

HALL MONITOR – Fare Thee Well Hall Monitor



Thank you, Bay View, for 11 years of readership and conversation. I appreciate all your emails, letters, and in person words when you've run into me at Anodyne or Outpost. It was always a thrill to meet a reader and know that my words were never merely shouted into a void.

However, all things must pass, and that is true as well for this column.

Obviously, "the work" isn't done, however I might define "the work."

There's the work I do on a daily basis in my classroom. Retirement for me is barely a glimmer on the horizon, but in a larger sense, all teachers in the Milwaukee Public Schools still need the time, resources, and training to do better what they already know how to do.

There's the work of pushing MPS to improve. I never promised I had a sliver bullet or magic beans; indeed, I spent many column inches establishing that educating poor, urban students is hard, and anyone peddling a simple solution is a liar.

Still, I used this space repeatedly to nudge MPS leadership away from policies I saw as dangerous and toward solutions I saw as improvements on the status quo.

This occasionally even worked. For example, Bay View High School, where I teach, just graduated its first class of students completing the brand-new program of studies in arts, engineering, and technology that grew out of a reform I

advocated in these pages some five years back.

And there's the work of trying to influence opinion and public policy. Goodness knows the policy around public education in this state is still disastrous—even more so than it was when I started at the *Compass*. I have many feelings about the governor's most recent comments concerning MPS, enough to fill many, many column inches.

But writing a monthly column just isn't rewarding for me anymore. I have been opining about education in this city and state for 15 years in one medium or another, online and in print—and occasionally on television and radio.

There's only so long such a thing is sustainable. This is especially so when the work isn't done yet, and I feel I need to direct more of my attention and energy to the classroom.

The classroom is, after all, the place with the most important work yet to be done.

Compass publisher Katherine Keller has been a great ally and friend, and I hope to grace these pages occasionally in the future. The other writers and columnists I've met through the years have been delightful and I look forward to what more these pages hold in store.

But for now, fare thee well, readers. The Hall Monitor is hanging up his sash.

Jay Bullock still teaches English at Bay View High School, still tweets as @folkbum, and still gets your email if you send it to

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HALL MONITOR – DEAR MPS SUPERINTENDENT APPLICANT



By Jay Bullock

[MayHallMonitor](#)

HALL MONITOR – If I Die In A School Shooting



I have been a teacher during every major school shooting, from 1997's Pearl High School shooting (18 months before Columbine, in a school in Mississippi) to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School a couple of weeks ago.

In between, there have been hundreds of active-shooter incidents in schools.

In a sense, each one of them draws the same response from me: outrage.

These are our children.

They were in what should be among the safest, most loving places they know – the classroom.

In another sense, each incident touches me differently. Since the Feb. 14 shooting in Parkland, Fla., I have been heartened by the response of students there, vowing to stop school shootings themselves if adults aren't going to.

But the punch in the gut was learning one MSD teacher had left specific instructions with his fiancée about what to do if he died in a school shooting. This is not a situation I have considered – most teachers will never be in a school with a shooter, and most who are will survive. But since I learned about that teacher, it's almost all I can think of.

I still have the outrage, though.

The Parkland shooting featured a 19-year-old assailant whose AR-15, the weapon of choice for mass shooters, was legally his own. As one MSD student noted on CNN, after the shooting he was not old enough to buy alcohol, but old enough to buy a weapon of war.

That adult shooter, like the adult perpetrator of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2013, is clearly an outlier. Most school shootings are done by minor students whose access to guns should be extremely limited if not zero.

Indeed, I have long believed and advocated that *most* people's access to guns like the AR-15 *should* be zero. It is a weapon of war. It belongs in the hands of soldiers, not civilians.

But the AR-15, specifically, is not the problem. It's that we have nearly one gun for every American in this country and a political culture that guarantees that no effort to change that fact will ever succeed.

When these shootings happen, it is remarkable to hear pro-gun politicians and lobbyists try to diagnose the problem as

anything other than U.S. gun culture. It's mental illness, they say sometimes. Oh, he was an extremist with whacko views. Or, America doesn't pray enough anymore.

I could believe they were serious if such dodges were followed by an effort to address mental illness in this country, or if they came with earnest attempts to curb white supremacist, extremist views, or if two of the most horrific recent mass shootings hadn't happened in churches while people were literally praying.

The one that really gets me, though, is the excuse that schools themselves are to blame. If only there were armed guards or armed teachers, they say, or if there were better procedures in place or more practice with them. After Parkland, Wayne Allen Root, a reactionary radio host and friend to President Trump, even suggested aerial drone patrols of school grounds!

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had an armed police officer on campus. It had practiced active shooter drills (we all do, even here in Milwaukee). The *New York Times* reported that teachers everywhere are now talking about what it means to be "the nation's human shields."

That's not the job I signed up for. Like many other things I do at school besides teach, it's one I will do if necessary, but that again misses the point.

After Sandy Hook, when the calls came to arm teachers, I was particularly livid. Wisconsin had just suffered through a years-long fight over whether teachers should be allowed to band together and bargain collectively about their working conditions and compensation. The answer from Wisconsin's politicians and courts had been a collective, "No way, you parasitic monsters." (I paraphrase only slightly.)

In what world does a rational person want to put a powerful, deadly weapon in the hands of someone they don't even trust

enough to do something as benign as join a union?

I guess it's the same world that thinks a 19-year-old is too immature to moderate his own alcohol consumption but old enough to own a semi-automatic rifle capable of firing 45 rounds a minute.

So. If I die in a school shooting, here is what I need you to do. Politicize my death.

