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Henry Hamilton and Christine Neumann-Ortiz

In takeover, your vote silenced

By HENRY HAMILTON and CHRISTINE NEUMANN-ORTIZ

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State legislators may soon debate the proposed mayoral takeover of Milwaukee Public Schools. The impetus for the legislation is a one-time opportunity for federal dollars.

The NAACP and Voces de la Frontera have one message for the proponents of this radical legislation: Our right to vote is not for sale.

The measure will change the management and control of MPS from an elected multi-member policymaking body (representing the varied interests of students, parents, and citizens) to an appointed policymaking body accountable not to the public, but to the mayor.

Residents voiced opposition to rumored plans that would have disenfranchised voters by vesting the mayor with sole authority to appoint the MPS school board and superintendent.

The current legislation, the so-called Teach Act, is an end run around the issue. The elected school board remains, but is left with little power.

Milwaukee voters are too sophisticated to be conned by this sleight of hand. The infringement of voting rights can take many forms. Politicians may directly eliminate a citizen's right to vote. Or as proposed here, politicians may leave intact the right to vote, but undermine a citizen's vote by curtailing the power of an elected body. The effect is the same - the voice of the voter is muted.

We are not inclined to acquiesce, while our rights are recklessly bartered by those we trusted to defend them. Particularly, where there is little promise of improved educational outcomes.

We encourage mayoral involvement in MPS. Mayoral involvement, however, does not require a mayoral takeover. Many school districts in the state and outside the state will receive Race-to-the-Top dollars without the kind of radical legislation proposed here.

Although the school board would retain limited power, written in the legislation is catch-all language that could grant the superintendent unilateral authority to override most board actions.

The legislation also eliminates the mandatory requirement of a public hearing before adoption of the school budget.

At the end of the day, a voter in the City of Milwaukee - the state's most diverse ethnic community - will have less influence over the direction of local education than voters in any other school district in Wisconsin.

It has been suggested the proposal would increase accountability. This is misleading. There are multiple strains and duties placed on the mayor. The mayor's most urgent task for the city is addressing unemployment (in some neighborhoods reaching 60%).

The proposal sets in place a dangerous mechanism where the future needs of students will be balanced against the need for city services, such as street and pothole repair, snow removal, and garbage pick-up.

The education of our children is too important to compete with these city services.

Proponents suggest educational needs will not be balanced against city services. We disagree. For instance, the legislation establishes a seven-member budget committee to advise the mayor-appointed superintendent: the Common Council President, the city comptroller, three members appointed by the mayor, president of the School Board, and the state superintendent of schools.

The majority of members are city of Milwaukee officials, or their appointees and they will have sway over the the largest school budget in the state. Only two budget committee members - the School Board President and the state superintendent - presumptively have any knowledge of education processes.

The struggle for voting rights for African Americans and Latinos has been a long and courageous struggle; achieved in the face of beatings, bombings, and loss of life by people of conscience of all races. We owe too great a debt to those who struggled before us to allow intrusions upon our voting rights in exchange for a reckless pursuit of one-time federal dollars.

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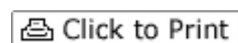
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