

# Milwaukee's North Side Education Crisis: A Generation of Failure Demands Action

## BRIEF IN BRIEF

Milwaukee's North Side is the epicenter of an educational crisis that threatens our city's future — and demands immediate, collective action:

- 1 MORAL IMPERATIVE:** 57% of Wisconsin's Black students attend Milwaukee schools. That makes the North Side ground zero for the state's worst-in-the-nation Black-White proficiency gaps — gaps that are growing, not shrinking. Yet for decades, city and state leaders have passed the buck, refusing to take accountability for outcomes that would be unacceptable anywhere else in Wisconsin.
- 2 ACADEMIC IMPERATIVE:** Of nearly 55,000 students on Milwaukee's North Side, fewer than 1 in 5 attend schools meeting CFC's quality bar<sup>1</sup>. Twenty-two of Wisconsin's 50 lowest-performing schools sit on the North Side — 17 of them MPS-operated. This isn't a footnote in Milwaukee's worst-in-the-nation NAEP results. It's the driving force behind them.
- 3 ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE:** North Side residents are not sharing equitably in Milwaukee's economic prosperity. Educational underinvestment leaves residents ill-prepared for life- and family-sustaining jobs, while the tax burden of maintaining MPS' half-empty buildings and chronically underperforming schools fuels the housing and affordability crisis hitting North Side families hardest.

<sup>1</sup> CFC's High-Quality School Metric is the same as the WI School Report Card, except we assign equal importance to student proficiency and student growth. Our quality bar is achieving 4 or 5 stars on our rating. See Appendix 1 for more information on our High-Quality School Metric.

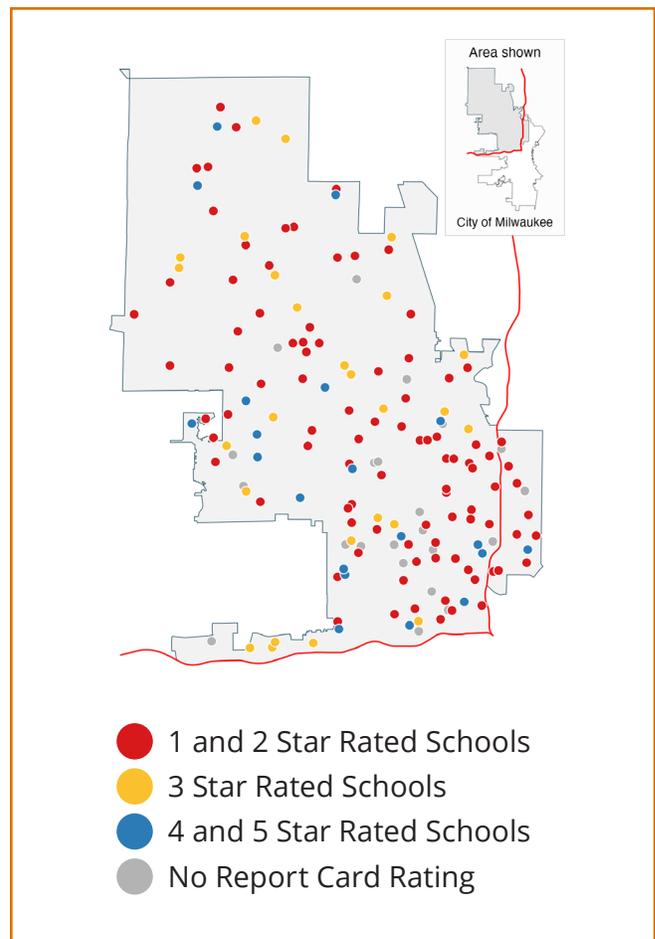
Milwaukee's North Side — a geographically defined area north of I-94 and a culturally significant hub of Milwaukee's African-American community — is home to an educational catastrophe that has festered for generations. While this report focuses on the North Side because the crisis is most acute here, affecting the majority of Wisconsin's Black students, the systemic challenges and solutions we identify apply citywide. Underutilization, underperformance, and lack of accountability plague Milwaukee schools across all neighborhoods.

