

A missed



Opportunity

By James Wigderson

Plan to turn around failing Milwaukee schools was doomed from the start; substantive reform is the only option

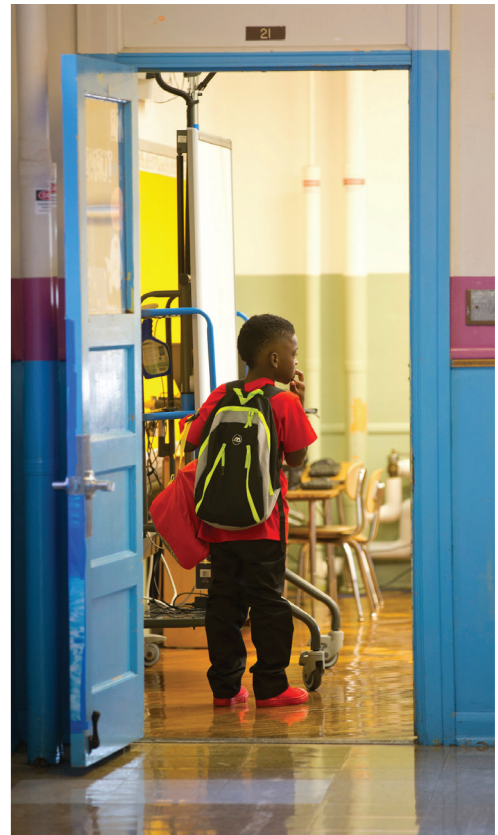
Jeffrey Phelps photos

The so-called Opportunity Schools and Partnership Program crashed and burned with no participation and no new opportunity for Milwaukee schoolchildren. It was a dismal failure.

A year after the turnaround program was created, its commissioner resigned, no schools have been selected for the program, no requests for proposals to run the failing schools have been sent and the program is in limbo.

But the attempt was still worth it: It showed, for reasons just now becoming clear to legislators in Madison, exactly who is honestly concerned about providing real opportunity for Milwaukee kids and who is disinterested in even the most tepid attempts to improve abysmal schools where not a single child is proficient at reading. And why our elected officials have no choice but to push for true and substantive reform.

State Rep. Dale Kooyenga (R-Brookfield), who co-authored the OSPP legislation with state Sen. Alberta Darling (R-River Hills), suggests the table is now set for real change, possibly including a different governmental structure for Milwaukee Public Schools. "Politically, we probably set ourselves up to say, 'Who are the



A boy enters his classroom on the first day of school on Sept. 1 at Auer Avenue School in Milwaukee.



The red carpet is rolled out for students on the first day of school at Auer Avenue, 2319 W. Auer Ave.

people in our state who are working to do something different with the worst-performing schools?” Kooyenga said in an interview. “And by the way, the worst-performing schools are where progressivism is the strongest.”

“The Opportunity Schools have put tremendous pressure on the Milwaukee Public Schools to try something different,” he says. “Even internally, the debate is if we don’t do something different, we’re going to look like a bunch of status quo people compared to Dale Kooyenga and Alberta Darling, who are trying to shake things up.”

A closer look at why the OSPP was doomed from the start, and why similar baby steps can’t succeed, illustrates Kooyenga’s point.

How the OSPP came about

Last summer, the Legislature passed the OSPP as part of the 2015-’16 state budget to begin the turnaround of a handful of failing schools in Milwaukee.

The state’s report cards on every school district, last updated by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction after the 2013-’14 school year, showed MPS “fails to meet expectations,” the lowest grade. The report cards also

identified 55 of the district’s 154 schools as failing to meet expectations.

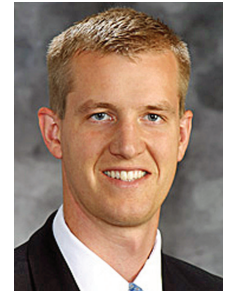
The OSPP law required Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele to appoint a commissioner to run the program. The commissioner would select one to three schools identified on the most recent report cards as failing to be in the program in the 2016-’17 school year. The school or schools would remain in the OSPP for five years. The commissioner could select up to five more schools the following year and every year thereafter.

The commissioner was also given the authority to select a nonprofit charter school operator or a private school in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program to run the schools in the OSPP.

“If you’re going to do all 55 failing schools in one year, you don’t have the talent pipeline of principals and teachers to do a wholesale change in one year,” Kooyenga says. “So we said, let’s do two to three schools, up to five schools a year.”

