

# POWER Education Blueprint

Parental Options for  
Wisconsin Enable Results

## AUTHORED BY

Bill McCoshen  
Rose Fernandez  
George Mitchell  
Joe Handrick

"Choice in education is no mere abstraction. Like its economic cousin, free enterprise, and its political cousin, democracy, it affords hope and opportunity."

~~ Ronald Reagan



# Wisconsin K12 Education Reform

## A Common Sense Blueprint for Success



### Summary

A free society has at its foundation an education system of high expectations and outcomes for its students. Effectiveness must be measured in outcomes for Wisconsin's children and families rather than dollars spent or school system growth. Student learning must be the goal of all efforts, every day, in every Wisconsin school. Every policy, every expense, every instructional practice, every decision must be based on its impact on children's learning.

With that singular goal in mind, Wisconsin families should be anticipating a new school year with optimism. Instead, the pandemic has exposed glaring and fundamental weaknesses in our system. This is visible at school board meetings across the state. Parents are turning out in large numbers, pressing for clear answers. There has been an awakening.

We begin with a recognition that Wisconsin has many great schools and that those schools work for a great many students. Collectively, however, outcomes in Wisconsin and the nation are inadequate. Even in the best of schools, the largest room is the room for improvement.

Many Wisconsin children have lost up to a year of progress in districts that paid more attention to demands from organizations than parents. Nearly everyone knows of a student who faltered during COVID. Too often we watched as our K-12 system held parents at arm's length and forgot that schools exist to provide education to kids. Our system provides too few options. It places too much faith in organizations that represent the status quo.... bureaucrats, teachers' unions, and school boards.

"The most important action we can take is to provide the widest possible range of education options and put parents in charge of choosing what is best for their children."

The status quo needs to be cast aside. Fundamental change — truly fundamental change — is needed. The most important action we can take — for kids, families, communities, employers, and taxpayers — is to provide the widest possible range of education options and put parents in charge of choosing what is best for their children.

First and foremost, we need to give every Wisconsin family the right to choose the schools best for their children, period. All kids must have a choice from among all options, whether they are private, home schools, charter, virtual or traditional public schools. Among those options, kids must have the ability to attend their local public school in-person.

Wisconsin pioneered what has become a national school choice movement. The pandemic has spurred many states to emulate Wisconsin and others to move beyond us. We need to restore the state's leadership. The Wisconsin policy that has produced proven results for a limited number

of families should be extended to all. No family should be excluded. Options must be available to every child growing up in Wisconsin without regard to where their families live, how much money they make, or what challenges they face.

A system accountable to parents will reward schools and teachers for success and innovation. When parents are free to leave, the school is motivated to earn their enrollment and so has reason to listen and work with them. Improvements come from that collaboration. This encourages districts to attract and retain students. The competition for students is a driver of quality like none other. It lets parents vote with their feet and leave schools that don't work for their children for schools that do.

This blueprint from Common Sense Wisconsin has as its single purpose the creation of educational opportunities that will prepare our children to be successful in life. It establishes the need for fundamental reform, describes pillars that form the foundation of reform, and presents policy guidelines that would define legislative proposals.

“Options must be available to every child growing up in Wisconsin without regard to where their families live, how much money they make, or what challenges they face”

# The Clear Need

Education spending in the past five decades has more than doubled in Wisconsin (in real dollars) but the quality has declined. A doubling in resources is not enough for our Governor and Superintendent of Public Instruction. They continue to falsely claim that taxpayers shortchange public schools.

While Americans spend a third more per pupil than other developed countries, students in many countries outperform Americans on international academic tests. The situation is unacceptable.

In an economy where thousands of employers are scrambling to find workers and most new jobs require at least a high school education, a majority of Wisconsin students are not proficient in core academic subjects. Thousands of students in the University of Wisconsin system require remedial math and English instruction.

The challenge reaches every corner of the state and every demographic group. As described by the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty:

“Poverty is not just a Milwaukee or urban issue. 144,000 children in poverty attend rural/small town public schools in Wisconsin. Nearly 20% of rural/small town districts have at least 50% of students in the free and reduced lunch program.

