Spelling
Prose and Poetry
Handwriting
Nature
History
Civics
Music
satisfactory.
U—Unsatisfactory.
Remarks by Teacher:
School Days
Days Absent
Tardy

A FATHER'S TIMELESS WORDS FROM A TURBULENT TIME

A veteran journalist looks back, through the thoughts of the then-superintendent, on the Milwaukee Public Schools of the late '60s and early '70s

BY MIKE GOUSHA

My dad and I are sitting in a sun-filled apartment in California's Silicon Valley, 2,200 miles from Milwaukee, surrounded by files, folders, photographs, speeches, transcripts, newspaper clippings, and notes. On this late December morning, we are talking, as we often do, about his days as superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools.

My dad, Dr. Richard P. Gousha, is now 95 years old. He has lived in northern California for 15 years, close to family. He moved there from Indianapolis, after his wife—my mother—died. For the better part of his time in California, he has been writing about his life, mostly about his experiences as an educator. Aided by the meticulous records he has kept and a memory far sharper than his son's, he has produced volumes of text detailing his life's work. From his first teaching job in a small town in Ohio to his final job at Indiana University, where he was first the dean and then a tenured professor, it's all there. But one job seems to stand above the rest: his stint as superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). A half century later, Milwaukee remains very much on my dad's mind.

He arrived in Milwaukee in the long, hot summer of 1967, two years after a federal lawsuit was filed against the Milwaukee Board of School Directors, alleging that city schools had been intentionally segregated because of actions by the board. The district disputed that claim, saying that racial imbalance in the schools was a result of residential housing patterns. Milwaukee, like many American cities, was experiencing racial turmoil and unrest. My dad's first month on the job coincided with rioting in Milwaukee that left four people dead and resulted in more than 1,700 arrests. The 200 nights of tense, fair-housing marches had just begun. My dad was still in his first year on the job when the civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, was assassinated. I was a sixth-grader at 81st Street elementary school at the time.

My father spent seven years in Milwaukee. At the time he left for Indiana University in the summer of 1974, he was the second-longest-tenured big-city school superintendent in the United States. The trial in the desegregation lawsuit filed against MPS had occurred in federal court, but the case was still a year and half from a decision.

Dr. Richard P. Gousha during his tenure as MPS superintendent

Illustrations by David Vogin, with images courtesy of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

My father delivered nearly 200 addresses during that seven-year period. Some were brief welcoming remarks. Others were lengthy and detailed policy speeches to local and national groups or parts of the state and federal government. How do I know this? My dad has a copy of every single one of them.

In recent months, I've spent hours reading those speeches. They provide a fascinating, first-person account of what was happening in the Milwaukee public schools during the tumultuous period of the late '60s and early '70s. Before I wrote this story, I asked my dad if he would mind sharing his thoughts and words from that time with the readers of this magazine. He agreed, and expressed the hope that others, especially other educators, might be interested in his experiences from a half century ago.

So what do these words from decades ago tell us? The answer is a contradiction: Milwaukee's public schools have changed dramatically, but in some ways the issues confronting MPS haven't changed at all.

One of the biggest changes between now and then has been the steady decline in the number of students who attend Milwaukee public schools. The district was once nearly twice as large as it is today. The sheer size of MPS was a point of emphasis for my dad in speeches he gave early in his tenure. Here's what he told the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators on November 2, 1967:

> "Each week I absorb more facts and figures about the school system of which I am superintendent. Facts like these: The Milwaukee public schools are currently educating one out of every seven public school pupils in the state of Wisconsin. Milwaukee has the eleventh-largest school system in the United States. Currently, it is educating 128,408 students . . . . Next September . . . this figure will increase by another 3,500."

In 1967, there were 5,000 professionals—teachers, principals, vice-principals, and assistant principals—to serve those 128,408 students, who attended class in 155 school buildings. Forty percent of graduating seniors went on to colleges and universities. The district had a 93 percent attendance rate. Like most large cities, student test scores lagged the national average. And among the 16 largest school districts in the United States, spending per pupil in Milwaukee ranked next to last.

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Still, Milwaukee, unlike many of its peer Midwestern cities, was growing in 1967. So, too, was the MPS student population. Parochial and private school enrollment was declining. By 1970, the student population in MPS would peak at just over 132,000, before beginning its steady descent. To keep pace, the district was hiring new teachers by the hundreds—some 600 for the 1969–1970 school year alone. By 1970, the number of professional staff had risen to 5,700, of whom 700 were African American. Seventy-five percent of MPS students were white. Twenty-five percent were nonwhite.