“This is not bold reform. This is very small, incremental new ideas to try something different,” he says. “And yet

“The reaction (from the left) is, we have the monopoly of failing education, and we don’t want anyone to insert themselves in this system that we have, which is dropping 30% of kids off with no diploma.” — State Rep. Dale Kooyenga



the resistance from the left, they only have one volume, which is zero to 10. And it proves that no matter what you do, whether we chose 53 schools or if we chose three schools, the reaction is always the same. The reaction is, we have the monopoly of failing education, and we don’t want anyone to insert themselves in this system that we have, which is dropping 30% of kids off with no diploma.”

Kooyenga and Darling chose the Milwaukee County executive to run the OSPP after exhausting their options. Gov. Scott Walker did not want the authority. “I don’t fault him for that. I think he had some legitimate concerns that it would be perceived in a bad manner,” Kooyenga says.

They also approached Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, he says. “He said he would get back to us, and we never heard back from him,” Kooyenga says.

“So, bottom line is, on the issue that I think is the root of economic, social and criminal issues in Milwaukee, Mayor Barrett said he did not want to lead, he did not want to manage, he did not want to have anything to do with trying to fix MPS, nothing,” he says.

“So what did that leave us with? There’s DPI. People don’t know this: DPI has the power to force corrective action for the entire school district,” Kooyenga says. “DPI

is sitting around with the power and has done nothing directly to deal with Milwaukee Public Schools. Nothing.”

After Democrats in the Legislature rejected a proposed Barrett takeover of MPS in 2010, the Legislature passed Act 215, which empowered state Superintendent for

Public Instruction Tony Evers to order districts with schools that have been identified as in need of improvement to provide more coaching for staff, make administrative changes, establish a consistent curriculum and extend the length of the school day for more help for students.

That authority has not been used by Evers to correct the performance of any failing schools.

“So you’re left with, OK, the superintendent already has powers that they’re not executing.

The mayor does not want to do it. The governor, for good reasons, doesn’t

want to do it,” Kooyenga says. “County Executive Chris Abele said, ‘Yeah, I’m willing to give it a shot.’ ”

Politics played a role

The OSPP became entangled in politics, says Scott Jensen, senior adviser for the American Federation of Children and former Assembly speaker. “The problem is the county executive was on the ballot and running against a progressive Democrat who had made a big deal out of this issue,” Jensen said in an interview, referring to



Teacher Joanie Marchillo walks with students outside Auer Avenue School on the first day of school on Sept. 1.



“It is now clear to me that as implementation of the law moves forward, the environment is not conducive to collaborative partnerships — something essential for positive things to happen in Milwaukee.”

– Demond Means, in his letter resigning as OSPP commissioner

Abele’s spring election against state Sen. Chris Larson (D-Milwaukee).

The race may have led to Abele’s selection of Demond Means, superintendent of the Mequon-Thiensville school district, as the OSPP commissioner, Jensen says. “So he essentially had to try to paper it over until after the elections by picking a local guy who is well-respected and loved MPS,” he says.

Means, an MPS graduate, was known for reducing the achievement gap between white and minority students in his district. He also served as chair of the DPI’s Task Force on Closing the Achievement Gap. Because there was no additional funding for the OSPP, Means’ role was voluntary.

Neither Means nor Abele agreed to be interviewed for this story. However, the two made it clear that they were not interested in a takeover of MPS.

“I think the county executive and I have said numerous times that we would not have drafted the Opportunity Schools Partnership legislation the way that it currently exists,” Means said at a May forum, reported by Watchdog.org. He added later, “We don’t believe OSPP should be a vehicle for private operators.”

What Means and Abele proposed instead was the takeover of one failing school by the OSPP. All of the teachers would be retained, and they could remain in the union. The school would retain MPS’ student discipline policies. Means would report to the Milwaukee School Board quarterly. At the end of five years, the school would revert to MPS’ control. The school would be named as soon as MPS agreed to the joint venture.

Abele said at the same forum: “Is it the way I would have designed it? No, it isn’t.

It is, though, the law, and this represents what we think is a way of implementing the law ... That it is the most sort-of pro-MPS, least-damaging, that we also think we can maybe we can do some good, that we could come up with.”

That compromise was still too much for MPS, and on June 17, it proposed instead an early childhood education program located within another existing charter school. That proposal was rejected by Means, as well as Kooyenga and Darling, for not complying with the OSPP law.

The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty issued a press release on June 28 saying, “Agreeing to such a plan may expose Commissioner Means to litigation from a taxpayer, a parent, or any of the potential operators contemplated by the statute to assist on the turnaround plan.”



Students sit on the gym floor during an assembly at Auer Avenue School on Milwaukee’s north side.

Means resigned the next day, stating in his resignation letter, “It is now clear to me that as implementation of the law moves forward, the environment is not conducive to collaborative partnerships — something essential for positive things to happen in Milwaukee.”