Put my pasty white face on every TV, website, social media platform, street corner, and billboard with the words, "Killed by America's obsession with guns."

Blame the gun. Blame the gun manufacturers. Blame the gun lobby. Blame the politicians who rake in millions in donations from the gun lobby to ensure no one person's actual human life is ever seen as more important than gunmakers' profits.

Tell those who insist "it's too soon" to talk about it that, no, it's not too soon.

It is, in fact, tens of thousands of lives too late.

Jay Bullock is a potential human shield at Bay View High School and tweets as @folkbum.

**HALL MONITOR – Hills To Die
On**



Last month, I noted Chicago Public Schools does a significantly better job of educating students in the middle-school grades than Milwaukee Public Schools. And I noted no one seems entirely sure why, or what kinds of things MPS could do to turn itself around.

In one of those cosmic coincidences, a couple of days after I submitted the column I learned of Karin Chenoweth's new book, *Schools that Succeed*.

Chenoweth penned [an op-ed](#) for the *Washington Post* headlined, "Yes, there are high-poverty public schools that operate at a high level. Here's how they succeed." Not wanting to give away *all* of the secrets of her book, Chenoweth didn't give step-by-step instructions for fixing everything.

But she did say these successful schools "focus on improving the knowledge and skill of the adults in schools and give them the time and space to collaborate about what kids need to learn and how to teach it."

Yes! I almost shouted aloud before considering what everyone else in the coffee shop would say. *This!*

This – the sense that groups of professionals do what they do better, when their leaders trust them to work together on a problem. *This* is one thing missing from many MPS schools.

I have covered this before in this space, but it is worth noting again: teachers' time is monopolized and micromanaged to an almost unbearable degree. At a school board meeting in 2017, teachers unrolled a yards-long handwritten list of all the things that administration expects us to do during our ever-shrinking professional preparation time. Paperwork and other non-student centered tasks have increased dramatically since 2011, the year our ability to bargain collectively about working conditions ended.

The board listened and reduced that micromanaged time a smidge. But I still spend 35 minutes every single day in a before-school meeting. I also spend hours more each week in structured “collaborative planning” time that lacks the authentic collaborative atmosphere described by Chenoweth.

We need that atmosphere in Milwaukee. This is not negotiable. It is a hill I would die on.

Okay, the war metaphor may be overkill, and cliché, but I have been thinking about it a lot lately and about the choices some people are making about their own hills.

For example, an MPS school board committee meeting held January 9th was packed to capacity with an audience that was very angry about raises given some central-office administrators. Those raises had been budgeted last spring and the budget that was finalized in November included those raises.

But because one or more of the raises may have been granted without sufficient school board review – one raise was halved after disclosure of this fact – it drew the attention of teachers and parents. They showed up at the meeting angry. One of the teachers was escorted out of the auditorium by security staff.

The raises, atop the fact that the central office added five administrative positions, when more than 150 classroom positions were eliminated, looked really bad for the administration. Terrible optics, as they say.

But the cost of the raises, \$100,000 a year, is one-tenth of one percent of the district’s spending, and it is not even enough to pay for a whole teacher position. It is hardly a hill to die on.

On the other hand, a board hearing two weeks later about what the 2018-2019 budget might look like drew fewer than half the

audience of the board meeting covering those raises. There were about a dozen who spoke, advocating for better pay and benefits, especially for substitutes and paraprofessionals, but there was none of the fire of the previous meeting.

When given an opportunity to influence budget decisions in advance, the energy and effort just wasn't as strong as people's outrage after the fact.

That didn't mean the board members didn't have a hill in the fight. At that budget hearing, the board members fought contentiously among themselves about how to avoid a projected \$38.7 million budget shortfall next school year.

Some, including Bay View resident and at-large school board member Terry Falk, wanted to add the sentence, "Consider cuts to central office staff," to the text of the district's "budget parameters," which guide the writing/content of the full budget. A heated argument followed about the value of the district's administrative offices and officers, with Falk's motion ultimately failing in a 6-2 vote, a telling indication of what hill the board seems willing to die on.

Falk, it should be noted, was the first to sound the alarm on those administrative raises.

In other cases, people are picking a good hill to die on, just on the wrong side.

For 2017-2018, MPS moved from four district calendars to two. They consolidated year-round schools, IB high schools, and other schools with grades 9-12 onto a single calendar with students starting August 14. Other schools kept a post-September 1 start date.

The plan was to move all schools, beginning in 2018-2019, to a unified calendar with a mid-August start date. This makes sense. Early start is great for high schools, and moving to a single unified calendar saves MPS money and helps families

with children in multiple schools and grades.

But district elementary teachers and parents chose the September-start-date hill to die on, and the calendar next year will be exactly as it is this year. With a looming deficit, now seems like the worst time to perpetuate a financially inefficient system. How many teachers will be laid off because of the calendar they themselves advocated?

The next few months will be tough, as the MPS budget process gets underway for real. I encourage everyone involved – board members, teachers, parents, students, and taxpayers – to think carefully about what hills they're willing to die on.

Jay Bullock teaches English at Bay View High School and tweets as @folkbum.

HALL MONITOR – MPS State Report Card Slightly Improved

MPS State Report Card Slightly Improved

But a deeper look highlights Milwaukee's woes



It's never a good sign when you or your place of employment is in the *New York Times* as the bad example, a cautionary tale.

Yet there we were in December, Milwaukee Public Schools, as part of a story on the newspaper's blog, *The Upshot*. After looking at data prepared by the Stanford Education Data

Archive, writers Emily Badger and Kevin Quealy heaped praise upon the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) for helping struggling students make up lost ground. According to the story, Chicago students make six years' worth of gains in the five years between third and eighth grade.

