

Good schools in Milwaukee are scarce, study finds

Northwest, north and south side areas have greatest needs

By Erin Richards of the *Journal Sentinel*
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Tucked on the south side of Milwaukee off Oklahoma Ave., Veritas High School has about 180 students, a college preparatory curriculum and a reputation for helping kids succeed.

According to a new study, the charter high school also has the distinction of being the only non-selective public high school in the city meeting at least 75% of the state's standards in reading and math.

That scarcity of good schools available to all children in Milwaukee—especially at the high school level, on the north and northwest sides, and in a few areas of the densely populated south side—is the focus of a new study by a Chicago nonprofit that has been tracking the distribution of “performing schools” in urban districts since 2003.

Overall, the study found that out of 353 schools studied in the 2008-'09 school year, only 13% of students enrolled in traditional public schools, charter schools and private schools that participated in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (and that reported data for the study) were attending a school that met Wisconsin's state standards in reading and math.

When the bar was lowered to include schools meeting at least 75% of the state's standards in reading and math—the cutoff to be considered a “performing” school for purposes of the study—the percentage of kids being served with a decent education rose to about 33%.

Add in the selective schools that require an entrance exam before admitting students—which are generally higher performers—and that number rose a bit higher to 37%, said Jose Cerda, vice president of public policy and communications at IFF, a

community development financial institution that supports nonprofits in the Midwest.” Our position is that all students should have the option of attending a performing school near where they reside,” Cerda said. “What we're trying to do is rate the capacity of this system—where does it have the most capacity and where does it have the least?”

Cerda said Milwaukee would need between about 56,000 and 78,000 more seats at performing public and private schools to serve all children in the city.

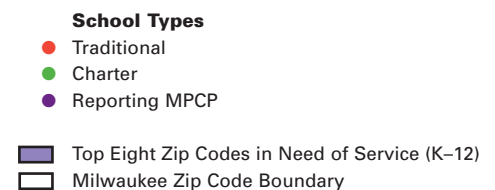
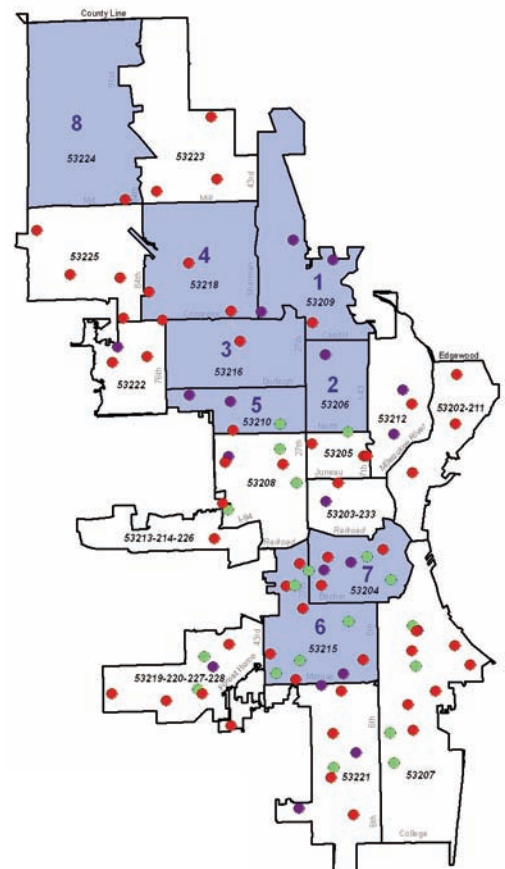
The range of more than 20,000 seats exists because the majority of private schools that participated in Milwaukee's voucher program that year did not submit test-score data for the study. In 2008-'09, 126 private schools participated in the voucher program, but only 23 submitted data for the study. It's possible that some of those 20,000-plus children are at schools that meet most or all of the state's standards, researchers said.

ZIP code analysis

To rank the need for performing school options in Milwaukee, the IFF study analyzed the schools in each of the city's 20 ZIP codes and found:

- More than two-thirds of the need for performing schools is located in eight ZIP codes: 53209, 53206, 53216, 53218, 53210, 53215, 53204 and 53224.
- Six of those ZIP codes with the highest need are on the city's north and northwest sides.
- The remaining two high-needs ZIP codes—53204 and 53215—are on the city's south side. Those ZIP codes have more schools meeting all or most of the state standards in reading and math than some other ZIP codes, but not enough to serve all school-age children living in the densely populated area.

Tier I and Tier II Schools and Top Eight Zip Code Areas



- Sixty percent of Milwaukee's ZIP codes (12 of 20) need at least 850 seats of performing high school capacity to meet the needs of public high school students residing in those areas.
- Milwaukee has no non-selective public high schools performing at the state standard, and only one—Veritas—performing at 75% of the state standard.

- Two selective high schools (with admission requirements) perform at the state standard—Rufus King and Reagan. Milwaukee School of Languages, a selective 6-12 school, meets 75% of the state standard. Together, these schools serve 8% of all high-school age children in Milwaukee

Veritas, located in 53215, will increase the number of children it can serve next year after it finishes an addition to the building this summer. The expected 70 new students will bump the school’s enrollment from about 180 to 250.

“That’s the highest I want to go for,” said Marcia Spector, a believer in small schools who runs the nonprofit Seeds of Health Inc., which oversees Veritas and a number of other charter schools in the city.

IFF is an urban charter school advocate. It makes loans to many such schools, including Veritas, which is using that money to build its new addition. But although Cerda said the organization supports charter schools as a turnaround option, leaders in the organization hope the study is used more broadly.

“We recognize that you can’t get to a number close to 78,000 without every component of the system (traditional public, charter and voucher schools) targeting high-need areas of the city,” he said.

Work in other cities

Originally, the IFF established its research methodology and ZIP code analysis to identify areas of Chicago that should be prioritized when locating new schools. Cerda said that five years later, when the same study was repeated, Chicago saw about 46,000 seats move from the nonperforming column to the performing column through various turnaround efforts. He added that about 16,000 new seats had been established at charter schools.



Kailon McGhee, 9, (right) quizzes Kris Williams using flash cards during Jen Beilke’s third-grade math class on Wednesday at Siloah Lutheran School, 3721 N. 21st St. The school was among few in Milwaukee ranked as “performing schools.”
Photo: Gary Porter

IFF—formerly known as the Illinois Facilities Fund before it expanded to other areas—has used the same analysis to study the distribution of schools in St. Louis, Denver and Kansas City. In Milwaukee, the study was funded by the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.

Milwaukee School Board President Michael Bonds said the study by IFF didn’t reveal anything the board didn’t already know about the location of performing schools in the city.

“We already know the north and northwest side don’t have as many good schools,” he said.

That’s part of why the board recently approved national charter school operator Lighthouse Academies Inc. to set up a new school in Milwaukee. That organization is seeking a building on the north or northwest side.

The IFF report recommends that in addition to focusing on the eight ZIP codes in the city in highest need of good schools, that Milwaukee leaders should also increase access to the more than 4,000

seats they identified as vacant in existing schools that meet state standards or 75% of state standards.

Also, it points out that MPS has 11 vacant buildings in the eight high-need ZIP codes, and that these could be used as a “powerful incentive” to attract high-quality charter school operators to the city.

Though Milwaukee has a long history of support for allowing parents to choose nearly any school in the city for their child, and for busing them across town to do so, Cerda said he still thinks that placing more quality schools in underserved areas is a good goal for education reform.

“The data shows to some degree that it matters,” he said. “If you have a good school nearby, people tend to go to that school in higher numbers and tend to travel less. We think that’s a smart thing.”