MPS was ‘obstructionist’

Abele’s decision to work with MPS was responsible for the OSPP’s inability to start in the 2016-’17 school year, says Steve Baas, senior vice president for the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce for Government Affairs.

“I think he felt that he had to give (MPS leaders) an opportunity in good faith to see if they would work with him. They exposed themselves as being obstructionist to the whole concept,” Baas said in an interview.

Kooyenga adds, “Although I respect that Chris Abele and Demond were trying to decrease the political drama around it, I think it was important, but not more important than results. I don’t think they were ever going to get the most effective solution by working through the institution that has been resistant to change.”

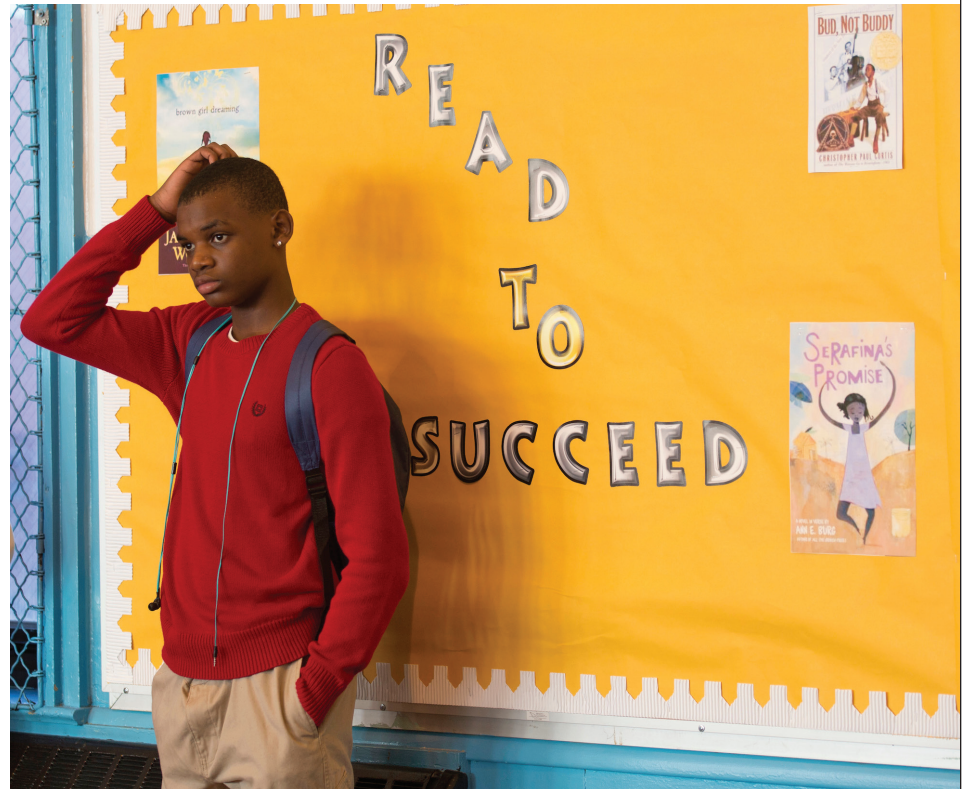
Abele “just needed to name the schools and personally also been out there saying why this has to be done,” Kooyenga says.

Choosing the county executive to run the program may have been the error, Jensen says. “Policy-wise, this thing was well-designed. The problem is the governance model,” he says.

“I think they’ve got to go back to the drawing board in regard to governance, but the turnaround district is still a good idea,” he adds.

Despite the OSPP’s inertia, the effort has led to some positive steps.

“They were very quick right after (the OSPP) to approve a charter school for an individual named Maurice Thomas, who is the founder of Milwaukee Excellence Charter School,” Kooyenga says. He also credits the OSPP for putting pressure on MPS to allow the MPS-chartered Carmen



Eighth-grader Ajonta Taylor attends an assembly at Auer Avenue. While the school has shown improvements recently, a few years ago Auer had no students rated as proficient or advanced in reading. It was expected to be one of the schools targeted for the OSPP.

High School of Science & Technology to move into Pulaski High School. And last year, MPS announced a plan to turn around the struggling Bradley Tech High School. Kooyenga says he has been told privately that the plan would not have come together without OSPP pressure.

“We set up a sharp contrast between who is for the status quo and who is for change. Now based on that foundation, we’re in a position to go to the table with all the reforms that enhance school choice, enhance charter schools and also possibly even change the governance structure of Milwaukee Public Schools,” Kooyenga says.

“I believe the Milwaukee Public School Board needs to be looked at. Maybe it’s time to have a different governing structure over the Milwaukee Public School Board. That has also been brought up by Democratic legislators like Lena Taylor and other parties as well,” he says. **WI**

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