“Students in rural/small town public schools, on average, perform worse than those in suburban schools and similar to those in urban schools on Forward Exam. 1 in 4 students who graduate from rural schools require remediation in math classes. 31 of the 38 lowest performing districts (23,168 students) are from rural/small town districts.”

Consider these sobering facts about the national picture provided by ElevateTeachers.org:

- One in four high school graduates reads at a 10-year-old reading level.
- 38% of all Americans lack basic math skills.
- US millennials have the worst educational outcomes in the developed world.
- Because of grade inflation, many parents are not aware their child is performing below grade level. For example, in a national survey 90% of parents said their child was at or above grade level when, in fact, only 30% were. In 2014 a school in Ohio had 72 valedictorians out of a class of 222 students.

# Three Pillars of Reform

## Trust Parents, Empower Parents

Parents can be trusted -- put them in charge: Where their kids go to school, which type of schooling they will receive, and choices within the school itself. For example, a parent should have choices about whether their kids wear masks in school or not.

Children's prospects are much brighter if parents are involved in education. The work of dedicated teachers is strengthened when parents are engaged. This is indisputable.

Giving parents the power to choose the school their children attend and ensuring they are aware of the options available to them are the bedrock steps in establishing that involvement.

Wisconsin's most successful schools are primarily accountable to parents. But too often schools are "accountable" to systems that put bureaucrats and unions ahead of parents.

## Children Deserve Equal Educational Support

All Wisconsin children should have an equal claim to our state's investment in K-12 education. Instead, Wisconsin is picking winners and losers. Current funding formulas discriminate against children depending on where they live, their household income, and the type of school they choose.

Wisconsin's complex school finance system puts vastly different levels of financial support behind our children. While the average per-pupil cost in public school districts is \$13,619, children in the state's three main parental choice programs receive only about \$8,500.

Furthermore, if children with disabilities are to grow into adults who fully participate in the American economy, they must first receive an education consistent with their needs. The state has never lived up to its promise to fund education for children with special needs.

## Teachers and School Administrators Need Freedom and Tools for Success

Wisconsin schools are beset with unnecessary regulation. It stifles innovation and diverts money outside the classroom.

We, of course, need health and safety regulations to protect our children. We need basic curricular standards. What we have instead is a regulatory Goliath.

Are innovative and successful teachers recognized and rewarded? If not, why not? The world has changed greatly just in the past 10 years. Have teachers been given the training and tools needed to help their students succeed in this new world? Teachers were thrust into the world of online learning during the pandemic, but did they have the proper tools and training?

### 3 Pillars of Reform

- » *Trust Parents*
- » *Equal Education Financing*
- » *Remove the yoke of bureaucracy*

# A Policy Blueprint

Real reform requires leadership from a governor who will stand up for families — not the bureaucracy and status quo — a governor willing to be held accountable.

Far too often, what Wisconsin does in K-12 education is justified “because that’s the way we’ve always done it.” It’s time to ask a simple question: *Why?*

- Why is nearly half of education spending outside the classroom?
- Why do some schools have substantial autonomy while most are mired in a daunting, top-down regulatory nightmare?
- Why is a child’s educational opportunity dictated by their zip code?
- Why do we continue to spend more and more without demanding that expenditures be directly linked to better outcomes for students?

Wisconsin families deserve a fundamental “re-imagining” of how K12 education is delivered. “Imagining” is the term coined by Walt Disney as the driving philosophy of what made Disney one of the most innovative and successful organizations of the twentieth century. It combines engineering with imagination and discards the restraints of inertia, past practice, and conventional wisdom.

## **Place Trust in Parents: School Choice For All**

The results are indisputable. Parent choice works. We know this from Wisconsin’s programs and from others around the country. At the end of this blueprint there is a (partial) list of the supporting research and data.

All parents in Wisconsin must have full choice for all their children regardless of race, income, status, disability, or zip code. This is the only way to truly provide an opportunity for each child to secure an education best tailored for his or her individual needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Income and enrollment limits on the Parental Choice programs should be eliminated. No such limits should be placed on school choice initiatives in Wisconsin. The majority of Wisconsinites are in favor of school choice for all children. National polling shows the same support beyond our state’s borders.

When parents have more options, their children graduate from high school at higher rates, score higher on college readiness tests, and are more proficient in core subjects. In short, they are better prepared for life.