The importance of the state's largest city and school district was something that my dad wanted others to understand, especially those who didn't live in Milwaukee. On November 21, 1967, he spoke to the Brookfield–Elm Grove Rotary Club. This was among the things he said:

> "Wisconsin is in grave danger if the citizens of this state ever come to the conclusion that Wisconsin can get along without Milwaukee or that Milwaukee can get along without Wisconsin. We need a healthy Wisconsin and a healthy Milwaukee if both are to survive. If either one becomes ill, the other one will suffer also."

The "Milwaukee is not an island" theme became a familiar refrain early in my father's tenure. The following is from a speech, on December 6, 1967, to the City Club of Metropolitan Milwaukee:

> "I began this noon by saying that any large-city school superintendent who looks at his school system in isolation is not facing reality. I do not intend to be that kind of school superintendent. I want to spread the message far and wide—and make it loud and clear—that a healthy Milwaukee public school system is essential not only to the city of Milwaukee, but also to the greater Milwaukee area and to the entire state of Wisconsin."

But winning the messaging battle would prove difficult. My dad's first year on the job was particularly turbulent. During the 1967–1968 school year, there were boycotts, student walkouts, fights, threats of a teachers' strike, and protests over what was being taught. News reports painted the district in an unflattering light, something my dad acknowledged in a speech on June 4, 1968, at Rotary Youth Recognition Day in Milwaukee:

> "Allow me to make it perfectly clear that I am in no way advocating that we should deny

the right of protest to persons and groups who feel they are aggrieved. To do so would deny our citizens one of their basic rights guaranteed by the Constitution. I think we would all agree that our world is not perfect and there are many people who have just grievances. It is a mistake, however, to give all the attention to the 2 percent and overlook the contributions of the other 98 percent."

"Our school year will end one week from today," he noted. "While I do not wish to be boastful at this time with five school days remaining in a school year filled with uncertainties, Milwaukee's school attendance record for the 1967–1968 school year will stand with the best—in fact, it is the best—of all the major school systems of the country."

Two days later, my dad spoke to the Hartford Avenue School Parent–Teacher Association: "In Milwaukee, as in all major cities of the country, we have had a most unusual school year. There was no textbook on the market that could have been used as a guide by administrators to cope with some of the problems that arose in the 1967–1968 school year now ending."

By 1971, my dad's speeches reflected a growing frustration over the toll that negative news coverage was taking on the city and its schools. Here are two excerpts from a speech on January 20, 1971, to the Women's Court and Civic Conference of Milwaukee County:

> "Too many of our metropolitan residents, I'm afraid, . . . are looking down their noses at the urban center only as an escape from taxes, from race problems, from pockets of poverty, from the tired, the aged, and the poor. In doing so, they paint a broad brush across the whole city and declare it unsuitable for their lifestyle and unworthy of their moral support. Milwaukee doesn't merit that kind of reputation. . . ."

> "This phenomenon has been a product of the post-World War II era, which saw a growing population, by necessity, expand beyond the central city, aided and abetted by the automobile and the construction of traffic corridors known as freeways. Sociologists and historians, I am sure, will have much to say in the future as they record this significant change in America's lifestyle. An unfortunate by-product of this development, however, has been the polarization that has taken place as a result."

In that same speech and in others, my dad defended Milwaukee. "I, for one," he wrote, "do not believe our long-established cities are ready to check in at the mortuary. They're going to be around for a long, long time and play a key role in the society in which we live and in which our children and grandchildren will live."

He also offered a staunch defense of MPS's performance: "In my humble opinion and based on comparison with other urban school systems, Milwaukee's public schools have more going for them than any other major school system in the country."

The challenges facing Milwaukee's public schools were of their time, but also, in some ways, *timeless*. In reading the speeches, I was struck by how issues facing MPS in the late 1960s and early 1970s still confront the district today. In this address to the Council of Chief State School Officers on November 14, 1967, my dad talked of the district's dire financial situation:

> "Our urban school system and our municipal government are both beseeching the state of Wisconsin for necessary financial assistance. We are desperate. Even though the schools have the backing of our State Department of Public Instruction, we are not making satisfactory progress in our quest for more funds. It is no secret that we are threatened with a teacher walkout in the near future; we have large numbers of disadvantaged, disruptive, and handicapped children who are not receiving required services and programs; we must continue our long-term construction program. So, I ask you, where do we turn? If the state does not invest a greater amount of its monies in our local school district, who will?"

