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New Poll: Milwaukee Voters Want MPS to Close Under-Enrolled Schools Before Asking for More Taxpayer Money

61% say MPS must close or consolidate schools; 49% oppose another referendum; just 13% trust the School Board to decide which schools should close

MILWAUKEE, WI — A new poll of Milwaukee voters commissioned by City Forward Collective and CFC Action Fund finds broad recognition that Milwaukee Public Schools must close or consolidate under-enrolled schools to address its financial challenges, coupled with deep skepticism about another property tax referendum and a lack of confidence in the School Board's leadership.

The survey of 1,038 registered Milwaukee voters, conducted by Change Research from October 2 to October 11, finds that **61% believe MPS's financial problems are serious enough that the district will need to close or consolidate schools**, compared with just 20% who disagree.

The findings come as MPS confronts years of declining enrollment, growing financial pressures, and difficult decisions about the future of its school buildings.

"Milwaukee voters recognize that MPS cannot keep operating a school system built for a student population that no longer exists," **said Colleston Morgan, President and Executive Director of CFC**. "They want district leaders to make the difficult decisions necessary to put more resources into classrooms and improve outcomes for students before asking taxpayers for more money."

Strong Support for School Consolidation:

The poll finds that Milwaukee voters recognize the severity of MPS's enrollment and facilities challenges and are increasingly supportive of school consolidation when presented with information about the district's circumstances.

- 61% say MPS's financial problems are serious enough that it will need to close or consolidate schools, compared with 20% who disagree.
- 59% were already aware that MPS enrollment has declined by approximately one-third since 2006.
- 75% find the argument that MPS has buildings it doesn't have enough students to fill a convincing reason to consolidate.
- 77% find it convincing that MPS spends money heating and maintaining space it no longer needs when those resources could instead pay for teachers, reading specialists, and counselors.

Support for closing schools also increases when voters hear more about the reasons consolidation may be necessary.

When asked about closing schools because of declining enrollment, 62% initially support the idea and 23% oppose it. After hearing arguments for and against, support increases to 71%, while opposition falls to 14%.

Similarly, support for closing schools following several years of poor academic performance rises from 52% to 57% after voters hear additional arguments.

"The case for consolidation isn't simply about closing buildings or saving money," said Morgan. "It's about what students stand to gain when resources are no longer tied up in buildings the district doesn't need. Milwaukee families deserve more teachers, reading specialists, counselors, and stronger academic programs."

Voters Prefer Closing Schools and Cutting Administration Before Another Referendum

The survey also finds little appetite for another property tax increase without meaningful changes to district operations.

Asked what MPS should do first to close a budget gap:

- 37% say close or consolidate under-enrolled schools.
- 28% say reduce central office administration and staff.
- 20% say ask voters to approve a referendum.
- Just 2% say reduce academic programs.

Separately, 59% support closing schools rather than raising taxes to fund the district's \$355 million facilities plan.

The poll finds that just 37% of Milwaukee voters would support another MPS property tax referendum in 2027, while 49% would vote against it, including 33% who say they would definitely vote no.

Even after hearing additional arguments, support for a referendum reaches no higher than 42% in the scenarios tested.

The results suggest that district leaders face a significant challenge in persuading voters to approve additional funding without first addressing the costs associated with declining enrollment and excess building capacity.

"Milwaukee voters aren't saying that schools don't need resources," said Morgan. "They're saying that MPS needs to make better use of the resources it already has. Before asking taxpayers for another increase, the district needs to show that it is willing to make the changes necessary to build a stronger, more sustainable school system."

Voters Want a Plan and Confidence That Students Will Have Good Options

While voters recognize the need for consolidation, the survey also identifies important concerns that MPS leaders must address before moving forward.

Just 27% believe there would be enough good schools with available seats nearby if a school closed, while 51% believe there would not.

The findings suggest that a successful consolidation plan must go beyond identifying which buildings should close. District leaders will need to demonstrate where affected students will go, how their educational opportunities will improve, and how families will be supported through the transition.

Voters also want families and community members to play a central role in those decisions.

Asked whom they would most trust to decide which schools close:

- 29% selected parents and families at the affected schools.
- 26% selected an independent commission of residents.
- Just 13% selected the MPS School Board.

"Families shouldn't be asked to accept school closures on faith," said Morgan. "They deserve to know where their children will go, that those schools will be better, and that their voices will help shape the decisions. MPS needs to put forward a credible plan that earns the community's trust."

School Board Faces Deep Public Skepticism

The poll also reveals a significant lack of confidence in the MPS School Board.

Just 22% of Milwaukee voters have a favorable opinion of the Board, compared with 46% who view it unfavorably — a net favorability rating of negative 24 points, the weakest of any organization or leader tested.

Only 16% say they would re-elect their current School Board member.

The results reinforce the need for a transparent, community-driven process that puts students' needs ahead of institutional interests.

Milwaukee Voters Support Different School Options

The survey also finds relatively similar levels of favorable opinion across Milwaukee's different school sectors:

- 48% view private schools participating in the Parental Choice Program favorably, compared with 32% unfavorably.
- 46% view public charter schools favorably, compared with 34% unfavorably.
- 43% view Milwaukee Public Schools favorably, compared with 49% unfavorably.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Milwaukee voters are open to a range of school options but expect leaders to address the district's challenges and improve educational opportunities for students.

A Plan for Students Must Come First

The poll points toward a clear path forward: MPS must develop a comprehensive facilities and academic plan that addresses declining enrollment, reduces unnecessary costs, and reinvests resources in stronger educational opportunities.

That process must be fair and transparent, with affected families and communities meaningfully involved in decisions and sharing in the benefits of reinvestment.

About the Poll

The Milwaukee survey was conducted by Change Research among 1,038 registered Milwaukee voters from October 2 to October 11, 2026. The survey was conducted by text message and online in English and weighted to the Milwaukee voter file. The reported margin of error is ± 3.4 percentage points, with a margin of approximately ± 5 points for half-sample questions.

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City Forward Collective envisions a city where every Milwaukee child receives an excellent education that prepares them to thrive at a high-quality school of their choice. We advance our mission to secure Milwaukee's future through informing, engaging, and catalyzing transformation across Milwaukee's K12 school ecosystem. Learn more about our work at www.cityforwardcollective.org

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