gap.

"I don't expect that this is going to be a one-and-done that will solve it all," Sheehy said. "But the trajectory is that more kids are going to be going to independent charters and private schools, not less, so if we don't address this problem, this ship begins to sink."

Sheehy said employers can't afford not to act.

"It takes a long time to accomplish these policy goals, but ... it's enlightened self-interest to stay engaged, to improve the education and skill development for these K-12 students, because it is literally their future workforce," he said. "These are 114,000 students in the city that are critical to filling the job openings of today and tomorrow."

Fuller said he's encouraged by the for-profit sector's advocacy work; other cities do not see the same level of involvement.

"Even some of the debates we have, I see as constructive because it means people still care," Fuller said. "The one thing I can say about Milwaukee is we haven't given up, and I believe the business community has been a critical part of the not giving up."