In an address on June 19, 1969, to the American Institute of Architects, my father warned of a citizen revolt against the high cost of taxation.

> "It is news to none of us that in Milwaukee, particularly, the property tax has reached the breaking point. The citizens of this city support their schools financially to the same degree that any other school district does. However, in addition to the school tax, there is what I call the municipal overburden, and this, coupled with the school tax, makes the burden almost unbearable."

"So, I ask you, where do we turn? If the state does not invest a greater amount of its monies in our local school district, who will?"

In that same 1969 speech, my dad also talked about an emerging problem that vexes MPS even today: student turnover and mobility. A recent series by *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* education reporter Erin Richards examined how high levels of student mobility stall academic achievement. These were my father's words, 50 years ago:

> "Many of our Milwaukee schools have a 20 percent mobility factor. The situation becomes alarming when the mobility factor reaches 50 percent or more. What does that 50 percent mean? Simply this: For every class of 30 pupils that begins the school year in September, 15 of those 30 pupils will have left the school before the following June and have been replaced by 15 new pupils. In the most recent year for which statistics are available, 26 of our Milwaukee schools were over the 50 percent mark. Several schools reached the 75 percent mark—a 75 percent turnover of students in one year.
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> "What happens to the educational progress in a classroom with such comings and goings? What happens to the educational progress of a child who attends three or four schools in the course of one year? What about the child who stays in that room all year and doesn't move, but instead witnesses a constant parade of classmates and a continual adjustment of the class program to meet the needs of the changing student population?"

As I reviewed the hundreds of pages of speeches and addresses from the seven-year period, I found only a few mentions of the subject that would generate debate for years to come: desegregation, or whether Milwaukee's schools could be successfully integrated. Filed before my father arrived in Milwaukee, the desegregation lawsuit had still not been decided by the time he left.

My dad's most exhaustive comments on the integration issue came in one of his final speeches, delivered March 29, 1974. It was an address in Milwaukee to the Citizens' Governmental Research Bureau (now the Wisconsin Policy Forum).

In that speech, my father said that "until the integration issue can be successfully resolved, urban schools will continue to suffer." And he raised issues that no doubt were controversial then *and* still are today. Could "cynicism" about the possibilities of integration—on the part of both whites and blacks—be overcome? Would a new generation of black leaders, who wanted their own good neighborhood schools, see integration efforts as a means to diminish their hard-earned power base? Would communities continue to find ways to

frustrate integration efforts, despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling?

Here are some of his words:

> "I opened this discussion on school integration by indicating that this issue is an unresolved cancer eating at the quality of urban schooling. It would appear that the major initial step in resolving this issue will have to be taken by the courts. Once the legal direction has been established, then is the appropriate time for debate on ways in which the integration can occur.
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> "Of course, the resolution of issues does not always follow a logical course. I guess it was inevitable that there should be debate in this city and other cities with regard to resolving racial imbalance before a legal direction had been clearly established. As you know, there has been debate before the Milwaukee Board of School Directors involving a number of plans with racial-balance elements. The racial-balance question deserves free and open debate. However, I cannot help but feel that, unfortunately, this free and open debate contributes to increased white flight. Of course, I have no direct cause-and-effect relationship data to give you; however, I would conjecture that the very discussion of the integration issue increases white flight. Our data would substantiate that we are losing white students, while the black population is stabilizing in number.
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> "We as a city and a society ought to be mature enough to discuss controversial issues without its resulting in fear and flight. In that spirit, I would like to speak in a planning sense regarding the potential ways in which we might provide racial balance in our schools. . . .
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> "[T]o be effective, it would seem that integration could not be accomplished on a piecemeal basis. . . . For a few moments, then, let me talk about the metropolitan alternative. Demographic predictions on the state of future urban America are rather transparent, given no changes in our current approaches. High and middle socioeconomic whites will continue to flee the cities. Cities will become increasingly the residence of the socioeconomic poor. If this pattern of apartheid is not to occur, there must be some identification of structures to change these predictions. . . .
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> . . . .
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> "The separation of the city from its suburban units is an historical contrivance that has no logic in response to our current needs. I do not feel I have to go into great detail to demonstrate the inextricable interdependency of city and suburban life. There really is no 'inner city'; there are merely differentiated economic areas within a metropolis. . . .
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> . . . .
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> "Some education planners have argued that future urban schooling in this country would hold promise if built upon a metropolitan concept. Within this metropolitan area there would remain substructures in response to the power relationships within the metropolis. In turn, these enclaves would have representation on a larger metropolitan board that could treat the overall problems of the area. . . . The integration plans for a metropolitan area should respect the power relationship in these substructural areas in a way that allows communities to share school experiences from a position of integrity.
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> "In other words, communities do not have to be shattered in a random, linear programming approach to distributing children for integration purposes. Instead, established communities can share learning experiences in ways that accomplish the integration goal but at the same time retain the sense of community that integration critics so aggressively support."