"By comparison," Badger and Quealy wrote, "children in the Milwaukee Public Schools test at similarly low rates in the third grade but advance more slowly, leaving them even further behind by the eighth grade."

I can't argue. As an MPS high school teacher, I see the effects of this slow rate of growth every day. The *Times* story shows that MPS eighth graders are, on average, over two grade levels behind, which squares pretty well with what I see in my classrooms.

It also squares with state data for MPS. Overall, we improved on the state report cards for 2017. But we were not so hot in middle school.

For example, 2017's eighth graders were less likely to score proficient or advanced than 2016's seventh graders, who were, theoretically, the exact same students. Somehow, in just one year those students' rate of proficiency fell by three percentage points in reading and two percentage points in math.

It's worth pointing out a couple of things to consider if you want to make the comparison between MPS and CPS. Notably, MPS has a much higher percentage of students with disabilities – 20.1 percent to Chicago's 13.7 percent. MPS students are also more likely to be economically disadvantaged.

The *Times* story presents third- and eighth-grade test scores graphed against community wealth for 2000 districts. The graph follows a clear and familiar pattern; there are above grade-level scores in places with above-average income and low scores in poor districts.

That's not the point of the *Times* story, of course, which is about growth rates. The growth-rate graph still shows a strong relationship between money and achievement, with students in richer districts improving more over five years. But there are many more outliers, including CPS, which is way out there, almost by itself. It clearly has above-average growth for a city as poor as it is.

For this Milwaukeean, it's been hard to understand *why* Chicago is making so many gains over the last five years, and this story is not the first to suggest that our neighbor to the south has answers to questions that stymie us.

Plumbing the depths of my social networks didn't offer any clarity, and the *Times* story isn't able to point to an answer, either. It cites only one Chicago school that is trying a bunch of different things.

The best the authors can do is make generic statements like, "Across the district, data about attendance and grades is being used to identify the students likely to need extra attention," as if the same thing isn't already happening all over the country, including in MPS.

Even the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research, whose job it is to work with Chicago Public Schools to improve education, can't "untangle what's been effective," according to the *Times*. The consortium's website offers a number of optimistic reports, but most are about programs that are less than five years old, so they are not solely responsible for long-term growth.

What the *Times* story offers, ultimately, is an affirmation of why I go to work every day. There is hope we can make a difference even in the face of tough odds. We have to try.

The *Times* story is clear about why the odds are tough. No matter how much ground a student can make up in an urban district like Milwaukee or Chicago, it is no match for the

advantage conferred by wealth.

Badger and Quealy observed, “The most effective school systems alone can’t overcome all the disadvantages of poverty that accumulate before children even reach third grade and that shape the country’s racial achievement gaps.”

There will be no real revolution in education reform if there is no improvement of income inequality.

Let’s see if we can do something about that in this new year.

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HALL MONITOR – Here We Go Again, Budget Edition



Since the end of *Hall Monitor's* summer hiatus, every column has felt like a variation on the theme *here we go again!*

Why should this month be any different?

It might have been different had recent trends held. For a few years, Milwaukee Public Schools found itself in relatively good fiscal condition. Layoffs ended and we made a big deal about expanding programs and offerings. The district even built up a small surplus. This year, though, we flash back to the soul-crushing budget deficits of years past. *Here we go again!*

In October, the Milwaukee Board of School Directors had to patch a several-million dollar hole in this year's budget, even though the district had cut almost 200 jobs before the school year started.

MPS is also projecting a \$20 million deficit for the 2018-19 school year, and a \$70 million deficit in just a few years after that, as projected costs outpace revenue.

In the context of its billion-dollar budget, MPS's \$20 million shortfall may not seem like much. But it means the loss of 200 teachers. Or 300 paraprofessionals. Or a Chromebook for every student.

Or replacing every drinking fountain in every school with one of those fancy, filtered bottle-filling stations. Take that, lead pipes!

MPS is not the only struggling Wisconsin school district. Last month, eight state districts put 10 funding referenda on the ballot, according to the state database that tracks them. Seven passed. Since 2016, nearly 240 school funding referenda have been put to a vote in Wisconsin, with 72 percent passing.

Much fault lies with the state, by far the largest source of funding for school districts. The medium-term solution is pretty clearly changing minds at the state level – if not changing the legislators themselves – so that Wisconsin's investment in public schools returns to previous levels.

The long-term solution for MPS is increased enrollment. Fewer than 60% of school-aged children in town currently attend MPS schools; that's a lot of missing revenue.

But medium- and long-term solutions won't solve next year's budget problem. What can MPS do in the short term?

From teachers, I hear suggestions ranging from laying off all the administrators to cutting school board members' pay to

zero. (One teacher tried to convince me that until recently the elected board worked for free, but they have actually been paid a salary, since at least 1935.)

MPS's middle management possesses a redundant layer or two. For example, in the space of a few weeks this fall, my school was visited by both a "School Quality Review Team" and "Monitoring Conference Team." Each was from the central office, each looked at what we were doing to improve student achievement, and each team reported to different bosses, who in turn provided different feedback to us. Did we really need both? Merely removing one of those layers of central office supervision would do nothing to redress the deficit. The district would have to cut over half its administrative positions to come close to saving \$20 million. And as hard as it is for the teaching staff to function with redundant layers of supervision, I wouldn't want to be here if there's *no* supervision.

No, what we're really talking about is closing schools and cutting compensation.