The epicenter of Wisconsin's worst in the nation Black-White performance gaps is the underperformance of Milwaukee's North Side schools. The numbers paint a devastating picture—of the 30,000 Black students in Wisconsin lacking access to a high-quality school (i.e., enrolled in a 1-2 star school), 6 in 10 attend school on the North Side of Milwaukee.

The picture isn't better if we look beyond the Black-White performance gap, either. Of Wisconsin's 50 lowest-performing schools, 22 sit on Milwaukee's North Side. Seventeen of these are district-operated schools.

## THE SCOPE OF THE CRISIS

Consider what we're accepting as normal. Of the 54,947 students enrolled in North Side Milwaukee schools, only 18% (9,373<sup>2</sup>) attend schools that meet City Forward Collective's definition of high quality. **For high school students, that number is just 14%. All of these students are at three schools: Marquette University High, Divine Savior Holy Angels, and the Hmong-American Peace Academy. Out of the 2,280 students in these schools, just 3% are Black, and none of these schools are MPS district-operated schools.**

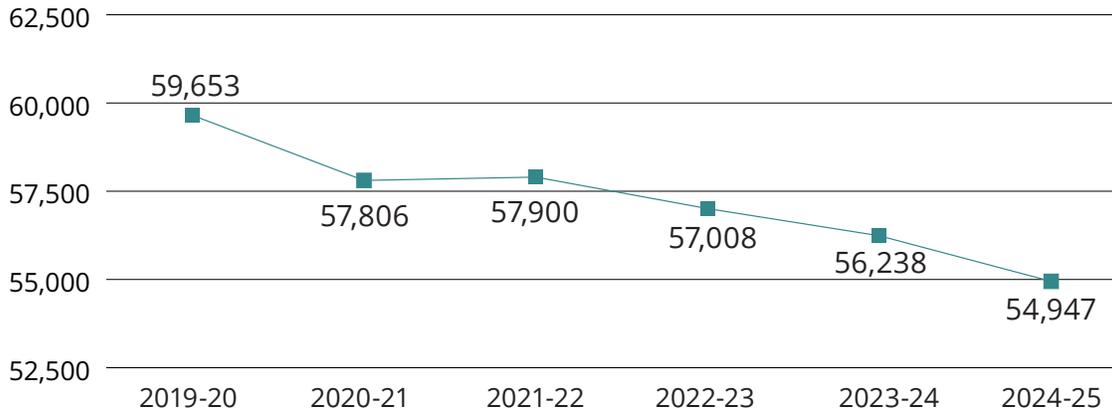


The state report card data reveal an even broader failure. Nearly half of North Side students (45%) attend schools rated below three stars—the state's basic threshold for meeting expectations.

Meanwhile, enrollment continues its steady decline. Total enrollment on the North Side has dropped from 59,653 in 2019-20 to 54,947 in 2024-25—a loss of over 4,500 students. While leading indicators point to the citywide decline continuing, with city of Milwaukee birth rates **dropping 15% since 2020**, the trends from the past two decades show slower decline in the predominantly-Black North Side school enrollment. The upshot for the North Side is that enrollment will almost certainly decline in the coming years, though at a much slower rate than birth rates.