Now, nearly 45 years later, I ask my dad if he could give me an example of what he was discussing then. He says he meant that schools from different parts of the city and metro area could be paired for shared learning experiences. For example, an orchestra from one high school might perform with the choir of another with a different racial makeup. Newly created advisory councils, featuring schools from the inner and outer city, would work together on long-range planning.

By the end of his tenure in Milwaukee, my dad had come to believe that issues such as racial integration and school financing could not be

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solved without a metropolitan school district that oversaw both the city and its suburbs. The effort to integrate Milwaukee's public schools would unfold much differently, as detailed in Alan Borsuk's article in this magazine (beginning on page 40).

During our conversation in California, my dad looks back to a moment from his tenure in Milwaukee that lingers, these many years later. It's a story he's told me before. In his final months on the job, he testified before Judge John W. Reynolds at the desegregation trial.

"I believe in societal integration," my dad recalls telling the judge. "It is a must in a shrinking world, and it is morally right."

The question was how to achieve it. "I had not recommended abandoning the neighborhood school policy," his recollection continued. "I thought it would only be a short-term, piecemeal measure, not necessarily best for long-range goals [including integration], since a flight to the suburbs would result."

But it's what happened during a break in his testimony that my dad still thinks about today. Reynolds asked him a question.

"He put his hand up to his mouth and leaned down and said, 'Doc, what are we going to do with this situation?'"

My dad—who was soon to leave Milwaukee—says today he regrets not having given Reynolds an answer.

"You look back," my dad said. "He was asking for my input."

As he tells this story, there is a sadness in my father's eyes. He says he believes that the subsequent city busing program ultimately ended up hurting neighborhoods across the city. Black and white. Years later, Milwaukee schools were still segregated. Re-segregated.

Ironically, my dad came to Milwaukee from Delaware, where he served as state schools superintendent, and where he desegregated the state's separate and unequal schools. His work in Delaware was not without controversy. One of our family's not-so-fond memories of my dad's tenure was the time someone tried to ignite a tinderbox left on our doorstep. But in many respects, my dad says integrating schools in Milwaukee—a city that at the time had strong ethnic enclaves and only a recent infusion of black residents—was more challenging than it was in a state with a long history of slavery and segregated schools. Because of the tensions that existed in the city at the time, my dad believes change in Milwaukee had to be more incremental, "digestible," as he calls it.

On March 30, 1974, my dad submitted his letter of resignation to the Milwaukee school board. He was ready to take on a new challenge: dean of the School of Education at Indiana University.

"It has been a privilege to serve as Milwaukee superintendent of schools during a unique and challenging time in its history," my dad wrote. "What historians will undoubtedly someday describe as cataclysmic events occurring since 1967 have had a profound impact upon our youth and our schools. However my stewardship during these times is ultimately judged, I will remain grateful for the personal and professional opportunity."

The letter speaks optimistically of the district's future, and the many files and folders from my dad's seven years in Milwaukee recount a number of successes. After 15 years of decline, math and reading scores rose during his final year as superintendent. When my dad arrived in Milwaukee, there was one African-American school administrator in the district. By the time he left, the district employed nearly 100. A $60 million bonding referendum was approved, leading to construction of three new high school buildings. There was a new emphasis on community involvement in decision making.

But, as my father conceded then and today, some unfinished business remained.

Among the many documents my dad has kept is a newspaper story from June 2, 1974. It's what might be called an exit interview. In that interview, my father talked of successes and frustrations. He told *Milwaukee Journal* education reporter David Bednarek:

> "This is a school system that has been wrestling with its problems, a school system that has evolved change without revolution. . . .
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> "In Milwaukee, we have unique aspirations and we have something going. In light of the need, though, we didn't do half as much as we should have."

On July 1, 1974, my dad began his new job as dean of the Indiana University School of Education. His days in Milwaukee were over, but nearly a half century later, memories of what happened during that turbulent period are never too far away. ■