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## Can Mayors Solve School Problems?

by Matthew J. Brouillette and Joseph L. Bast

### Summary

Granting Mayor Archer control of Detroit's failing government schools is not likely to solve the district's financial and academic problems. A more promising—and more popular—reform is school choice.

*Main text word count: 727*

In 1994, frustrated by five years of failed reforms, the Illinois Legislature granted to Chicago Mayor Richard Daley sweeping authority over the Chicago Public Schools. Accountability—the new reformers hoped—would come from the publicity generated by the success or failure of the city's top official. In his recent State of the State address, Governor John Engler called for similar legislation in Michigan, with his primary target being Detroit.

Should the Michigan Legislature grant power to mayors to seize control of poorly performing schools? Let's take a look at what actually happened in Chicago.

Much to Mayor Daley's credit, he appointed a crack management team that weeded out tens of millions of dollars of waste and corruption. The Mayor had an excellent reputation for assembling teams of good managers and his appointment of budget director Paul Vallas to lead the Chicago education reforms was no exception.

Vallas decided that the nation's third-largest school district ought to concentrate on education issues, and education issues only. He and his assistants eliminated a \$1.3 million budget deficit in part by contracting with private companies for transportation, janitorial, and food services. In three years, the Chicago Public Schools saved \$20 million simply by privatizing busing. The savings enabled more money to be directed into after-school and summer school programs for struggling students.

### Comparing Chicago and Detroit Schools

	Chicago	Detroit
Student Enrollment	407,241	170,855
Children from Extremely Impoverished Neighborhoods	21%	47%
Special Education Students	4.1%	10.4%
Freshmen Who Did Not Graduate (Class of '94)	52%	68%

Sources: U. S. Department of Education, U. S. Census Bureau, National Center for Education Statistics

So on the finance side, the mayoral takeover in Chicago was quite helpful. The *educational* progress, however, has been modest. Test scores finally bottomed out and have improved for three

years running, but only by the most humble amounts, leaving them well below their levels of just six years ago.

Most of the improvements in test scores that have taken place can be attributed to making kids practice test-taking skills (when to skip

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difficult questions and when to guess, for example) and teaching to the tests. This means the reformers will soon squeeze out all the marginal improvements that the takeover can deliver and will then have to come up with another scheme to make further progress or try something genuinely innovative.

Could Mayor Dennis Archer duplicate even Chicago's limited success if he were to take over the struggling Detroit Public Schools? That depends critically on the resolve of the board and the CEO he appoints to implement and sustain changes that the Detroit Public Schools have consistently rejected for years. The board must be willing to persevere against an entrenched bureaucracy that keeps poor financial records and resists attempts by the public to find out what's going on. And the board must reach out to Detroit parents, act on their concerns, and seek their support and involvement.

Mayor Archer must be much more open to privatization within the schools than he has been within his own city administration. Other than to keep the unions happy, there's no reason to deprive classrooms of resources just so more money than necessary is spent on busing, janitorial, and food services.

The chances of at least minor success will increase greatly if the takeover board is empowered to relax teacher tenure and certification rules. Good teachers must be rewarded and placed where they can do the greatest good; bad teachers must be moved out.

Ultimately, a mayoral takeover of schools is a short-term Band-Aid. Something more fundamental is required when only one-third of the students entering the ninth grade are able to graduate, and of those who do, fewer than one-half can read at the eighth-grade level or solve sixth-grade level math problems. The really substantive and lasting changes that are needed will occur only when families are empowered with the ability to leave a failing school and choose another.

The fact that a reform-minded governor now proposes exchanging one set of politicians for another as a "bold" maneuver suggests we've reached the outer limits of what can be done to improve the schools within Michigan's constitution. Detroit parents instinctively know this, as reflected in a recent *Detroit Free Press* poll that showed 77 percent of them support amending the constitution to allow for tax credits for tuition at nonpublic schools. Parents seem to be saying they would rather pick their children's school than pick the politicians who run the schools.

Until we allow for genuine school choice through such mechanisms as tuition tax credits, well-intentioned but desperate measures like takeovers may help, but they will still come up short.

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