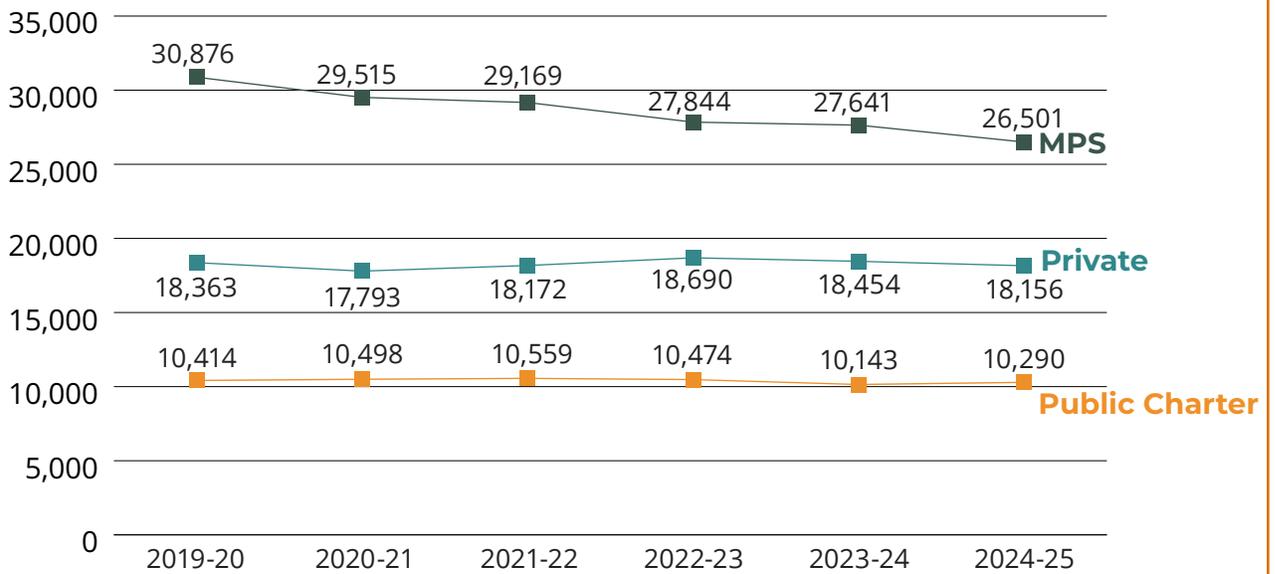
<sup>2</sup> 18% of students in rated schools

### TOTAL ENROLLMENT TRENDS



MPS bears the brunt of this exodus, losing more than 4,000 students while public charter and private schools have held relatively steady or grown slightly. Families are voting with their feet, fleeing a system that has failed them for generations.

### TOTAL ENROLLMENT TRENDS BY SECTOR



## UNDERUTILIZATION COMPOUNDS THE PROBLEM

These enrollment declines have created a system of half-empty buildings draining resources that should go to classrooms.

With a 30,000-student enrollment decline, and an average school size of 485 students, MPS is operating 25 more schools than it needs. Schools operating at 50-60% capacity still require full heating, maintenance, and administrative costs. Every dollar spent maintaining underutilized infrastructure is a dollar not invested in academic programs, teacher development, or student support services.

The data shows school after school with dramatic enrollment drops: Sherman Elementary down 53%, King International down 59%, Andrew S. Douglas Middle down 56%. These aren't just numbers—they represent communities that have lost faith in their neighborhood schools.

From millions of dollars each year in Central Office subsidies for inefficient staffing, to tens of millions of dollars in expenses to heat and maintain buildings that are in some cases more than two-thirds empty, MPS is diverting resources that could be invested in academic programs and wraparound services — and driving up property taxes and rents for North Side residents in the process, exacerbating the city's affordability crisis.

## THE STATEWIDE IMPLICATIONS

This crisis extends beyond Milwaukee's borders. Milwaukee schools serve only 10% of Wisconsin's children — but 57% of the state's Black students, the vast majority of whom either reside and/or attend school on Milwaukee's North Side.

Not only is Milwaukee's North Side educational crisis directly impacting Milwaukee's economic vitality, it is a primary driver of one of the most persistently shameful statistics in our state — Wisconsin's largest-in-the-nation disparities in proficiency between Black and White students.

Black students in Wisconsin perform worse than their peers in Mississippi (and most other states), while White students in Wisconsin are at or slightly above national averages. As a state, we've talked about and around this issue for generations — but the most recent NAEP results indicate that these gaps are in fact growing, driven by outright declines in Black student proficiency in Milwaukee.

When Milwaukee fails its students, Wisconsin fails its Black children. The academic outcomes for these students—particularly in reading and math proficiency—rank among the worst in the nation. We're not talking about minor achievement gaps; we're talking about generational educational malpractice.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Schools like St. Marcus Lutheran and Milwaukee College Prep are proof that zip code doesn't have to be destiny. Both are serving students on the North Side—the same kids, the same neighborhoods—and producing dramatically different results.

