



Use a Charter School Board to Reorganize Detroit Public Schools

By Greg Harris

Summary

Gov. Rick Snyder has proposed creating a new entity to oversee public schooling in Detroit. The new entity should not manage schools currently run by the district. Instead, it should authorize independent organizations to run them and hold those organizations accountable to financial and performance standards. This approach could lead to lower administrative costs and better academic outcomes.

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The Michigan Legislature will soon begin debating in full the future of Detroit schools. The governor and the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren have introduced new strategies to address the vicious cycle of poor academics and spiraling debt. Unfortunately, both plans carry significant tabs and cling to the notion that a unified school district central office needs to govern all schools.

In Detroit, large governing entities have little to show in terms of results, with histories of pay to play and excessive compensation for top executives. A conservative governor and a conservative-majority Legislature should actually consider taking a more conservative approach to educational change, one based in choice and that creates a lean and efficient governing structure for schools in Detroit.

A choice-driven system could still embrace the primary features of Gov. Snyder's plan, including his proposal to use local property taxes to pay off Detroit Public Schools' \$515 million debt. Debt payment would become the sole function of DPS, which would then dissolve as an entity once the debt is paid within 10 years.

The governor seeks to create a new entity called the Detroit Community School District, for which he'd allocate additional state revenue equivalent to \$50 per Michigan student, or about \$70 million per year. While the creation of a new presiding entity is needed, its role and structure should in no way resemble the central office of old. As recently reported by The Detroit News, DPS spends nearly \$2,000 per student on administration, among the highest in the entire state. And it has about the same number of central office employees as it did when there were 100,000 more students over a decade ago.

Legislators might consider modeling a new educating district in Detroit after Washington D.C.'s Public Charter School Board. That governing body does not run schools directly, but rather authorizes independent operators to run the schools. There are more than 60 such operators in D.C. managing 115 schools. The D.C. board manages performance contracts with each operator, closes schools that do not meet performance standards and tries to scale schools that succeed. It does not manage where students must attend school — parents are free to choose to enroll their children in any school.

The D.C. Charter School Board is also a good model for a lean central office — it is funded from a 1 percent fee it charges to the charters under

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Lower administrative costs and higher academic performance can come through the charter-school model of public education.

its umbrella. This would amount to only about \$70 per pupil or about 4 percent of what DPS currently spends on administration.

That approach works in D.C. because the board is not taking on the expense of directly managing the schools, which operate under a contract, retaining their autonomy and controlling most of their operations, including budgeting and personnel decisions. Legislators are understandably reluctant to have all Michigan districts pay the tab for Detroit. Importantly, the effective elimination of an unwieldy central office could help to make the new educational district self-funded.

While the D.C. Charter School Board provides a model for governing schools of the future in Detroit, one important caveat must be made. The D.C. board authorizes all the charter schools in the city. It's the only game in town. But in Michigan, there are already public charter school authorizers that manage schools in Detroit, and these schools should continue to operate independently of the new district.

Research suggests that these charter schools produce far better outcomes than their district counterparts. A 2015 analysis by Stanford University found that students enrolled in Detroit charter schools receive the equivalent of an extra 70 days of learning each (180-day) academic year versus DPS kids. Better outcomes for charter school kids are seen in other cities, too, including Washington, D.C.; Cleveland and New Orleans.

Creating a D.C.-like charter board to authorize and manage schools in Detroit would not be as radical of a change as it might first sound. After all, DPS already authorizes 13 charter schools and runs its own Office of Charter Schools. This proposal could be as simple as expanding that office and giving it authority to manage contracts with all the city's schools.

While entrenched guardians of the educational status quo would protest a new choice-driven system of schools, Detroit parents would likely embrace it. A recent survey found 80 percent of Detroiters want a system where parents are in control of choosing schools for their kids. Indeed, most parents in Detroit have already voted with their feet by enrolling their children in charter schools.

Good leadership makes an opportunity out of a crisis. Fiscally conservative leadership finds ways to make the best use of existing resources. Empowering leadership puts parents in charge of their children's education. Let's combine these three qualities to transform Detroit's education landscape for the better.

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