



The SEED School of Wisconsin

A Public, Urban Boarding School, honoring the legacy of Marty Stein

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Local Leaders Hoping to Plant the SEED

By LaToya Dennis June 25, 2008 | WUWM Radio

Milwaukee leaders and members of the business community are throwing their support behind the opening of the state's first public boarding school. It would cater to at-risk children through out the state. But as WUWM's LaToya Dennis reports, a number of challenges lie ahead.

Schools like the one being proposed for Wisconsin, specifically Milwaukee, aren't new. The first urban public boarding school was established by the SEED Foundation in Washington D.C. nearly a decade ago. The second SEED school will open this fall in Maryland. Jeanette Mitchell is an advisor for the Wisconsin Coalition for a Public Boarding School. She says it's closely examining the criteria Maryland is using.

"We are looking at the Maryland model as what we might want to use. But it's that the student is two to three years behind and some personal factors which might be a parent who might be incarcerated, free or reduced lunch, all the at-risk criterias," Mitchell says.

Around 80 percent of Milwaukee Public School kids qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch. On top of that, nearly 2,300 MPS students a day are considered homeless by the federal definition. Mitchell says those statistics are why schools like this are needed in cities such as Milwaukee. She says the idea is to give kids who've been counted out a safe and loving environment where they can learn.

"The SEED model integrates a rigorous academic curriculum with a nurturing boarding program, which teaches life skills and provides a safe secure school environment for after school. Students and families benefit from this intensive program, which has as some of the key elements--small class sizes, mentorship, community service and extra-curricular activities," Mitchell says.

During the school week, students would live in on-campus housing. On Friday afternoon they would be allowed to go home and visit with family for the weekend. Now onto the numbers. To get the school off the ground official's estimate they need to raise about \$40 million in private dollars. After the school is completed, the state would be asked for around \$10 million. It equals out to around \$30,000 per student. That's compared to the \$10 thousand districts across the state currently receive for each kid. Former Milwaukee alderman Mike D'Amato is the SEED Foundation's Wisconsin director. He says the real test will be selling the state legislature on the idea in these hard economic times.

"It's a big difference but you have to remember that we are providing room and board, we're providing 24-hour service and many of those children are receiving those government dollars in other ways whether that be TANF money or the old welfare money, whether it be food stamps or Section 8 money. What we're asking is that the state look at this in a different way and say let the government money follow the child. If we do that we're already spending the money we're asking for. We're not asking for any new dollars," D'Amato says.

Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett says he hopes lawmakers and Wisconsin residents realize this is an investment the state can't afford to ignore.

"Everyone knows the statistics. It is far less expensive to educate them than it is to imprison them. And many times sadly that is the choice that we are talking about. So let's put the money in at the front end. Let's educate the young people," Barrett says.

The school is hoping to open its doors in 2011 to a class of sixth graders. Each year it would add a grade until it caters to students in grades six through 12.

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A new school that addresses problems beyond its walls

By Michael D'Amato June 7, 2008 | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

In recent years, Wisconsin has been a hotbed of activity for education reform. Although some innovations have produced notable success stories, they have not yet fundamentally altered the quality of public education for many of the state's most underserved children in an atmosphere of diminishing public resources.

The debate about education continues to be limited to what happens inside the four walls of the schoolhouse at a time when the state continues to face the nation's worst achievement gap between white and black students.

The truth is that at-risk children do succeed - if we offer them wrap-around services that support the academic and social success of the students. Children need a stable, supportive environment in which to live so that they have the ability to concentrate on learning.

The Washington, D.C.-based SEED Foundation is proposing a comprehensive approach to improving public education in Wisconsin, insisting on excellence in the classroom and addressing the human service components that create an optimal learning environment - nutrition, housing, after-school activities, tutoring, mentoring - under one roof.

SEED's public urban boarding school model attempts to take certain adverse influences out of the equation by integrating a rigorous, college-preparatory program with a nurturing boarding program that teaches life skills and provides a safe, secure environment in which students can live and learn.

