

State Sen. Alberta Darling's Recovery District Idea is Designed to Fail

By Alex Molnar

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For more than 35 years, the main prescription for what ails Milwaukee's schools has remained constant: school choice. In the 1970s and 80s, specialty and magnet schools were going to integrate MPS. In the 1980s and 90s, the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program was going to empower African-American parents through vouchers. From the turn of the century to now, charter schools were going to unleash a wave of "disruptive innovation."

After three and a half decades of being treated with the choice "cure," Milwaukee's children are more racially isolated and impoverished than ever, and academic performance continues to lag.

Now, state Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills) [proposes to solve the problem](#) of chronically sub-par academic results not with resources and support but with still more choice. This time choice will appear in the form of a "Recovery District" run by an administrator overseeing a "portfolio" of charter schools. A "Recovery District," the cliché-ridden argument goes, driven by competition and test-based accountability will unleash a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement.

Elliot Smalley (Memphis) and Patrick Dobard (New Orleans) made their case for the Recovery District idea at a 2013 Milwaukee meeting [organized by the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce](#). A subsequent expert review of their presentations by Elizabeth DeBray (University of Georgia) and Huriya Jabbar (University of Texas at Austin) [found little credible support](#) for their claims of academic successes. This is not surprising, since the research nationally about charter school outcomes has overwhelmingly found that they offer no overall performance advantage over traditional neighborhood schools.

The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program enrolls about 26,000 students. But it's hardly an academic all-star. After five years of study, the University of Arkansas longitudinal evaluation final report in 2012 reported no meaningful difference in the achievement results of choice schools and the much-maligned Milwaukee Public Schools. Moreover, for the period studied, the choice program had a student attrition rate of 75%.

The results of neither the choice program nor the charter school sector differ meaningfully from those of district schools; in fact, the comparison likely exaggerates voucher and charter school performance. This is because voucher and charter schools are able to use various mechanisms such as parent volunteering requirements to effectively turn away or toss out students who don't "fit in." Thus, they nudge their performance statistics in a positive direction while at the same time increasing the taxpayer-funded education system's inequities. By exporting their lowest achieving and most difficult students to MPS while leaching away its funding, voucher and non-MPS charter schools have steadily eroded MPS's ability to function effectively.

Milwaukee's public schools already have had a good dose of standards-driven and test-based accountability. Between 2003 and 2011 the Department of Public Instruction reported on the "Adequate Yearly Progress" of state schools. Since 2011, DPI has issued district and school "report cards." Now, Wisconsin teachers and principals are also to be judged on the basis of student test scores.

The American Statistical Association, based on high-quality research, has warned against using test score based Value Added Assessment models to judge teacher performance. Yet even as parents have begun to recognize the negative effects of such standards and testing policies and are saying "enough," the "Recovery District" idea builds on the same ill-advised testing and grading regime.

The simple truth is that in Milwaukee, regardless of sector, some students perform very well academically while many others don't do well at all. The difference in student performance is highly correlated with their economic circumstance and other non-school factors. Voucher schools, charter schools and standards and testing can do little about such matters. That's a job for economic and social policy, a job Wisconsin and Milwaukee's business and political leaders have steadfastly refused to do.

Instead of creating jobs in Milwaukee, they have blamed the schools for the poverty engulfing the city and set about dismembering MPS. Proclaiming they were doing it "for the children," politicians in Madison and the civic elite in Milwaukee have largely succeeded in reshaping public education from a school system into a choice-based "system of schools." Along the way, they have turned MPS into a resource-starved, last-resort school district for Milwaukee's neediest students.

A "Recovery District" represents more of the same. It would further fragment Milwaukee's taxpayer-funded education system and open wide the door to more private for-profit and non-profit management organizations — many of which have proven much better at funneling taxpayer dollars to their managers and/or owners and investors than educating students.

Though of little educational merit, Darling's "Recovery District" will without a doubt be well-crafted to accomplish at least one purpose: insulating politicians from direct accountability for its predictable failure.

Alex Molnar is research professor and publications director, National Education Policy Center, University of Colorado-Boulder.