



**The Return
To Separate
And Unequal
Metropolitan Milwaukee
School Funding
Through a Racial Lens**

Rethinking Schools is a non-profit independent publisher of a quarterly newspaper, an online journal, books, and other educational materials. We advocate the reform of elementary and secondary public schools. Our emphasis is on urban schools and issues of equity and social justice.

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Executive Summary

The Return to Separate and Unequal: Metropolitan Milwaukee School Funding Through a Racial Lens

*Rethinking Schools is pleased to present the report **The Return to Separate and Unequal: Metropolitan Milwaukee School Funding Through a Racial Lens.***

Race is at the core of education issues in urban areas such as Milwaukee. As this study shows, it also is an essential element in the widely unequal funding between schools in Milwaukee and in surrounding suburbs.

The Return to Separate and Unequal underscores that school funding reform is not only an educational necessity. It is a matter of civil rights and racial justice.

Half a century after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed separate and unequal schools based on race, the Milwaukee area has firmly returned to both separate and unequal education.

The report documents that as the percentage of African-American students and students of color has risen in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), funding per pupil has plummeted compared to funding in overwhelmingly white suburban districts.

The state of Wisconsin is constitutionally responsible for providing public education. Yet the state not only tolerates the funding gulf between Milwaukee and its suburban counterparts, it has instituted policies that allow the gap to widen.

We believe this report is particularly timely given a New York State judge's decision Jan. 10 that that state's method of financing public schools was illegal not only on state constitutional grounds, but because it disproportionately hurt students of color and thus violated federal civil rights laws. The ruling specifically noted the unequal funding in New York City, where more than 70 percent of the state's students of color live. Milwaukee accounts for approximately 50 percent of public school students of color in Wisconsin and 71 percent of African-American students in the state.

In the Milwaukee area, a few key figures tell the story:

- In 1980-81, when the white and African-American populations in MPS were roughly equal, Milwaukee's "shared costs per pupil" were only \$127 below the suburban average.
- By 1998-99, when MPS had become a majority African-American district with about 80 percent students of color overall, Milwaukee's "shared costs per pupil" were \$1,254 below the suburban average.

If an MPS school of 1,000 students had received the suburban

average in 1998-99, it would have had \$1.25 million more to spend that year. The district, with a student population of about 100,000, would have received \$125 million more.

Shared costs per pupil have dropped so precipitously in Milwaukee that MPS, which two decades ago spent significantly above the state average, now spends \$506 per pupil below the state average.

Lifting state-imposed revenue caps is a necessary first step to provide budgetary relief; by itself, however, it will not fix the spending gap. Using the local property tax, Milwaukee would have to increase its school tax levy by more than 75 percent to match the suburban school funding average — in essence trading tax injustice for school funding injustice.

Modernizing the state's school funding policies is the only solution. As MPS faces another year of belt-tightening and budget cuts, it is essential that policy discussions focus not only on spending money wisely, but on securing the additional resources that MPS needs and deserves.

Discussions on school finance often use different comparisons. This report uses "shared costs" per pupil. This is partly because the state uses "shared costs" as the basis for determining general aid to schools. Further, "shared costs" allow one to more accurately compare spending between Milwaukee and the suburbs and to eliminate differences based on Milwaukee's disproportionately high percentages of low-income students and students with special education needs or with limited English language skills. "Categorical funds" designed to help pay for such extraordinary educational needs, but which often are used to compensate for inadequate general funding, are not included in shared costs.

Unfortunately, the spending gulf between Milwaukee and its suburbs is only the latest twist in a long history of separate and unequal education in Milwaukee.

The dual school system found unconstitutional in Milwaukee in 1976 differed from today's system primarily in scale. Instead of isolating individual African-American schools within a district, as was the case a quarter century ago, the current system isolates and underfunds an entire school district.

The Return to Separate and Unequal lays to doubt any question about whether MPS "deserves" significantly more money. The answer is an unequivocal "yes."

Any other answer legitimizes white privilege and further entrenches a system under which MPS and its students of color are denied the funding given to students in predominantly white districts.

Sincerely,

Bob Peterson, Kathy Swope, and Barbara Miner
on behalf of *Rethinking Schools*
January 15, 2001

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