MPS still has far more capacity in its buildings than it does students. The district is currently writing a new facilities master plan. The previous one is from 2011. The new plan will certainly call for shuttering buildings and moving other programs around.

That will suck. No teacher wants their school closed after they've invested time, energy, and probably their own money in their classroom. And it's not fair to the students who will be forced to switch schools. But it's coming.

It will also suck when teachers and other employees are asked to give back salary or benefits, especially considering that everyone agrees, from the superintendent to the union to the nonpartisan Public Policy Forum, that teacher retention in MPS is a major problem. A recent study by the forum found MPS

teachers are 50 percent more likely to leave than teachers in neighboring districts. So asking teachers to take a \$4,000 cut, which is what it would take to save \$20 million without layoffs, is just a bad idea.

A better idea might be to offer a couple of furlough days, or to reduce the staff academic calendar from 191 days to 189.

This past August, every teacher in the district sat through *five days* of professional development (PD) before school started. There's a PD day at the end of the year, after we've turned in our grades and locked up our classrooms for the summer. And the day before Thanksgiving was, yep, a PD day.

If MPS wants to hang on to all those PDs (but come on, really?), they could drop our two paid holidays (Thanksgiving and either Labor Day or Memorial Day).

Two furlough days will cut pay by about one percent. Low-paid hourly employees, like paraprofessionals and aides, would be hurt most, and we should be sensitive to that. MPS is working on a plan to raise its minimum hourly pay to \$15 by 2021, so that may soften the blow.

However, two unpaid non-work days for everyone would save the district about \$6 million, but that would not take care of the entire deficit. We will still need to close a modest number of schools, and, maybe, not hire new employees for those positions that opened due to retirements. Yet those manageable cuts would mean the district could squeak by next year without layoffs or undoing its investment in arts and other programs.

The year after, when the deficit nearly doubles to \$37 million? We'll have to talk about that next fall, when I'll be saying here we go again!

Jay Bullock teaches English at Bay View High School and tweets as @folkbum.

HALL MONITOR – What Has Changed?



I was filling out a survey the other day and realized I'd moved to a new demographic box. This is my twenty-first year of teaching.

I shook off the creeping sense of mortality and sat down to write my column this month, and then I realized that I'm in a new box here, too. This is my eleventh year writing for the *Compass*.

So I am pausing to reflect on the last 20 years in the Milwaukee Public Schools and the last 10 as an in-print school district "hall monitor."

In an organization the size of MPS, you'd expect a lot of systemic inertia. In the past two months, I've written about some of the things that haven't changed – unrealistic expectations placed on teachers, ever-increasing standards for students without needed supports, silly euphemisms used for "failing."

But overall, in the last 10 or 20 years, what *has* changed? Almost everything.

Also, basically nothing. Let me explain.

Infrastructure

Over my tenure at the *Compass*, much of my writing has been about school closings, or threatened closings. However, with

one exception, every single Bay View-area MPS school building is still open and full of students.

The exception is Dover Street School, which is being renovated to hold Howard Avenue Montessori students beginning in the 2018-2019 school year.

But that's not the only change. Fritsche Middle School is no more; in 2010, the students and staff were moved to the Bay View High School building. But now the high school is back to holding only grades 9-12.

The old Fritsche building is now Milwaukee Parkside School for the Arts, a merger of Tippecanoe and Dover. Howard Avenue Montessori occupies the Tippecanoe building. Riley is now a bilingual Montessori school. Fernwood Montessori is bigger than it used to be, with more building and more students.

Students

Kids are still kids, I always say when people ask me how teaching is going now compared to way back when. It's true, but also too facile an answer.

When I started teaching, students generally didn't like reading – wouldn't read the books for homework, wouldn't volunteer to read aloud in class. They didn't like writing, either. "A whole page? That's terrible!" they said then.

Now the only thing different is the language of complaint: "A whole page? You're forcing it!" they say.

Yet every single student I teach today is reading and writing significantly more than 10 years ago, and far more than 20 years ago.

Credit the iPhone! The ubiquity of smart phones has made text-based interaction so much more common. Students text, snap, and inbox each other hundreds or thousands of words a day.

That translates to students submitting assignments in so many more ways than just paper and pen, including “typing” papers with their thumbs. I have a set of Chromebooks for my class, use Google Classroom daily, and receive memes that are tweeted at me. Each of my curriculum units is peppered with video, and I have a YouTube channel dedicated to writing instruction.

I still grade work (another way I used to be deemed “terrible” but now am informed I am forcing it), but it’s no longer about points. It’s about evidence of proficiency, with a scoring system based on the Common Core State Standards, adopted pretty much nationwide.

Funding

When I started teaching in MPS, school communities fought the central office over funding. When I started writing here, school communities were fighting the central office over funding. Today, school communities are fighting the central office over funding.

One or two decades ago, there was a belief among the school communities that MPS had the funding to adequately pay for all we demanded, if the district would just prioritize differently.

Now, however, it’s clear MPS is being massively shortchanged by the state. Because Wisconsin lawmakers have kept funding increases below the rate of inflation for years and promoted policies that have whittled district enrollment to record lows, the budget seems to be all scraps and no meat at all.

Because the pickings are even leaner, the ever-present sense of mistrust between labor and management persists. It’s both better and worse than before.

I have said often, lately, that the superintendent and the union are working closely and cooperatively on many big-picture projects to improve student achievement. But the

passage of Act 10, the 2011 law stripping almost all collective bargaining power from teachers unions, means teachers have to struggle, scrape, and claw for any win, like a sliver more prep time or pay that honors our loyalty.