SEED opened its first school for grades seven through 12 in Washington in 1998 and is set to open a second school in Baltimore this fall. Although the typical student enters SEED two to three years behind grade level, 97% of SEED graduates have been accepted into four-year colleges, and 70% are on track to graduate from college within six years. Moreover, Newsweek recently ranked The SEED School of Washington as one of America's best high schools. Bringing a SEED school to Wisconsin is a tremendous opportunity that Milwaukee and Wisconsin cannot allow to pass us by.

Admittedly, Wisconsin's school reforms have incorporated many ideas that educational leaders

have determined have a significant positive effect on learning, such as student mentoring, smaller class sizes, better-trained teachers and school breakfast. However, the most important factor in a child's success is a stable home environment. Even the strongest academic program cannot offset the effects of poverty, violence, drugs, teen pregnancy, gangs and the chaos in some neighborhoods or households.

Across America, urban school districts are in crisis, and Wisconsin's are no different. The Journal Sentinel's Dani McClain confirmed the link of poverty to learning problems, recently reporting that "the root cause of troubles for students often can be found outside the classroom and often can be traced to poverty. Some of them may be homeless or lack good food to eat. Some may be responsible for their younger brothers and sisters" (www.jsonline.com/744219).

In fact, the majority of Milwaukee Public Schools students face major impediments to learning that have little to do with what is happening inside schools.

Consider that:

- 80% of MPS students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- One of three Milwaukee students lives in poverty, ranking Milwaukee sixth-worst in the country, while Wisconsin as a whole had only 12% of school-age kids living in poverty.
- 35,000 to 40,000 students have no medical insurance.
- A shocking 2,300 MPS students per day meet the federal definition of being homeless, totaling some 13,000 children every year. About 95% of Milwaukee's homeless schoolchildren are children of color.
- The mobility rate for MPS high school students has steadily risen, from about 17% in 2002 to about 21% during the last school year. In other words, 21% of students in a school at the end of a school year were not enrolled there at the start of the year. In some MPS high schools, the rate is as high as 50%.



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The effects of poverty, homelessness, high mobility and poor health care have had such a serious effect on achievement that MPS Superintendent William Andrekopoulos has said that "all of these factors, of course, impinge on a student's ability to learn."

As in Washington and in Maryland, Wisconsin residents understand that the problems that plague the state's urban centers require creative solutions and the resources of the entire state. Milwaukee and other Wisconsin cities cannot foot the bill alone.

In coming weeks, we will announce the formation of the Wisconsin Coalition for a Public Boarding School, an alliance of community-minded organizations, businesses and individuals who support a public, college-preparatory boarding school to better serve at-risk urban students. Members of the coalition commit to:

- Equip Wisconsin students who face environmental challenges with the academic skills and social preparation necessary to succeed in college and beyond.
- Create a viable work force for the region.
- Provide urban students and families with another pathway to success.

Together, we support major investment in Wisconsin's public education for our most at-risk students through SEED's innovative and proven approach.

In the end, the most important thing that a SEED school may prove to Wisconsin's taxpayers is that, if we work to find the resources to invest in these students on the front end, they will pay enormous dividends to our community on the back end.

Michael D'Amato is the father of three MPS children. He recently was named Wisconsin director for The SEED Foundation in Washington, D.C. Michael D'Amato is the father of three MPS children. He recently was named Wisconsin director for The SEED Foundation in Washington, D.C.

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Editorial: Planting SEED for Wisconsin youth

A 24-hour boarding school can be part of the answer to helping inner city youth help the state by becoming high school and college graduates. **June 14, 2008 | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel**

Her learning marked her as different in her neighborhood and her home. And that was the conundrum she presented to the benefactor driving her home for summer break from the last day of school on Thursday.

Her family lives in one of the roughest housing projects in Washington, D.C. But for the past three years, the 15-year-old ninth-grader has been attending the SEED School in that city, which meant she lived at the school five days a week, except in the summer. It is a boarding school of the type that a core group of influential Milwaukeeans wants to establish here — providing remedial and college-prep, wraparound services that cocoon students from tough family and neighborhood circumstances so that they may better acquire the academic and life skills to succeed.

