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ACLU of Wisconsin
Statement in Opposition to
A Mayoral Takeover of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

Milwaukee, WI: On October 1, 2009 the ACLU of Wisconsin's executive director Christopher Ahmuty released the following statement:

Changing the governance of Milwaukee Public Schools will not remedy Wisconsin's failure to provide an adequate education to far too many of Milwaukee's children. Mayoral takeover will not narrow the racial achievement gap, which should deeply trouble all Wisconsinites. Schemes such as mayoral control and school vouchers that focus on control rather than education in the classroom are bound to fail our children.

Rather than spending time and effort to push through a controversial takeover program that will not provide resources for programs that work, the governor, mayor and state legislators need to ensure that all Milwaukee children have the opportunity to obtain a meaningful, adequate education.

Those genuinely concerned about student performance need to evaluate what programs and services - such as smaller class sizes - help students succeed. They must look at researched-based findings on what programs and services best educate students with disabilities, English language learners, and low income students. In light of the racial achievement gaps in our community, they must look at whether specific programs are needed to support children of color. Then they must determine what these programs cost, and how those programs will be fairly and adequately funded. That is the kind of adequate education that all Milwaukee students deserve - but are too often denied.

Moreover, efforts to improve the education of Milwaukee children must address the needs of all students who attend taxpayer-supported schools, not just those who attend schools operated by MPS. Approximately 1/5 of Milwaukee students attend private voucher schools at taxpayers' expense - and most of those schools perform no better than MPS, and in some cases fall short of MPS performance. Yet neither the takeover proposal

nor any other plan that has been offered seek to improve education for those 20,000 Milwaukee children.

Nor does the takeover plan deal with the negative impacts of voucher turnover on MPS schools. As a recent audit shows, each year far more students leave voucher schools for MPS than transfer from MPS to voucher schools. Some voucher schools close during or after the school year, for reasons ranging from poor physical conditions to financial mismanagement. Voucher schools can and do expel students who present behavioral and other challenges. And research has also shown that voucher schools educate a far smaller percentage of students with disabilities and English language learners than MPS – requiring MPS to divert a far greater percentage of its resources to educate these children.

The poor outcomes of voucher schools are a clear indication that quick fixes will not meet the educational needs of Milwaukee children. Vouchers were sold as a free market, competitive model that would succeed without regulation, oversight or public disclosure – but overall, the system has failed and should be phased out, starting with those voucher schools that are underperforming MPS.

Nor should there be a headlong rush for other quick fixes. Neighborhood schools, for example, were sold – and funded - as a way to provide a better education to Milwaukee children, and they too have failed. There is no evidence that yet another quick fix – a mayoral takeover of the public schools – will have any more success in meeting students' needs.

The ACLU of Wisconsin believes the primary constitutional responsibility for the education of Milwaukee's children rests with the State of Wisconsin. The state needs to put adequate resources into the public school system to provide the educational services and supports those children need – including adequate supports for children living in poverty, children with disabilities, English language learners, and other special needs children. It needs to ensure that the per-pupil funding for Milwaukee Public Schools students is at least comparable to that of suburban districts. Those are the reforms that will help Milwaukee students succeed.