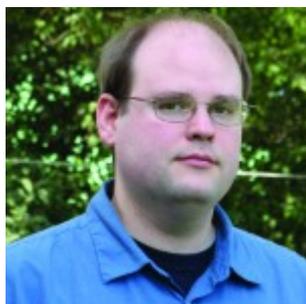
Still Worth It

In the end, I guess I can say this: What frustrates me now, fueled my righteous indignation back then. What made the fight worth it then, still sustains me now.

Some say history is not a line but a spiral, the same things keep coming back around. It's true! If I'm still here doing this in another 10 years, you for sure will hear about it.

Jay Bullock teaches English at Bay View High School and on YouTube at bit.ly/bullocksrules.

HALL MONITOR – Don't Make Milwaukee Lake Wobegon



When Garrison Keillor retired from *A Prairie Home Companion* last year, his News from Lake Wobegon segment retired with him.

In that fictional Minnesota town, “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

It always drove me crazy when I heard that slogan. You simply can't call *everyone* above average. Half of any group will

always be below average. *Average* also has a specific meaning when describing academic achievement.

Last month I wrote about the mandates handed down to teachers from the Milwaukee Public Schools administration. One is to publicly post student scores from the STAR “universal screener” test, such as the percentile rank for every student.

Percentile rank shows, after Johnny takes the STAR, that Johnny reads or does math better than some percent of all students who take the test. If Johnny’s at the 80th percentile, he’s smarter than 80 percent of students his age. If Johnny’s at the 50th percentile he’s, well, average.

MPS uses percentile ranks to create “target” scores. Students can be above, at, or below the target based on their percentile rank.

You have perhaps guessed the punch line: To be “on target,” students must be well above average, at least in the 60th percentile for reading and at least in the 75th percentile in math. In fact, students can no longer be “above target” in math at all. A student scoring at the 100th percentile, better than pretty much any other child taking the STAR nationwide, is merely “on target.”

MPS told teachers these unrealistic targets will “better predict proficiency” on the state achievement tests – Wisconsin Forward Exam and ACT Aspire.

I hate to say it, but this almost makes sense, given the state’s massive recent shift of proficiency goalposts.

States started moving proficiency goalposts in the late 2000s as they realized that the 100 percent proficiency demanded by 2002’s “No Child Left Behind Act” was impossible.

Because states feared punitive measures for missing universal proficiency, they applied for waivers from the U.S. Department

of Education. That process demanded states adopt stricter proficiency standards. In 2012, Wisconsin opted, like many other states, to use standards defined by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), or “the nation’s report card”.

This was a mistake.

We can debate whether Wisconsin’s previous proficiency standards were too high or too low, but according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) we were, again, average.

Since the switch, however, barely half of Wisconsin’s students score proficient or higher on annual state tests. Regardless of your opinion of MPS or public education in general, it is simply ridiculous to think half of Wisconsin kids can’t read or do math at grade level, especially when we continue to score well versus other states on measures like the ACT.

At the time of the shift, both NAEP and individual states used the word “proficient.” But they did not mean the same thing. States typically defined proficient as at grade level, a bit above average but not in the top tier. In other words, grades of A and B. Maybe a C+.

But NAEP called that same level of achievement “basic.” “Proficient was akin to a solid A,” according to Diane Ravitch, former NAEP board member and current education-reform skeptic.

NCES data show that before states started moving goalposts, not a single state’s definition of “proficient” met the NAEP standard of “proficient” in math. In reading, just a handful did.

When it began in the 1970s, NAEP didn’t label student achievement at all and only began to do so under pressure in the 1990s. The process of defining levels like basic or

proficient was plagued by scandal. Repeated reviews, including one by the non-partisan General Accounting Office in 1993, declared NAEP measures of proficiency should not be used as a model

or reference point by anyone else.

But here we are, describing virtually every MPS student as “below target” because of those NAEP definitions.

Oh, come on, Jay, you say. Doesn't the below target label light a fire under these kids?

No.

In fact, recent research indicates that the more we tell underprivileged students they are failures, and that this failure is because of their own action (or inaction) rather than larger systemic issues, the more likely they are to see a decline in self-esteem and an increase in risky behavior.

We tell successful students, you know, the children in Lake Wobegon, or, in Milwaukee's wealthier suburbs, that success comes from hard work and “grit.” Those students see no problem with that. They and their families are generally successful. The meritocracy is working as intended!

But a study published this summer in the journal *Child Development* reports that when told the same thing, struggling students attribute failure to their own flaws: *I didn't work hard enough*, maybe, or *I guess I don't have grit*. This leaves them less likely to bother trying because they internalize these messages and think they'll just fail anyway.

In June the study's lead author told *The Atlantic* “there's this element of *people think of me this way anyway, so this must be who I am.*”

Yes, student effort does affect student achievement. But decades of research shows the best predictor of achievement is

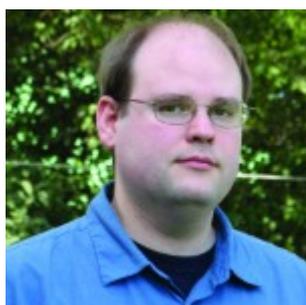
not “grit” but the zipcode children are born in. Centuries of American segregation and economic inequality weigh more heavily than grit on MPS students’ achievement.

Neither my students nor I can fix segregation and economic inequality. Why, then, force my students to feel that much more marginalized? I am not asking we lie; students below grade level should be identified and helped to improve.

But we should also be able to tell our grade-level students that they’re successful, rather than telling them they are “below target.” Don’t try to make Milwaukee Lake Wobegon.

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HALL MONITOR – A Signature Euphemism; a Daft Solution



I’m so lucky! My school is a “signature school” in the Milwaukee Public Schools this year!