## WHERE IS THE LEADERSHIP?

Here's what should alarm every Milwaukee resident: tens of thousands of children are trapped in failing schools, and the people running for office aren't talking about it. No bold plans. No urgency. No moral outrage. Just silence.

That silence is a choice — and it reveals a political calculus that puts adult interests ahead of children's futures. Special interest groups, union politics, and bureaucratic inertia have built a system where failure is tolerated so long as the status quo goes undisturbed. And too many of our leaders have decided that's a bargain they can live with.

It's time to end that bargain. Every elected leader and candidate for office — from the Governor's race to the state legislature, from the Mayor and local alders to MPS School Board members — must show up in Milwaukee's North Side schools and answer one straightforward question: **What concrete steps will you take to improve school performance and student outcomes on Milwaukee's North Side?**

Milwaukee's North Side families have spent decades listening to platitudes and generalities, to buck-passing and vague calls for "more money" with no plan attached. They've heard it all — and nothing changed. It's time to demand answers that are as specific as the crisis is urgent.

## THE PATH FORWARD REQUIRES COURAGE

We cannot continue doing the same things and expecting different results. The North Side needs fewer, better schools—not a sprawling network of underutilized, underperforming buildings. This requires three immediate actions:

- First, we must rightsize and reinvest - beginning with Milwaukee Public Schools.
  - ❖ We need the right number of schools, in the right places, with the right educators, serving the right students.
  - ❖ Consolidating underenrolled schools isn't about abandonment—it's about concentration of resources to create excellence. And, it can be done while improving outcomes - we should guarantee that any student affected by a school closure or consolidation has priority access to a new, higher-performing school of their choice.
  - ❖ The savings from eliminating redundant infrastructure should flow directly into academic programs, wraparound services, and teacher quality initiatives in the remaining schools.

- Second, we need real accountability for persistently underperforming schools—regardless of sector.
  - ❖ It’s time to stop putting sectors over students, and politics over performance.
  - ❖ When any school fails to meet the mark for its students, year after year, we must intervene/take action.
  - ❖ This includes closure, leadership change, or conversion to more successful operators. We should replicate what works.
- Third, we must remove the barriers that prevent progress.
  - ❖ MPS’s bureaucratic incompetence, school board ideology, and special-interest obstruction have held back innovation for too long. When adult politics trumps student achievement, we all lose. We need governance structures that prioritize outcomes over process, results over rhetoric.
  - ❖ Students on Milwaukee’s North Side continue to be impacted by the persistence of unequal per-pupil funding levels across Milwaukee’s schools. On the North Side, 52% of students attend public charter and private schools—and these schools receive \$4,405—\$5,897 less per child in funding each year. Altogether, students in Milwaukee’s North Side schools will see more than \$105 million less in funding this year because of unfair and unequal funding. We must ensure all North Side students are fairly funded, no matter their choice of school.

## THE TIME FOR TALK IS OVER

This isn’t a new problem. We’ve watched this decline for decades, commissioning studies, forming task forces, and issuing reports while generation after generation of North Side children receive substandard education. The enrollment trends show families have already lost patience—they’re leaving the system entirely.

Milwaukee’s North Side education crisis represents a statewide emergency with implications for Wisconsin’s economic future, racial equity, and moral standing. The question isn’t whether we need dramatic change—the data makes that undeniable. The question is whether our leaders have the courage to act.

Every day of inaction represents another classroom of children whose futures are compromised. The North Side doesn’t need more talk. It needs fewer, better schools. It needs leaders willing to challenge the status quo. Most importantly, it needs a community that refuses to accept educational failure as inevitable.

CURRENT WI REPORT CARD



CFC'S HQ SCHOOL METRIC



The CFC High-Quality Metric is a new measure of school performance calculated by City Forward Collective. It is different from the DPI school report card in that it evenly weights Achievement and Growth.