



**TO** Milwaukee Public Schools

**FROM** Dave Metz and Lucia Del Puppo  
FM3 Research

**RE:** Voter Support for a Milwaukee Public Schools Referendum

**DATE** December 17, 2019

Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) recently completed a survey of 753 Milwaukee voters likely to cast a ballot in the April 2020 election.<sup>1</sup> The survey found that voters have positive views of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), local public school teachers, and neighborhood schools. At the same time, voters offer mixed evaluations of the system’s overall performance, and more than seven in ten say that MPS needs additional funding. Clear majorities offer support for a proposed referendum measure, with the most durable support likely for a referendum in the range of \$80 million to \$107 million per year, with a four-year phase-in structure and tax impact between \$150 and \$199 per \$100,000 of assessed valuation.

Key specific findings of the survey include the following:

- **Voters have a favorable view of the MPS, public school teachers and local schools.** As shown in **Figure 1** below, voters have positive perceptions of a wide range of entities associated with Milwaukee Public Schools, but particularly with local public school teachers.

**Figure 1: Favorability Ratings**

	Total Favorable	Total Unfavorable
Local public school teachers	71%	16%
Your neighborhood school	57%	18%
Milwaukee Public Schools	55%	37%

<sup>1</sup> **Methodology:** From December 8-15, 2019, FM3 completed 753 interviews (online, on landlines, and on wireless phones) with voters in the City of Milwaukee likely to cast ballots in April 2020. The margin of sampling error for the study is +/-3.6% at the 95% confidence level; margins of error for population subgroups within the sample will be higher. Due to rounding, not all totals will sum to 100%.

- **At the same time, voters offer mixed evaluations of the MPS’s overall job performance.** When asked to evaluate the performance of Milwaukee Public Schools overall, 39% rate their performance as “excellent” or “good,” while 32% rate it “only fair” and 25% “poor” (as shown in **Figure 2**). Generally speaking, the “only fair” rating is equivalent to a neutral rating in voters’ minds – but there remain more strongly negative sentiments than strongly positive ones.

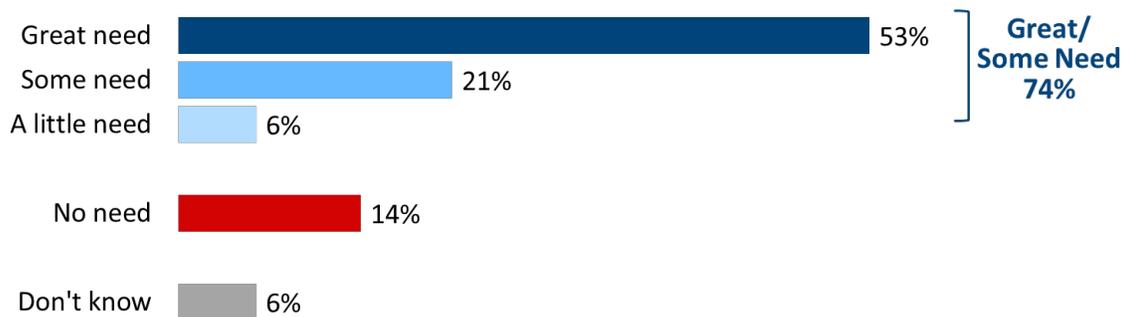
**Figure 2: Evaluations of MPS Job Performance**

Job Rating	% of Voters
Excellent	5%
Good	34%
Only fair	32%
Poor	25%
Don't know	4%

- **Three-quarters see at least “some need” for funding for Milwaukee Public Schools.** Perceptions of MPS’s performance are likely tied to voters’ perceptions of the district’s financial need. Seventy-four percent say there is at least “some” need for additional funding for MPS, including a majority that sees a “great” need, as shown below in **Figure 3**.

**Figure 3: Perceived Need for Additional POS Funding**

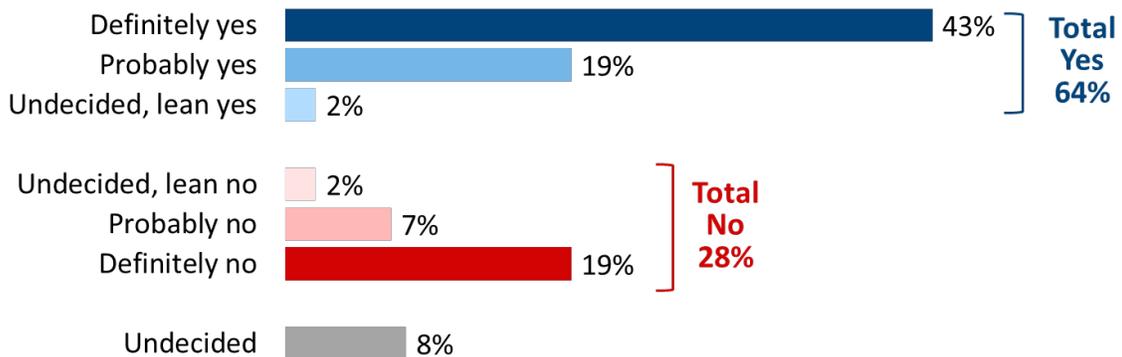
*Generally speaking, would you say that Milwaukee Public Schools has a great need for more money, some need, a little need, or no real need for additional funding?*



- **Approximately three in five voters initially say they will vote “yes” on a \$208 million referendum.** Survey respondents were offered a model ballot question for a \$208 million referendum measure as shown below, and were asked how they thought they would vote. As shown in **Figure 4**, more than three in five indicated that they would vote “yes” on such a measure – including more than two in five who said they would “definitely” vote “yes.” The survey tested two versions of the ballot language via a split sample, one more concise and one more detailed about how funds raised by a referendum would be used. Though the total “yes” vote for the two versions was about the same, the “definite yes” vote was nearly ten points higher for the more detailed language.

