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EDUCATION

New Milwaukee reading coalition hopes to make a difference in literacy for the city's kids

Alan J. Borsuk Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Milwaukee is facing a significant reading crisis affecting the majority of its students.

Milwaukee education and civic leaders have formed a new coalition to unite various school sectors on this issue.

The initiative aims to provide high-quality training and new curriculum for teachers in early grades.

The new initiative of the Milwaukee Reading Coalition and the new Milwaukee Public Schools reading plan are both premised on four things:

Milwaukee has a huge reading crisis, involving the large majority of students in all schools and all sectors of schooling in the city.

Reading instruction is changing substantially because of Wisconsin's new reading law that calls for teaching using the "science of reading."

MPS has a new reading plan that emphatically calls for all students to get grade-level instruction in reading, which has often not been the case.

Milwaukee education and civic leaders are creating two structures to pursue reading improvement in ways that haven't been tried before.

Seeing long-time education leader Howard Fuller and Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Brenda Cassellius together on a stage where they agreed on almost every point before an audience of civic leaders was in itself a statement that something different is going on.

Fuller was the MPS superintendent more than 30 years ago and has been a national leader in advocacy for school voucher programs and charter schools. For years, he was a particularly unpopular person in MPS circles. Cassellius is the new superintendent who answers to a school board made up mostly of people backed by the Milwaukee teachers' union. The two of them were joined Sept. 15 by Laura Guitierrez, president and CEO of the United Community Center on the south side and its high performing Bruce-Guadalupe School, and JoAnne Anton, president and CEO of Herb Kohl Philanthropies.

What a group! And what were they doing there, at a meeting of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, a private group generally involving big figures in Milwaukee area life? They were promoting what is intended to be an everyone-united, urgent campaign to improve the generally awful level of success of Milwaukee children in learning to read.

It's one part of a statewide and nationwide change in how reading is taught to students in early grades. Starting about a decade ago, advocacy for what is called "the science of reading" has gained big momentum and the "balanced literacy" or "whole language" approaches that dominated reading instruction for years are in retreat. What does that mean, in general? The change is best known for promoting the use of phonics approaches to reading, teaching kids to sound out letters and put them together in words. But it's more than that, especially when done right. It includes teaching vocabulary and general knowledge. And it includes using teaching methods that are more spelled out and structured — and requires teachers to be trained in how to use those methods, which is often not the case now.

More: [What is phonics? Here's a guide to reading terms parents should know](#)

More: ['Science of reading,' whole language, 'balanced literacy': How can Wisconsin resolve its 'reading wars' and teach kids to read?](#)

What does this mean in Milwaukee? It means the creation of a new coalition to prioritize and support better reading outcomes. Organizers of the Milwaukee

Reading Coalition say 86 organizations and 115 individuals have signed on to support the campaign. It includes people involved in all sectors of Milwaukee schooling who, for this purpose, are setting aside many years of disunity. It does not include everyone (the Milwaukee teachers' union and School Choice Wisconsin have not joined in). But it's still impressive.

At the same time, the Milwaukee School Board has approved a reading plan proposed by Cassellius that, among many things, overhauls some past approaches to reading instruction. In short, it calls for giving all students grade-level learning opportunities and holding all to high expectations, rather than emphasizing struggling readers while many students got less rigorous work. (In education jargon, the switch is from emphasizing "Tier 3" students who aren't doing so well to emphasizing "Tier 1" instruction serving everybody at grade level.) MPS has had way too few Tier 1 students and way too many Tier 3 students for many years, and the goal is to reverse that.

The MPS plan and the plans of the reading coalition are compatible and, at least at the leadership level, there has been a show of harmony.

The reading coalition's aim is to give high-quality training to just about everyone who teaches reading to students in early grades, using a program that is widely used in some states and is known as LETRS. (That stands for Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, but you almost never hear the full name). LETRS is expensive and time consuming; some similar programs that don't require as much time and money are also likely to be used in Milwaukee.

Fuller, who has been at the center of the reading coalition effort, says that good training of teachers won't solve the whole reading problem, but it is an important step toward effective teaching in schools.

After two years of political and legal gridlock in the state Capitol, [more than \\$49 million in state money has been made available](#) for implementing the [Wisconsin reading law known as Act 20](#), which was passed in 2023. Hunks of that money will

go to support hiring a limited number of reading coaches for teachers statewide, to paying part of the cost for schools to purchase curriculums that are in line with Act 20, and to support the costs of training teachers.

The Milwaukee coalition wants to have the amount that is sent to the city for training controlled by a second new body, the Milwaukee Reading Commission. The commission would oversee allocating the money to schools and teachers at any city school that complies with requirements for doing the training well. One part of the plan is to pay \$1,500 stipends to teachers who do the training.

How much money will there be? So far, more than \$500,000 has been granted from private sources, and the [Greater Milwaukee Foundation](#) has agreed to act as fiscal agent, handling the money. The hope is that money from the state — a few million dollars perhaps, but the amount has not been set — will provide major fuel to the effort. Fuller and others have been meeting with top leaders in state government from both parties in hopes of reaching agreement that will make the reading commission the agent for distributing training money in Milwaukee.

Someone asked me a few days ago: Why now? Milwaukee's reading crisis has been a grim fact of life for years. I'd suggest two answers: One: It's in line with the national surge of "science of reading" initiatives. The other: Why not now? Is there some reason to postpone or dawdle on aiming for better for Milwaukee kids?

More: [Latest test scores show little progress in math, reading for Wisconsin students](#)

As reading coalition leaders have said, the failure of many thousands of Milwaukee students to thrive as readers has been and remains a threat to the current state and future of the city in multiple ways. Cassellius has been emphatic about reading improvement as a priority for MPS. And Fuller, who is in his 80s, has waded into this with passion and intensity, as if it could be the last campaign of the city's best-known education activist. (At an initial meeting in May of people interested in the reading coalition, Fuller told people not to call him if they disagreed because he

wasn't going to stop. He told them if they had a different idea, they should go work on it themselves.)

Will this time be different than so many other proclaimed campaigns over the years that aimed to change the reading results in Milwaukee? The leaders of this coalition certainly hope so, and the momentum at this point is much stronger than past efforts.

But. But. There are so many "buts" and Fuller and others acknowledge that there many ways this drive could stall.

"This time for sure." What punctuation mark would you use at the end of that sentence, a period, an exclamation mark, or a question mark? In a more neutral, maybe somewhat hopeful person, the sentence is a cautious: "This time for sure." To skeptics or critics, it is: "This time for sure?" But to those taking part, it is: "This time for sure!" And for the first time, the exclamation mark people are influential, energized and presenting a broad front.

Alan J. Borsuk is senior fellow in law and public policy at Marquette Law School. Reach him at alan.borsuk@marquette.edu.