This girl represents one of the reasons Milwaukee and state leaders should get behind this proposal, contributing to a capital campaign that must raise \$30 million to \$60 million in private money and injecting a commitment in the

governor's upcoming budget for direct state funding in 2011.

"Ms. Poole, I'm concerned," the girl said, as Lesley Poole, the schools director of student life, tells it on the day it happened. "I think I'm getting smarter and know more than anyone in my house, and that's unfair to my mom. I know more words than she does. . . . I can out talk her."

The real conundrum? She didn't want to feel that she wasn't her mother's child, a single African-American mother living in poverty. Yet she now recognized that much of what was occurring in her neighborhood presented little viable path for her.

"That's my brother. He just got out of jail," she told Poole as they drove up to the projects. There was her other brother, too. He had just been expelled from school, she said.

Sad, yes. But this conversation constituted a victory on a couple of levels.

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"It's taken us all year to have her articulate that she is smart," Poole told us. And a double victory because this dawning includes the ability to recognize that the seductive siren song of her neighborhood could cast her onto the sharp, ragged rocks of failure.

Milwaukee needs such victories. It needs a SEED School like the one in Washington, D.C., and another one just under way in Baltimore. It's about creating an environment of nurturing, safety, expectations and discipline so that students from challenging circumstances can learn.

This school's creation is being spearheaded by former Milwaukee Ald. Mike D'Amato for the SEED Foundation. But the idea started with well-known Milwaukee businessman, philanthropist and general humanitarian Marty Stein. Stein passed away in 2006, but before he died, he founded the Milwaukee Boarding School Foundation.

The school this board is pushing will require seven to 12 acres to accommodate a campus that includes boarding facilities. D'Amato figures this will require new construction but said the organization is not averse to renovating existing structures if that makes more sense.

The board will seek a site in an urban setting as close to the central city as possible, but admission will be open to all eligible students from throughout the state. Anticipating more applications than the 600 slots that will be available when all grades of the sixth- through 12th-grade school are opened, organizers envision a lottery to pick the students.

This school has some unique requirements. Per-pupil spending in MPS is more than \$10,000 per year. Owing to the intensive wraparound approach, the cost balloons to about \$30,000 per year per student for this school. Organizers will be looking to the state Legislature to provide the initial direct investment of about \$2 million for the first year and about \$10 million per year from general purpose revenue funds when all grades are filled.

It will seek a direct relationship with the state Department of Public Instruction rather than seeking charter or voucher status. Such a relationship makes the school fully accountable to the public.

D'Amato says state funding must not come at the expense of Milwaukee Public Schools. We agree. And we agree wholeheartedly as well that this new effort should not be viewed as a vote of no-confidence in MPS.

A SEED school will help MPS. In Washington, D.C., 93% of the students have no family members who have attended college; 80% receive free or reduced-price lunches; 85% live with a single parent or with neither parent; when they start, they are two to three grade levels behind; they have been testing lower on pertinent tests than other public school students; and 15% have special education needs.

Students from such situations are difficult to teach in conventional fashion. What organizers of the Milwaukee SEED school are saying is that saving many of these students will require creative, out-of-the-box methods best accommodated in an environment that gives students a glimpse of the possible. And this is best accomplished through an integrated, engaging 24-hour learning program that wraps students in high expectations for attending college while shielding them from distracting and harmful influences.

It's hard to argue with the results: 81% of the Washington, D.C., students, most of whom entered in dire need of academic remediation just to catch up, graduate. And 97% of these have been accepted to four-year colleges.

A school that abets family disunity? Take the case of that Washington, D.C., 15-year-old girl with the conundrum. The biggest advocate for her remaining in this school is her mother, said Poole. Though having no high school diploma, being poor and having children in the juvenile justice system, this mother pushes her daughter to succeed.

Low-income parents in the direst of circumstances still dream of better things for their children. The rest of us need to help make these dreams come true. Gov. Jim Doyle can start by including the commitment in his next budget. The Legislature should approve it. Folks throughout Wisconsin can demonstrate support by donating to the school's capital campaign.

It's long been argued that the problems of educating Milwaukee's inner city youth in particular will require new paradigms. A Milwaukee SEED school offers one.