*“Shall the Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee County, Wisconsin be authorized to exceed the revenue limit specified in Wisconsin Statutes by \$125 million for the 2020-21 school year; by an additional \$50 million for the 2021-2022 school year; by an additional \$22 million for the 2022-2023 school year; and by an additional \$11 million (for a total of \$208 million) for the 2023-2024 school year and thereafter, for the recurring purposes of sustaining and expanding educational programming (**Half Sample Only**: including offering more career and technical education programs, attracting and retaining certified educators, and expanding art, music, physical education, and language programs?)”*

**Figure 4: Initial Support for the Referendum**



- **However, additional information and pro and con messages drop support for a \$208 million referendum to a bare plurality.** As shown in **Figure 5**, additional information about a \$208 million referendum yields steadily reduced support. Informing voters of the tax impact of the referendum (\$399 per year per \$100,000 of assessed valuation) drops support to 55%, and an exchange of pro and con messages further reduces it to 50%. These results suggest a \$208 million referendum would have a difficult time winning voter approval.

**Figure 5: Progression of Support for a \$208 Million Referendum**

Position	Initial Support	After Tax Rate Information	After Pro and Con Messaging
<b>Total Yes</b>	64%	55%	50%
<b>Total No</b>	28%	39%	45%
<b>Undecided</b>	8%	6%	5%

- Support for a referendum becomes broader and more committed at lower tax rates.** When asked if they would support a referendum at lower tax rates, while also generating a lower amount of revenue for schools each year, voters’ overall support grows (as shown in **Figure 6**). Particularly noteworthy is that at \$107 million, support hits the 60% threshold, including 40% who say they would “definitely” vote “yes” – metrics we typically look for in order to be confident of a measure’s success. Given the tendency for support for diminish after exposure to pro and con arguments, an amount between \$80 million and \$107 million (with a tax impact of \$150 to \$199 per \$100 thousand of assessed valuation) is likely the upper bound at which a measure could pass.

**Figure 6: Support for Smaller Referenda**

Annual MPS Funds Raised	Tax Rate per \$100,000 of Assessed Valuation	% Total Yes (% Definitely Yes)	% Total No
\$156 million	\$297	57% (36%)	39%
\$107 million	\$199	60% (40%)	35%
\$53 million	\$97	64% (45%)	31%

- Voters prioritize investments in recruiting and retaining teachers, improving school safety and security, fixing leaky roofs, and expanding special education services.** When asked to rate a series of potential spending areas as either “extremely,” “very,” “somewhat” or “not important” (as detailed in **Figure 7**), voters identify retaining quality teachers, improving school safety and security, replacing leaky roofs, expanding special education services, and better preparing students for college and careers as top priorities. At the same time, every potential investment tested was rated “very important” by a majority of those polled.

**Figure 7: Ranking the Importance of Referendum Spending Priorities**

Spending Areas	%Extremely Important	% Extremely/ Very Important
Recruiting and retaining high-quality, certified teachers	51%	87%
Improving school safety and security	45%	74%
Replacing leaky roofs	43%	80%
Expanding special education services for children who need them	41%	75%
Better preparing students for college and careers	40%	76%
Increasing the availability of student mental health counseling	39%	73%
Providing high-quality early childhood education	38%	71%
Improving student-teacher ratios	38%	72%
Reducing class sizes	37%	68%
Upgrading science, technology, and computer labs	37%	71%
Closing the achievement gap between high-income and low-income students	36%	69%

Spending Areas	%Extremely Important	% Extremely/Very Important
Expanding the availability of career and technical education	36%	79%
Hiring additional counselors, social workers, psychologists and nurses to address students' needs	35%	69%
Expanding art and music education classes	34%	65%
Improving access for students and teachers with disabilities	33%	72%
Repairing and upgrading school facilities	33%	66%
Improving energy efficiency to save money and reduce environmental impacts	29%	60%
Repairing aging restrooms	28%	63%
Expanding physical education classes	28%	57%
Offering full-day four-year-old kindergarten	27%	51%
Replacing outdated heating and electrical systems	27%	67%
Expanding the availability of advanced educational programming, like Advanced Placement classes	27%	66%
Upgrading fire safety systems	26%	65%
Adding more staff at school libraries to help students	26%	52%
Increasing the availability of language programs	23%	52%

**Taken together, the data show strong support for a referendum to provide additional revenue for Milwaukee Public Schools.** Voters have a generally favorable view of MPS, and more than seven in ten see a need for additional funding for the district. Voters offer broad support for a potential referendum, with that support most likely to endure at a total tax impact of no more than \$150 to \$199 per \$100,000 of assessed valuation, with a four year phase-in structure. Voters label a wide range of potential investments of referendum dollars as high priorities, led by “recruiting and retaining high-quality, certified teachers.”