Choice students in Milwaukee attend safer schools and are less likely to commit crime. Using DPI’s own criteria, private schools in the state’s choice programs and independent public charter schools are more cost effective.

While the majority of parents likely are satisfied with their traditional public school, it’s just as likely that many would welcome more options. No family should be denied a broad range of choices based on where they live or on family income.

This also means information about the choices available to families must be readily available. Can bureaucracies who are opposed to any and all alternatives to traditional public schools be trusted to share with parents information about choice? If not, new methods of ensuring transparency and information sharing must be explored.

For starters, we must question the current restraints on Wisconsin's Open Enrollment program. Open Enrollment is a central element of educational freedom. It must be strengthened. The Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty made these wise policy recommendations to strengthen Open Enrollment for families:

- School districts should be required to report their reasoning for the number of seats they offer. Lack of space is the most common reason for denial.
- A unified system for accepting and denying students should be adopted to fight current discriminatory practices.
- Student data on Open Enrollment should be transparent.
- Full funding should go to the school that is educating the child rather than the current retention of funds in the resident district.
- Application period should be year-round rather than the current three months in the spring.
- Abolishing the veto power of the resident school district.

For choice to work for all, funding must follow the student. The state pays school districts directly as if our children are a commodity to manage from on high. Our children belong to their families and the responsibility of their education rests with their parents. With this in mind, we now turn to a discussion of funding disparities.

## Fix Funding Disparities

Clear disparities distort the allocation of state and local education dollars.

- Per pupil spending inequity must be eliminated among traditional public schools, independent charters and private choice schools. Disparities in the Open Enrollment transfer program likewise need to be eliminated.
- State-imposed spending limits on public schools enshrine a system of relative spending between districts that dates to the early 1990s. While the limits have helped curtail property taxes, they often don't reflect the fact that enrollment needs of local districts have changed markedly. The system must be rethought and replaced.

"Our funding system needs to recognize that the education of a child in Spooner is just as important as a child in Mequon"

~~Bill McCoshen

Common Sense Wisconsin  
Policy Board Chair

Fixing the funding disparities is also important to ensure that universal choice works for all. Currently, Open Enrollment applications for children with special needs are routinely denied. This is, at least in part, due to the fact that funding does not always follow the student.

## Slay The Regulatory Goliath

Wisconsin taxpayers have been more than generous in support of education. Wisconsin school districts spent more than \$12 billion in 2020 and K-12 funding is Wisconsin's largest expenditure of taxpayer dollars. Per-pupil spending, adjusted for inflation, has more than doubled since 1970. Yet there has never been a time when the education establishment deemed funding sufficient. The clarion call always is: More.

The enduring assumption that existing spending is insufficient must be rejected. Instead, the allocation of current resources must be examined and altered. Wisconsin must discard the default position that support for education is measured by how much more taxpayers contribute.

A doubling of spending has not been matched by results. Using state and national standards, a majority of Wisconsin students are not deemed proficient in core subjects.

Administrative bloat means that nearly half of K-12 spending is outside the classroom, in stark contrast to the more efficient and productive charter and choice sectors. According to a report by the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, in a majority of Wisconsin school districts there is more than one non-teacher employee for every teacher.

National data reviewed by EdChoice.com revealed that, since 1950, non-teaching staff has grown by over 700% while the number of students has only increased by 100%.

One explanation is countless pages of state regulations with which public school districts must comply. The regulatory Goliath must be confronted. Rules that do not arise from enacted legislation must be repealed. Legislative mandates that spur burdensome rules should be amended or discarded. The Governor must make this a priority in working with the Legislature.

Similar regulatory burdens weigh on private schools that participate in Wisconsin's parental choice programs. Most of these mandates do little to improve results and instead, draw scarce resources away from actual education.

### **Tools for Teachers: Empower Professional Educators**

Teachers must be allowed to run their classroom and this includes the ability to handle disruptive students and remove bullies.

Giving parents the right to move their kids from a hostile environment is the right thing to do for that family. But what about the teacher who remains? Why must they continue to be subjected to hate speech, threats from bullies, and be asked to teach in such an environment?

A report from Public Agenda concluded, "Too many students are losing critical opportunities for learning -- and too many teachers are leaving the profession -- because of the behavior of a few persistent troublemakers." The report indicated strong parental and teacher support for a number of reforms including more accountability for parents and more protections for teachers from lawsuits.

