

## **Community Partners Work To Improve Schools**

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Keeping politics out of education reform isn't easy, but a Milwaukee partnership that includes UWM has been largely successful in doing that.

The Milwaukee Partnership Academy (MPA), which has won national awards and recognition for its efforts, has been working to help children in Milwaukee Public Schools achieve at or above grade level since 1999. The MPA brings together school administrators and union officials, academics and business people, community organizations, foundations, teachers and parents.

“We were able to get the people to the table who need to be there, leaving the politics outside the door. A lot of urban school districts are not able to do that,” says long-time MPA member Linda Post. Post is chair of the School of Education's Department of Curriculum and Instruction, and has been with the MPA since it started.

The MPA, which formally announced its goals in 2002, grew out of a Title II Teacher Quality Grant beginning in 1999.

The partnership has grown to 12 executive partners and includes leaders from the City of Milwaukee, the State Department of Public Instruction, local private colleges and universities, business and labor, community organizations and representatives of major local foundations. Within UWM, the MPA involves not just faculty from the School of Education, but vice chancellors, deans and faculty from many other areas of the university.

“Many of the education conversations and relationships that have developed in the community got their start with the MPA,” Marleen Pugach, professor of curriculum and instruction, reminded a recent MPS strategic planning session. The meeting itself was a visible reminder of those partnerships. Among those at the table that day were Chancellor Carlos Santiago, MPS Superintendent Bill Andrekopolous, Dennis Oulahan, president of the MTEA, Daniel Bader, president of the Bader Foundation, and Gerard Randall, executive director of the Private Industry Council.

In addition to getting leadership to the table, the MPA has also been successful in getting representatives from all its partner organizations and others involved in working out the details of reform. The MPA's implementation team is made up of work groups that tackle the nitty-gritty detail of making system-wide change.

The MPA helped has helped Milwaukee schools work toward achieving a number of goals that research shows will help student achievement.

Major accomplishments include:

- Developing a comprehensive approach to literacy and mathematics;
- Putting into place learning teams and “embedded professional development” to improve the quality of teaching and leadership within the schools;
- Designing new systems and reports to help teachers and parents track their children’s progress;
- Working to develop tutoring programs and getting parents and community members involved;
- Evaluating what works and what doesn’t – with the help of outside experts – and refocusing MPA efforts to deal with problem areas.

The MPA has had major successes in working together to bring funding for change and research to the local school system.

UWM is the administrator for a \$20 million grant – the largest in UWM history – from the National Science Foundation that involves multiple local partners in a collaborative effort to improve mathematics education.

UWM also administers a \$5 million grant from the Carnegie Foundation’s Teachers for a New Era program, focused on better preparing teachers for urban schools. (This grant has just been renewed).

The Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce, an MPA member, is administering a \$17 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to assist in developing and evaluating reforms that replace large urban high schools with smaller schools.

Other local foundations have become involved in MPA efforts, providing small, targeted grants for specific projects like literacy initiatives and the evaluation of school-based Learning Teams.

Despite the collaborative work and the successes in funding, the MPA’s path to education reform hasn’t been straight and easy.

Key MPA members – including UWM, MPS and MTEA – have experienced leadership changes. The MPA’s first executive director recently stepped down. The business community, led by the Greater Milwaukee Committee, is taking more of a leadership role in education reform. And MPS is rethinking its long-range strategic plan after several evaluations of improvement efforts questioned the results of reform efforts.

However, through all the change, the MPA has remained a key underpinning for education reform in Milwaukee, and UWM has remained an active partner in the MPA.

“We have regrouped over the past few years, but we’re still very much a critical player in the mix,” says Post, who is heading the MPA’s interim leadership team. “If I didn’t think

that what we were doing was important, I wouldn't be putting all this work into the MPA.”

Much of the MPA's current work is focused on responding to issues and recommendations raised in a series of independent evaluations of MPS reform efforts over the past year.

For example, a report by the Council of Great City Schools, based on an evaluation of Milwaukee Public Schools, criticized the system for not moving quickly enough on the urgent issues it faces -- low test scores and poor graduation rates.

A report from the Education Trust, which included Milwaukee in an examination of teaching inequalities in three urban cities, documented the disproportionate numbers of inexperienced, out-of-field and uncertified teachers working in schools with the most low-income and minority students.

And, finally, outside evaluations of the learning teams and literacy coach programs – key reforms that grew out of MPA work – point out that these programs, while generally successful, need ongoing work to ensure that they are working as intended at all schools.

Rather than sink into gloom because many challenges remain, says Post, MPA members gathered in a retreat this summer to look at ways of dealing with the issues raised. One result was a new “Skunkworks” work group, which focuses on brainstorming innovative, “outside-the-box” efforts to reform schools.

One ongoing effort that grew out of the “Skunkworks” group was an effort to find out more from students in MPS about what they need and want, says Post. “We're not just working with student council leaders, but we're reaching out to other students whose voices aren't always heard.”

The involvement of Marquette Dean of Education, Bill Henk, a noted literacy expert, will add new insight to the issues the literacy programs face, notes Post.

And, schools of education, including UWM's, are re-thinking the work they do in preparing and supporting new teachers. UWM School of Education Dean Alfonzo Thurman, along with Tia Bojar from Cardinal Stritch University, heads a council of local deans of education, the Metropolitan Milwaukee Area Deans of Education (MMADE) which is looking at several of these issues.

UWM's teacher preparation programs, for example, are working to strengthen the ties between preparation and practice, says Pugach. One new initiative builds on the existing ties with cooperating teachers who welcome student teachers into their classrooms by offering a cooperating teachers academy through the Carnegie Teachers for a New Era grant, says Pugach. This effort is being led by two assistant professors in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Barbara Bales and Jennifer Mueller.

Within the university, departments are developing closer relationships to help subject matter experts improve their knowledge of what teachers need and help aspiring teachers improve their content knowledge. “It’s one thing to know your content, but good teachers know how to explain content in several different ways to reach all students,” says Pugach.

With research showing many urban teachers leave the profession within a few years, the MPA and UWM are also working to recruit more teachers of color, retain new teachers and develop them into experienced teachers. Helping new teachers make the transition from university to urban classrooms may involve a variety of support. Examples are a Web site, mentoring from experienced teachers and even an electronic mentoring program, Tapped In, which provides online opportunities to share ideas and discuss issues and is funded by the Carnegie grant. Other SOE programs are focusing on helping both new and experienced teachers deal with a wide variety of new requirements through PI34, No Child Left Behind and IDEA.

“The MPA is an unusual and effective collaboration of community partners who are dedicated to the bottom line in education – helping teachers teach and children learn,” says Alfonzo Thurman, dean of UWM’s School of Education. “UWM’s active involvement in the MPA is an extension of our mission of providing teachers who are well-prepared to be educators and leaders in an urban system.”