



It Shouldn't Take a Hurricane to Revitalize Detroit Public Schools

By Michael Van Beek

Summary

A plan to turn 41 buildings in Detroit into charter public schools doesn't go far enough. Detroit Public Schools should look to post-Katrina New Orleans for an example of how to boost student achievement through wide spread school reform.

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U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan once called Detroit Public Schools “New Orleans...without Hurricane Katrina.” This comparison became more apt following a recent announcement that 41 of Detroit's failing schools could be turned into charter public schools, a move modeled after the post-Katrina reforms in New Orleans. While this is probably a net improvement from the status quo, it's unlikely that Motown will benefit as much the Big Easy has from a similar plan.

The shortcoming of the proposed DPS plan is that it just doesn't go far enough. The sentiment echoed by DPS school board President Anthony Adams seems to have prevailed: “Our first goal is to preserve the integrity of DPS as a system.” This is the same system that produced the worst test scores in the history of the nation's most reliable and consistent standardized test.

The latest DPS plan attempts to save between \$75 million and \$99 million by authorizing charter management companies to run 41 schools. This would supposedly reduce the district's overhead costs. While that's a worthy goal, the end goal — improving student learning — got lost, as it so often does, in the apparent compromise between the DPS school board, Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb and the district's teachers union.

Evidence from New Orleans suggests that academic improvement can be had through increasing the number of charter schools in a struggling urban district. After New Orleans created dozens of new charter schools following Hurricane Katrina, state test scores have steadily improved. In 2004, two-thirds of New Orleans schools were failing according to state standards; now about 40 percent are. Likewise, the percentage of students attending low-performing schools decreased from 67 percent to 34 percent between 2004 and 2010.

The New Orleans model rests on the theory that a competitive school marketplace will better serve the needs of parents and students. The idea is that parents empowered with choice will make better (although not perfect) decisions about where to send their children to school than elected officials, and that schools competing for parents' patronage will have no choice but to improve or close.

But substantial differences between DPS' new plan and the reforms enacted in New Orleans will undoubtedly hinder the prospect of replicating

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New Orleans' academic success. First, under Michigan law, when a school district authorizes a charter school (as opposed to a public university or community college doing so), teachers hired by the charter school must operate under the authorizing district's teachers union contract.

The current teachers union contract in Detroit is a 150-page beast that dictates everything from the use of "rubber rooms," to work hours, academic calendars, teacher transfers and "last in, first out" staffing procedures. So unlike New Orleans, where there is no similar mandate, the new charter schools in Detroit will not have the chance to innovate — they'll be forced to operate in largely the same way the current failing schools operate. They'll have virtually no say over which teachers they hire, what they pay them or the number of hours they may teach.

Secondly, Detroit's plan does not create a dynamic school market. While any parent will theoretically be able to enroll their children in any new charter school, parents residing in the vicinity of the new charters will be given first priority. New Orleans, on the other hand, grants all parents an equal opportunity to gain access to any of the city's charter schools. That city also has a limited voucher program that introduces some private school competition into the school marketplace.

Although Detroit's plan to "charterize" a large portion of the district appears to fall short in several ways, there is still a chance for success. For instance, it is unclear how pending legislation in Michigan concerning emergency financial managers would impact this plan. It might enable Robert Bobb to have the final authority on the details of this plan, but it's uncertain whether this would free the new charters from the constraints of the union contract.

Regardless of this possibility, as long as one of the main goals of the district is to preserve its dysfunctional self, any sort of compromised plan like this one will fall short of its goals. It's time to simply realize that DPS' elected officials and government employee unions have failed. The system is unalterably ruined. New Orleans came to this realization after Hurricane Katrina and has refashioned itself for the better. Detroit should do the same.

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