Finally, universal choice also provides new pathways and options for the student who may be disruptive. Perhaps the traditional classroom is not the proper fit for that young man or woman. All kids deserve a great education and when the situation of a disruptive child is not addressed, every kid in that class suffers -- including the disruptor.

### **Tools for Teachers: Opportunity and Recognition of Excellence**

Unsafe classrooms and inability to handle disruptive kids is just one of many issues that is causing a shortage of teachers across the nation. Too few of the best and the brightest in a high school graduating class are going to be education majors. The few who do become teachers spend just



a few years in the classroom before being encouraged to do the “important work” and move into administration. Wisconsin needs to correct those two problems.

Once professional practice, autonomy, creativity, and personal accountability are enhanced and expected, the best and the brightest will be more satisfied in the classroom. But how do we get them there in the first place? Some ideas include:

- Incentives to earn an education degree in the areas of concentration most needed such as tuition forgiveness with each year of classroom teaching or a state grant.
- Guaranteed admission at a UW System school for Wisconsin high school graduates who enter an internship program as a high school sophomore – a dual enrollment course track and tutorship experience aimed at a fast start to the bachelor’s degree in Education.
- Efforts to attract more males, and students of color into teaching. Enhanced community college programming that can lead to degree completion.
- Alternative licensure for experienced career experts.

Online learning is here to stay (at least at some level). The pandemic made clear that many schools were simply unprepared for even basic levels of online schooling. Teachers must be given the training and tools they need to adapt with the times -- and parental involvement is critical. At the same time, one thing many parents learned during the pandemic was just how hard it is to teach. In an online world, parents and teachers must be partners.

## Creative Curriculum

If we are to have a system that truly prepares every student for life, this means we must recognize there are multiple pathways towards success in life: Traditional university, VOTEC, the military, apprenticeship, and combinations of each.

“Our K12 systems must not only offer choice of where a kid goes to school, there must be choice and options within public schools”

Today’s K12 system too often only has one track and that is kids who are preparing to go to university. Everyone else is just on a path for a high school diploma. According to EdSource, “the emphasis in public schools in recent decades has been on preparing students for success in college, at the expense of more vocationally oriented courses or pathways.”

K12 curriculum cannot consist of a single pathway. Successful European systems offer kids various tracks at young ages. The marketplace and economy are changing -- preparing for a four-year university is no longer the only or primary purpose for schools. Our K12 systems must not only offer choice of where a kid goes to school, there must be choice and options within public schools.

Students need a better preparation and understanding of the workforce. All high schools should be offering dual enrollment courses in cooperation with their community college, career exploration programming, internships and pathways to apprenticeships in the trades, life skills training and counseling that is connected to employers and job needs.

We also must reject curriculum components which are harmful to kids. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an ideology that rejects Martin Luther King’s wisdom that people should be judged as individuals. It is a destructive ideology. It tells non-white citizens that control of their lives is in the hands of others. It is contrary to our nation’s founding principles and the ongoing effort to eliminate barriers to equal opportunity.

# The Challenge of Change

Milwaukee will be the host city this fall to a national gathering that will commemorate the enactment thirty years ago of the nation's first modern school choice program.

Entrenched interests resisted that change. Indeed, the education establishment and its political allies have opposed every effort to expand parent choice, dating to the launch of the Milwaukee choice program three decades ago. If opponents had prevailed, parents of 45,000 students at more than 300 schools across the state would be denied public support for their choices.

Give Governor Evers credit for being honest about opposition to school choice. When he served as Superintendent of Public Instruction, he said it was "morally wrong" to expand the state's pioneering school choice programs. While in fact it is morally wrong to deny parents educational freedom, the resistance illustrated by none other than the state's Governor shows the depth of opposition that will greet real reform. The Governor has vetoed modest plans to strengthen school choice and even proposed a hard enrollment freeze that the Legislature thankfully rejected.

The scale and importance of reforming Wisconsin's K-12 system is the biggest challenge facing state and local elected officials. It requires leaders willing to take risks and be held accountable for results. The high stakes — the future of our children — make it worth the effort.

