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## EDUCATION

# Some positives coming out of Milwaukee education in 2025

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Fresh energy. Initiative. Commitment to making things better. Long-standing consistency in doing good work.

We certainly need more of those things when it comes to Milwaukee's education scene. And in 2025, there were examples of each of these, which is to be applauded.

Looking back across the year, there is plenty to be concerned about. Some things got worse; many things didn't change for the better. But at this point, let's emphasize some positive things, such as:

**The arrival of Brenda Cassellius.** The education story of the year in Milwaukee is the new superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools, now eight months into the job. Fresh energy? Check. She speaks her mind, she's shown commitment to improving the success of students, she's accessible to the public, and she's not afraid of hard subjects. But what a tough job, and the work is likely to get harder in 2026 as more controversial questions (school closings, for example) come to the fore and as money issues become more troubling. Good start, and good luck ahead.

**Improved bureaucracy.** Cassellius gets a hunk of the credit, but it seemed like MPS was **making some progress** in getting its act together even before she arrived. There are fresh faces in quite a few jobs, including the troubled human resources department. The **lead paint crisis** is pretty much over, and the stream of bad news

about the meltdown of the finance department has subsided. This may be setting the bar low, but I haven't heard a horror story about the MPS bureaucracy for a while now, which is a good change from prior times.

**The Milwaukee Reading Coalition.** For the first time, a wide array of community leaders has signed on to supporting real action to do something about the crisis-level number of Milwaukee schoolchildren who do not read at grade level. The focus of the new Milwaukee Reading Coalition is on training teachers of children in early grades in all schools in Milwaukee about how to be effective in leading students to reading proficiency.

Making that happen is not going to be easy, and progress is going to be slower than one might wish. But at least there's a sense of getting the community's act together on a crucial issue. Applause to Howard Fuller, the long-serving education activist, and JoAnne Anton, president and CEO of Herb Kohl Philanthropies, who have been at the center of this effort.

**Reagan High School and its principal Mike Roemer.** Reagan, on the far south side, is the best thing that has happened in MPS in the last quarter century (the school was founded in 2003). Its international baccalaureate program and long-standing record of strong achievement overall for students have made it the MPS school of choice for hundreds of families every year. Roemer led work that brought major physical improvements to the school in the last several years and has been a model of consistent good leadership.

**The veterans who keep on succeeding.** Important education advocacy in Milwaukee has come for a couple decades from three schools: Milwaukee College Prep, with four campuses on the north side; Bruce Guadalupe on the near south side; and St. Marcus Lutheran, just north of downtown. Sure, they're controversial to some people because two of them are charter schools, and one is a private school in the voucher program. But they demonstrate that commitment to excellence, rigor and building character can pay off year after year.

This year's evidence: In the recently released state reports cards for schools, Bruce Gaudalupe and St. Marcus each received five-star ratings. One Milwaukee College Prep campus got five stars and the other three got four stars.

**All-In Milwaukee.** You want to know what is being done to boost low-income students from Milwaukee who have the talent and will to pursue bright futures but need help clearing the path? Then you want to know about All-In Milwaukee.

Now in its eighth year, this private nonprofit is building an impressive record of helping students who would otherwise be likely to face substantial obstacles getting into and through college. The program offers not only financial aid, but academic advising, socio-emotional support, and career readiness help.

The percentages of the 650 All-In students who are succeeding in college or who have gotten degrees are impressive: over 90% by several measures. Almost all have no debt from college, and a large percentage are on track to get good jobs while staying in the Milwaukee area.

**Forward Scholars.** Can people do something to help more kids succeed in school? A lot of volunteer efforts have had difficulty showing much success. Forward Scholars provides tutors, generally retirees, who work in 10 Milwaukee schools, working with students in early grades who are not yet on track to succeed as readers. The effort is well-structured, the tutors carry out clear programs, and the results are positive. Serving a couple hundred students, Forward Scholars is small, so it's not a broad solution to Milwaukee's reading problems. But is it helping kids in a meaningful way? Yes.

There are more heroes in local education, especially **classroom teachers**, and there is more good news in education in the city. This is a sampling, and it comes with two important broader observations:

The first is that it is hard to generate big success in schools serving low-income and high-needs students. There is far too little success nationwide. But is it possible to get more kids on track to succeed in school? Yes, and these examples show it.

And the second is that these examples stand out against a general education landscape where there is too little change for the better. As the scores on [Wisconsin's standardized tests](#) showed (even amid some changes in the way results were reported), there was little change for the better academic outcomes in 2025.

The year did not bring good news for schools in Milwaukee and statewide when it comes to money. The new state budget brought a little bit more [money for special education](#) but not much other change. Even with a boost from the narrow and controversial passage in spring 2024 of an [MPS general revenue referendum](#), MPS leaders say they are heading toward [tight times](#). And nationwide, the turmoil over education policy coming from the Trump administration indicates that things will get [tighter in terms of federal aid](#), and they already have tightened up when it comes to grants for such things as help with mental health.

[Absenteeism? Declining enrollment? Trouble filling teaching jobs? Violence in school](#) and in the community? Weak education cultures and low levels of success in too many schools? These are all realities that are deeply concerning and too common in Milwaukee, and, to a lesser degree, in many other communities.

The realities of the daily lives of so many of Milwaukee's children in 2025? Not much change overall, and the forces shaping the lives of thousands of children include dysfunctional homes, instability in housing and food, weak neighborhood vitality, too much trauma in kids' lives, too much need with too little help. Most of this is centered outside of school, but it impacts educational success.

But the news is not all bad. We need to appreciate the good things going on and applaud those who are making it possible. And we need to hope that somehow, even if the prospects seem daunting, 2026 will be a year in which success spreads in big and meaningful ways.

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