In 20 years of teaching I’ve seen my share of reform efforts and euphemisms. But “signature school,” as a way of indicating schools that failed to meet expectations on the last state report card, may be the craziest.

The designation entitles us to some bonus resources, like a “hotline” for administrators to call in emergencies (not,

sadly, a Commissioner Gordon-style red phone) and “resources gathered to counter inequitable patterns,” whatever that means.

During a full week of professional development before students returned, teachers in “signature schools” were presented with a hefty list of “Classroom Set-up Expectations.”

These elicited actual laughs from my colleagues. A classroom library with a carpeted area, so students can sit at our feet? Where does that fit among the 40 desks for my sophomores? Posted weekly lesson plans? Come on, I have to adjust my lessons on the fly almost every day!

Let us not forget the in-class “cool down space,” complete with noise-canceling headphones, lavender-scented pillows, and “a small trampoline.” I am not making this up.

What’s not funny is mandatory posting of achievement, attendance, and discipline data on a “data dashboard,” updated hourly and prominently displayed outside the door of every “signature school” classroom.

This dashboard is clearly designed so central office personnel can see at a glance whether a classroom, and its teacher, are failing because getting to know us and our kids by investing real time among us simply takes too long.

The shame (guilt, stigma – pick your noun) associated with bad data on our dashboards is somehow supposed to motivate teachers and students to do better.

Here’s the thing, we have pretty clear evidence that *data walls don’t work*.

They originated with University of Chicago’s David Kerbow, who saw data visualization as a way for teachers and administrators to identify problems early. Private data walls in the office or staff lounge provide school adults with big-

picture insight and prompt good discussion about what has worked, what hasn't, and what to try next. They should be a tool for informing next steps, not for judging students or staff.

Importantly, there was never any intention to have "data walls" in view of students or the public. But why should that deter education reformers?

Despite the experiences of places like Holyoke, Mass., that had probably the most famous uproar in 2014, worthless public "data walls" have steadily spread among low-performing schools and districts nationwide.

Yet, we *do* know what *does* work. Let's set aside policing-style classroom set-ups and shaming teachers and students, and instead focus on research-based solutions for "signature schools."

So what works?

Achievement

Our must-post data comes from the district's "universal screener" test, STAR. A screening test is *not* a test of student achievement; it is, as the label suggests, used to identify early students who need remediation and intervention.

STAR covers only math and literacy, and only in some grade levels. It is not aligned to district curriculum and it is given

just three times a year. My sophomores took the STAR test on August 28 and will not test again until January. Of what value is that January score to anyone visiting my class in, say, November? What use is STAR data posted outside of, say, an art class, ever?

No reputable researcher or organization anywhere recommends using screener data this way, including state and

national Response to Intervention (RtI) groups.

Better achievement happens when teachers track and celebrate individual student growth over time on specific key skills, which can't be reflected in a single number. Such growth should be monitored constantly, not checked a few times a year.

As noted by the Achievement Network, a national nonprofit that partners with schools to boost academics, "This is not just about looking at the numbers, but looking at student work that illuminates specific needs of students." No data dashboard can do that.

Attendance

Evidence is overwhelming that attendance improves when schools make personal connections to students and families, including through dedicated mentors. Some MPS high schools benefit from City Year, an Americorps-funded program that places recent college grads in the role of mentor and interventionist for ninth-grade students only.

This is a start, but not enough, especially as City Year interventions miss the vast majority of MPS students and don't quite go far enough with those they do reach.

According to a guide for schools from Hanover Research, mentors should do more than make a few calls home and see students at school. They should "meet with parents and occasionally participate in home visits for students with attendance or behavior issues." Mentors should "monitor student progress and work alongside families and communities to improve attendance."

Behavior

We must post how long it has been since we wrote a discipline

referral, like the signs in factories that read, “This plant has worked x days without an accidental injury.”

There is research to suggest that such workplace signs indeed help minimize injury, but only after extensive safety training and building a shared sense of community responsibility among workers.

Posting referral data may well work when students have a shared sense of responsibility for each other. Simply posting it won't do the difficult work of creating such a community.

MPS has made some baby steps with Restorative Practices and trauma-sensitive training. But how do creating tension, competition, and division through these artificial, meaningless “data dashboards” build a caring, connected community?

Real change requires complicated and undoubtedly expensive work. A “data dashboard” is easy and cheap, but utterly useless to anyone except those who want to make snap judgments about students and their teachers.

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Hall Monitor – The MPS Budget and the Resource Gap walked into a bar

(something about taking square aim at WisGOP)



I'm not telling you something you don't already know – the Milwaukee Public Schools budget is awful.

No one involved is happy about it. Superintendent Darienne Driver's budget proposal and commentary lash out at state legislators forcing her to eviscerate programs. The district's construction budget, for example, will be cut by a whopping 92 percent!

Board members are raising their voices at board meetings. Teachers are packing hearings demanding raises promised long ago. School principals are making gut-wrenching decisions about which staff can stay and which must go.

Most frustrating of all, students are looking at another year in a school system in a city that cannot hope to begin to bridge the gap between what's available to them compared to what's available to children living, in some cases, just blocks away in the suburbs.

This is my most common refrain. I feel like I should just get it printed on a sandwich board, "end-is-nigh-style", and stand on a street corner screaming it. That might be as effective as all my previous warnings.

I have warned: Let's talk about the much-storied 53206 zip code. The average annual household income is \$32,000 – not a lot of money for raising a child.