Confidence in the system has taken a big hit. Lake Wobegon, where all children are above average, is gone. Parents don't need to wait for test scores. Their children are behind and sleep is lost with worry.

Let's confirm what Wisconsin moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, and teachers already know — our kids deserve better.

"The biggest room in the world is the  
room for improvement."

~~Helmut Schmidt  
Former Chancellor of Germany

# Sources, Additional Information

## THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT

### 1. Wisconsin schools most subject to teacher union control were not open during the pandemic

<https://wispolicyforum.org/research/where-learning-went-virtual/>

<https://will-law.org/study-unions-politics-appear-to-drive-fall-school-reopening-decisions-in-wisconsin/>

### 2. The staggering cost of lost learning

<https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/COVID-Learning-Loss-2021-final.pdf>

<https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/COVID-Learning-Loss-2021-final.pdf>

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>

[https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/OpeningTheSchoolhouseDoor\\_FINAL.pdf](https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/OpeningTheSchoolhouseDoor_FINAL.pdf)

## STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT NEEDS TO IMPROVE

### 1. Fewer than half of Wisconsin students are proficient in key subjects

<https://bit.ly/2Xrmtxt>

### 2. Student achievement is a statewide issue — not just an urban one

<https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/REPORT-Rural-Schools-Need-to-Expand-WPCP.pdf>

[https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/will-truth\\_in\\_spending\\_web.pdf](https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/will-truth_in_spending_web.pdf)

### 3. US Schools spend more than other nations yet achievement ranks low

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/07/us-education-spending-finland-south-korea>

<http://www.elevateteachers.org/video>

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/15/u-s-students-internationally-math-science/>

### 4. A focus on attending a university comes at the expense of other important career paths.

<https://edsources.org/2017/poll-public-schools-must-do-more-to-prepare-non-college-going-students-for-the-workforce/588549>

## 5. Most new jobs require at least a high school education

<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2014/article/education-level-and-jobs.htm&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1628005180106000&usg=AOvVaw3tdrwI4JDxogakI2pC3CPG>

## SCHOOL CHOICE WORKS

### 1. Choice students outscore public schools on college-readiness ACT test

<https://schoolchoicewi.org/parental-choice-program-students-have-higher-scoresagain/>

### 2. DPI ranks choice and charter schools higher than traditional public schools

<https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2021/04/28/data-wonk-about-that-data-on-charter-schools/>

### 3. Students in the Milwaukee choice program lead safer lives.

[http://journal.apee.org/index.php/Parte3\\_2020\\_Journal\\_of\\_Private\\_Enterprise\\_Vol\\_35\\_No\\_3\\_Fall](http://journal.apee.org/index.php/Parte3_2020_Journal_of_Private_Enterprise_Vol_35_No_3_Fall)

<https://schoolchoicewi.org/milwaukee-school-choice-research-chosen-best-academic-article-of-2021/>

### 4. Choice and Charter Schools are 30 Per Cent More Cost-Effective

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15582159.2020.1726164>

### 5. Strengthen Wisconsin's public school choice (Open Enrollment)

<https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/publicschoolchoicev7.pdf>

## THE PUBLIC WANTS MORE CHOICES

### 1. The pandemic has pushed national support for choice to an all-time high.

<https://www.federationforchildren.org/new-poll-school-choice-support-at-all-time-high/>

### 2. Wisconsin parents agree.

<https://schoolchoicewi.org/education-poll-finds-wi-parents-want-flexibility/>

## WISCONSIN SCHOOLS ARE NOT SHORT-CHANGED

### 1. Wisconsin school districts spent more than \$12 billion in 2020

<https://dpi.wi.gov/sfs/statistical/cost-revenue/section-d#Item%203c>

### 2. Real per pupil spending in Wisconsin has more than doubled since 1970

[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_236.70.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_236.70.asp)

### 3. US Schools spend more than other nations yet achievement ranks low

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/sep/07/us-education-spending-finland-south-korea>

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/15/u-s-students-internationally-math-science/>

### 4. Only 53 percent of K-12 spending is on instruction

[https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/will-truth\\_in\\_spending\\_web.pdf](https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/will-truth_in_spending_web.pdf)

<https://rightwisconsin.com/2020/06/18/wisconsin-school-districts-have-administrative-bloat-to-blame-for-budget-failures>