

# Teacher Knows Best!

*Educators Oppose Choice but Send Their Own Children to Private Schools*  
by Daniel McGroarty

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Milwaukee, site of the nation's first publicly-funded private school voucher program (and the only such program until Cleveland's kicks off in the 1996-97 school year), has once again thrust itself into the voucher vanguard. Beginning this fall, its path-breaking parent choice program expands to include low-income children wishing to attend Milwaukee's religious schools.

To date, 102 religious schools have notified the state of their intent to participate — welcoming voucher students in a phased process that will open eligibility to 7,250 Milwaukee children immediately and 15,700 for 1996/97. Participating families may earn no more than the eligibility level for reduced-price lunches.

To no one's surprise, Wisconsin's public education establishment brought out the brass knuckles. The 55,000-member Wisconsin Education Association threatened to mount an effort to unionize private school teachers, a telling if tacit threat to introduce into private schools the flesh-eating virus that has rendered reform all but impossible in public schools. But the unions sensed the tide of public opinion turning against them. An internal memo headlined "Legislative Alert," which requested members to phone state legislators to protest vouchers, comes with the following admonition: "Do not state that you are a teacher. This will not help your cause. Have husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, and voting-age children call also."

Teachers' union leaders also hinted broadly at a boycott aimed at Milwaukee business leaders who supported expanding private school choice. But evidence suggests a very different sort of boycott is already in effect — one staged by Milwaukee Public School (MPS) teachers who prefer a private education for their own children.

An April 1995 survey by the University of Wisconsin Madison's Applied Population Laboratory documents the extent to which MPS teachers send their own children anywhere but MPS schools. The survey found that 31.4% of all MPS teachers — who are required by condition of employment to live within city limits — enroll their own children in private schools. That's nearly three times the national average.

The tendency grows more pronounced for public school teachers who reside in Milwaukee's Central City neighborhoods, home to some of the public system's worst schools. In the two Central City census areas, the percentage of public school teachers enrolling their children in private schools swells to 42.1% and 44.5% — a resounding "no confidence" vote in urban public education by the people who know it best.

With so many of the rank-and-file shielding their own children from the public school experience, it can be difficult to find a leadership that hasn't also felt the pull of private schooling. In this year's race for Milwaukee School Board, Robert Kurth, the candidate of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA), scored a perfect 10 on the teachers' union questionnaire. Kurth pronounced privatizing a "scam and a sham" and declared that "No public

tax dollars should be used for private school choice programs." What MTEA did not ask was where Kurth's own children were enrolled: not the MPS, but private religious schools. Kurth himself sees no contradiction in his form of chequebook choice: "If other parents want to send their kids to private school, let them pay."

As for the teachers' union itself, records for the past decade show a steady exodus of board members and officers from the city to the suburbs. The MTEA's spokesman has a short answer to queries about where union leaders send their children to school: "That is information we do not track."

*(Excerpted with permission from National Review, Sept. 15, 1995)*