Up in River Hills, 53217, home of State Senator Alberta Darling, a long-time opponent of MPS, the average household income is \$282,000.

The difference between the two – a cool quarter mil, by my math – is what I call the Resource Gap. Imagine the

experiences all that money buys: camps, music lessons, tutors, high-quality preschool, family vacations to foreign countries, rooms upon rooms upon rooms of books to read. Multiply that by 18, the years between birth and graduation...

I am not saying schools *have* to be the place where the Resource Gap is redressed. I'm just saying, in this column at the end of this school term, just as I said in my September column, schools are the place where we *expect* the gap to be made up. Year after year we are told that there's no reason why children in Milwaukee can't succeed at the same rates as their suburban peers.

I don't know how I can make that more plain.

The state budget is not finished. For all I know, Republican Governor Scott Walker and the Republicans on the state's budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, including Sen. Darling, will see the light and change the provisions that hit MPS so hard.

For example, the revenue cap, the grand total amount a district can collect from state aid and local property taxes, remains flat. That means even though there may be some increases in state funding for MPS, those must be offset by reducing property taxes.

It is, for want of a better word, diabolical. It serves the short-term interest of property taxpayers at the long-term expense of our children. Yay for the local homeowner and his extra hundred dollars at the end of the year; boo for the 96 teachers and 98 educational assistants not in MPS classrooms come fall.

Superintendent Darienne Driver's budget comments pull no punches. "Revenue is not keeping pace with inflation," she wrote in her budget brief. "Stable revenues are not enough to sustain the district's operations. (They) will not allow the district to continue prior year operations at even a modest

increase to keep up with costs.”

Thus, cuts. Thus, broken promises on raises. Thus, an end to almost all capital improvements around the district.

Thus, another giant wedge driving the Resource Gap wider.

And Dr. Driver knows it. Her budget brief says, “Meeting the MPS vision is challenging within an environment of stagnant revenues, growing educational options, increased need for quality programming aimed at serving Milwaukee’s diverse student population, and regaining public confidence that the school district can provide students with a quality education.”

This is, on its face, an inarguable fact. Milwaukee’s kids deserve the same high-quality programs Alberta Darling’s neighbors have in their schools. MPS must regain the trust of Milwaukee families if it wants to increase enrollment. MPS is facing more competition from more directions than ever before.

All of that factors into the Resource Gap, or, as Driver calls it, “the need for quality programming aimed at serving Milwaukee’s diverse [poor and minority] student population.”

But it’s also a broadside aimed directly at Walker and Darling and the rest. The time for pinning failure on us is long past, Driver is saying. We can’t keep doing more with less. We will not go down without pointing out, to everyone who will listen, whose responsibility this really is, whose decisions are really the ones leaving Milwaukee’s children with less and less and less every year.

To be fair, the budget woes of MPS are hardly unique. District officials, school board members, and parent groups from every corner of Wisconsin have inundated budget hearings to voice complaints. Over the last three years, nearly 200 school district referenda have been on ballots around the state, most of them passing.

MPS has not gone to referendum, knowing the whole problem here is that Milwaukee families lack the resources in the first place.

As this goes to press, the Legislature has a few weeks left to finalize the state budget and how it affects MPS. If you, like me, believe the Resource Gap is real and that we have a moral and civic obligation to do something about it, here's the phone number, 1-800-362-9472.

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It's the freshmen, it's always the freshmen



Recently, Milwaukee Public Schools Regional Superintendent Orlando Ramos was reported to be a finalist for several school district superintendent positions around the country.

Most MPS “regionals” supervise geographical areas – East, Southwest, Central, and Northwest. Not Ramos. He heads the High School region, which means he has the worst job in MPS.

As the person who oversees MPS high schools, Ramos is accountable for students at the end of 12 years' worth of MPS education, but he controls only four of them.

The headline statistic that Ramos (and often MPS) is judged on

is the district's graduation rate.

With 83 percent of students graduating after their fourth year of high school in 2014-15, America as a whole was at an historic high, according to federal data. Just 20 years ago, that number was 71 percent. (Data from the 2015-2016 year is not yet available.)

For MPS, the 2014-15 graduation rate was only 59 percent. Worse, in Wisconsin, the gap between the white and black graduation rates is 27 percentage points, the widest in the nation, according to the Feds. In MPS, where the majority of Wisconsin's black students attend school, the gap is 23 points: only 56 percent of black students in MPS graduate in four years, compared 69 percent of white students.

MPS does better with its six-year rate, giving students two more years to finish high school or an alternate program like GED. In 2014-15, our six-year rate was 72 percent, still terrible but closer to a respectable number.

MPS is not alone. Urban districts nationwide struggle with graduation rates and gaps, especially between black and white graduates, though obviously many urban districts were able to overcome some challenges that MPS hasn't.

For example, an April article in *Education Week* detailed how the Chicago Public Schools system was able to boost its graduation rate from fewer than half in 2007 to 70 percent in 2014-15.

Working with researchers from the University of Chicago, CPS identified six keys to boosting graduation rates: Ease the transition from 8th to 9th grade. Boost attendance. Reduce out-of-school suspensions. Hold high standards for grades and achievement. Build school communities that take collective responsibility for student success. Use early-warning indicators to identify students who are off-track as soon as possible.

I can sum that all up in a single word: freshmen.

True, the “ease the transitions” plank of that platform explicitly refers to 9th graders. But the others all do implicitly, and I’ll return to Milwaukee to explain how, beginning with attendance.

While MPS has an overall 89 percent attendance rate, meaning eight of every nine students are in school on any given day, absences are not spread equally among all students.

