

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

Borsuk: Stirring on Milwaukee's south side, a building boom of growing and popular choice schools

Alan J. Borsuk, Special to the Journal Sentinel Published 11:43 a.m. CT Jan. 10, 2020 | Updated 1:02 p.m. CT Jan. 10, 2020

Buy Photo



A sizable addition to what is now a Notre Dame school at West Greenfield Avenue and South Layton Boulevard is an example of a boom in private schools on the south side. At the same time, a lot of MPS schools are seeing declining enrollment on the south side. (Photo: Rick Wood / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Notre Dame School of Milwaukee opened on Milwaukee's south side in 1996 with a student body of 26 middle school girls.

It grew steadily — 90 students in 2001, 130 in 2006, 201 in 2012. It added co-ed elementary grades and a middle school for boys, as well as a second building.

It now has 535 students, a five-star ("significantly exceeds expectations") state report card, and a lot of construction equipment in what was previously a paved area adjacent to its building at West Greenfield Avenue and South Layton Boulevard as it builds a \$7 million addition.

Three blocks from that Notre Dame building is Nativity Jesuit School. It opened with 14 middle school boys in 1993 and grew within several years to about 60. In recent years, its enrollment has quadrupled to 252, including boys and girls in elementary grades. It also has a five-star report card and it recently completed \$3 million in improvements.

Want to talk even bigger and growing?

A couple of miles away on South Fifth Street is St. Augustine Prep, a private school now in its third year, with about 1,300 students in elementary, middle and high school grades.



Alan J. Borsuk (Photo: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

It missed out on a five-star report card for 2019 because of a data error — the school's score was based on having 39% of its students labeled “economically disadvantaged.” It would have been awarded more points if the correct figure of 81% had been used in the state's calculation. The school is on track to grow to more than 2,000 students within several years.

And in four buildings on the south side, there are Carmen charter schools with about 1,400 students in kindergarten through 12th grade (plus another 663 at a northwest side Carmen school). The first Carmen school, which opened in 2007, got a five-star report card this year for the second year in a row.

Carmen brought an elementary school into its network this year, is moving soon to a larger middle school building and is working on plans for long-term growth.

At West National Avenue and South 19th Street, Cristo Rey High School is constructing a \$33 million building on what was formerly the location of a Pick 'N Save. In its fifth year, Cristo Rey has about 400 students. It got a three-star report card. The new building, to open in the fall, will allow the school to grow to about 500.

Buy Photo



Cristo Rey High School, at South 19th Street and West National Avenue, is constructing a \$33 million building on what was formerly the location of a Pick 'n Save. The building will allow the five-year-old school to grow to 500 students. (Photo: Rick Wood / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

Don't forget the United Community Center, with its longtime, high-performing Bruce-Guadalupe School with more than 1,300 students and a four-star report card. Its Acosta Middle School is now in its second year with about 175 students, and construction is underway for an early childhood center.

Also, St. Anthony School, with about 1,675 students in several buildings across the south side and a three-star report card. And the Seeds of Health charter schools, including a south side elementary school (three stars) with more than 400 students and two high schools, Veritas (four stars) with about 250 students on the south side and Tenor (five stars) with about 230 students downtown.

The broad picture: One of the interesting and significant aspects of the evolving school landscape in Milwaukee is the growing set of schools outside of the Milwaukee Public Schools system that has large and generally increasing enrollments, coupled with track records of success. This is particularly true on the south side, where the number of construction projects or new school launches is eye-catching.

Some think the growth of these schools is great. Doesn't Milwaukee need all the top-performing schools it can get? Some think this is a bad development, undermining Milwaukee Public Schools.

School choice in action

But either way, this set of growing schools is important. A few thoughts about them:

This is school choice in action. In each of these schools, the basic operating cost of educating all or almost all of the students comes from public dollars (and yes, they get less per student than public schools get).

By law, not one student has been assigned to go to these schools. Parents in hefty numbers are choosing to enroll their children in schools with ambitious academic programs, strong results and generally peaceful atmospheres, in most of these cases shaped by religion. There is a market for this.

Yes, this is a problem for MPS. Only about 55% of Milwaukee children who are getting publicly funded education are enrolled in conventional MPS schools. Enrollment overall in MPS has declined for years.

On the south side, even as the total number of children appears to be growing due to the growth of the Hispanic population, some MPS schools are shrinking. South Division High School had 1,431 students in September 2005. It had 795 this year. For Pulaski High, the figures are 1,560 and 837. Hamilton High went from 2,208 to 1,545. Allen-Field Elementary went from 867 to 566.

Are these choice schools creaming off the best kids? I probably make both sides of the heated school sector wars angry by saying the answer is neither all one way or the other.

Schools generally cannot refuse to enroll students (some special ed needs are an exception) and most go to lengths to serve kids with challenges. But sometimes students are forced to go elsewhere due to behavior or not buying into the program. In the end, MPS schools end up with bigger numbers of kids with big needs. But no school is exempt from dealing with tough issues around students.

What about the MPS referendum? On April 7, Milwaukee voters will be asked whether they want to increase property taxes so that MPS can get more money (\$87 million a year) than the basic state formula permits. MPS supporters are energetically campaigning to convince residents the money will be well spent and will give children better schools.

But it's just a fact that many parents are finding good schools for their kids outside of MPS. What can MPS advocates learn from this and what can they do to win more people over, both at the ballot box and when it comes to enrollment?

And what can everyone do to create a climate where excellence and success grow and are more widely embraced?

Alan J. Borsuk is senior fellow in law and public policy at Marquette Law School. Reach him at alan.borsuk@marquette.edu (<mailto:alan.borsuk@marquette.edu>).

THANK YOU: Subscribers' support makes this work possible. Help us share the knowledge by buying a [gift subscription \(http://jsonline.com/gift\)](http://jsonline.com/gift).

DOWNLOAD THE APP: [Get the latest news, sports and more \(http://bit.ly/JournalSentinelApp\)](http://bit.ly/JournalSentinelApp).

Read or Share this story: <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2020/01/10/borsuk-choice-schools-undergoing-building-boom-milwaukee/4431654002/>