In Milwaukee, 46 percent of students are habitually truant, meaning they miss 10 days or more in a year. At that point, likely graduation rates fall quickly to below 60 percent. At 20 days absent – just one absence every other week – graduation rates fall below 50 percent.

The worst attendance rate in MPS, a tepid 78 percent, belongs to freshmen, and fully 65 percent of freshmen are habitually truant.

The University of Chicago researchers note that “missing as few as five days per semester can make a student less likely to graduate from high school.”

Ninth grade also leads in suspensions. In 2014-15, 11 percent of all MPS students were suspended at least once. But 22 percent of freshmen were suspended, double the average. Freshmen also comprised 40 percent of all expelled students.

And so on. MPS freshmen come into high school well below grade level. On 2015-2016 state tests, only 11 percent of MPS 8th graders were proficient or higher in math (compared to 36 percent statewide) and 19 percent in English (40 percent statewide). It’s hard to have high standards for freshmen when so many struggle to meet the lower standards of middle school.

Freshmen grade point averages are also worse than those of their peers. In the most recent year that I could find data

for, 2011-12 when MPS self-published a district report card, freshmen earned a sad 1.52 GPA on a four-point scale. The average for seniors, by comparison, was a 2.2. (Current data were not available from MPS by press time)

MPS 9th grade has higher enrollment than any other grade K-12 school. As the low GPAs, poor attendance, and high suspension rates suggest, many students repeat 9th grade. The exact number isn't available in state data, but compared to 8th-grade enrollment, it looks like around 2,000 of the district's nearly 7,000 freshmen are there for the second or third time. Freshmen, then, make up almost two-thirds of all MPS students held back a grade in a given year.

What's the Answer?

Chicago has improved its success rate by paying attention to the factors listed above, and implementing freshmen families or academies, meaning a small group of teachers shares the 9th-grade class and can work more proactively, and faster, to intervene when students start falling behind. Some MPS schools do that now – including Bay View High School – and more will institute the program next fall.

MPS has made other changes, such as moving the start of high school to mid-August in order to minimize the “summer slide.”

But Chicago also does something desperately needed here. According to the University of Chicago group supporting changes in CPS, *“students with low attendance and grades in middle school [are] flagged for early intervention before entering high school”* (my italics).

In addition to sending kids on to high school without anything like 8th-grade mastery, MPS middle schools and K-8s have no good way to communicate all the red flags and supports needed for members of a high school's incoming class.

Every year I watch as high-risk students sit in class – for

more than a month – until the first round of district screening tests are completed.

Then, finally, five or six wasted weeks into the school year, students are placed in intervention classes or referred for special education services. That is, assuming the school even has those supports available, having not been informed beforehand that they would be needed.

This is why Orlando Ramos has the worst job in MPS. Sure, he can take credit for great MPS schools that always graduate world-class scholars and make it into various national top-schools lists. But he also has to manage the ongoing mess that is Milwaukee's freshman class, with no ability to influence who makes up that class or what happens to them before they enter his region.

The district's high school region is just two years old, and maybe the reorganization that created it will yield results eventually. For now, though, you couldn't pay me enough to take on an impossible task like that.

Note: Unless otherwise stated, all data in this column are from the most recent statistics on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website.

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PAREN(t)HESIS – Right sizing,

decluttering



The first signs of spring include the robins' return, joggers out in force in our parks and on the Oak Leaf trail, and my own inklings of spring cleaning.

I have found that an easy way to keep things tidy at home is to have less stuff. I think that the architecture in Bay View lends itself to a more minimalist lifestyle than the suburbs because our older homes have small closets, our floor plans are unlikely to include a dedicated playroom for kids, and our garages are small, too.

Some of my friends swear by certain philosophers of decluttering such as Marie Kondo, author of *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* and *Spark Joy: An Illustrated Master Class on the Art of Organizing and Tidying Up*. Kondo even specifies a certain way to fold clothing for maximum efficiency. Instead of following a specific author, I get my inspiration from my uber-organized mom. When my grade school friends came over, some would tease me that our house was tidy and quiet, reminding them of a library. She and my dad, now in their retirement years, still keep their home like that.

Intergenerational relationships can be especially tricky when it comes to clutter, especially the clutter of too many toys. Parents tell their own parents to stop buying so many toys but grandparents enjoy the gift giving. Once I sat on a plane next to a grandmother who told me she was bummed out that her adult son asked her to stop bringing so many McDonald's Happy Meal toys and similar little gadgets when she visited her grandson. I replied that it felt like every parent my age was having the same conversation with their own parents, and the commonality

seemed to reassure her.

Conflict over clutter can also be a sore spot within marriages and parenting relationships. When I read the comments to articles about clutter, inevitably some people mention how their views differ from that of a spouse or partner. The fundamental disagreement seems to cause lots of tension. Spending on toys that clutter the house can lead to that famous topic of marital disharmony, money!

In our house, we seem to do fairly well with Saturday sweeps that result in a pile for Goodwill donation and a stack of books for one of the area's abundant Little Free Libraries. Peer pressure helps too, like when friends talk about decluttering success. And there's the peer pressure of other people coming over, like when my husband and I host a party or my daughter has a friend sleep over. And as winter wanes, there are less snow pants, scarves, and mittens hovering about to clutter up the entryways.

Just like exercise routines, decluttering routines are probably best when they're a regular part of every week. I clean out the questionable, ready-to-expire food from the refrigerator on most Sundays. Seems like a perfect time to also spend a few minutes decluttering our home—and clearing our minds in the process.

The author is a freelance writer and mother of one. Reach her with comments or suggestions at jill@bayviewcompass.com.