



Highland Park: The Road to Recovery

By Audrey Spalding

Summary

The Highland Park school district was in dire straits, both academically and financially, when in 2012 they were converted to a charter district – the first of its kind in Michigan. The Mackinac Center has been tracking the school's progress, and though there is still more work ahead, the changes made so far are promising.

Main text word count: 604

At the Highland Park school district, students were used to seeing rodents in their classrooms, used to filthy bathrooms without toilet paper and used to being placed in “combined classrooms” when their teachers didn’t show up. Incredibly, the district was spending nearly \$20,000 per student. Patricia Ashford, a long-time teacher at Highland Park schools, said that teachers would sometimes go on expensive trips to places like Orlando, Fla. with \$100-per-day eating allowances.

“All they came for was their money last year,” Mia, an 8th-grade student, told me. “All they had to do was come sit at their desk.” She said that there were some teachers who just showed up for a paycheck.

The academic track record of Highland Park students at the time was atrocious. During the 2010-11 school year, none of the district’s 81 eighth-grade students scored proficient on the state math test. That same year, just 3 percent of Highland Park high school juniors scored proficient on the state math test — sadly an improvement above the previous two years.

Highland Park is one of the Michigan districts that the state has tried to reform by imposing dramatic change. Some schools have been taken over by the state. Others have been dissolved entirely. Highland Park, a conventional district that lies in the heart of Detroit and includes three different schools, was converted into a public charter school district.

Charter conversion had never occurred in Michigan prior to 2012. When the Highland Park school district became Highland Park Renaissance Academy district, some suggested that the conversion meant “public education [would] die.” The Detroit Free Press characterized the move as a “gamble.”

The Mackinac Center followed the first year of the new Highland Park Renaissance Academy closely, spending hours interviewing teachers who stayed with the district, parents, students and school administrators (A short video featuring those interviews is available at Mackinac.org/HighlandPark). Though there is still much work to be done to improve the schools and students’ education, the changes made so far are promising.

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This short documentary video, available at Mackinac.org/HighlandPark, was the result of more than a year's worth of interviews and visitations to Highland Park schools.

Students have already posted significant academic growth. Highland Park 8th-graders did especially well during the 2012-13 school year on both reading and math tests. Students and parents say that there has been dramatic improvement.

Moreover, the Leona Group, the for-profit management company selected to run the schools, has invested more than \$1 million to clean and repair the schools. The rodents are gone, the toilets are clean and students are no longer subject to combined classrooms. Many of the conventional district's teachers stayed on with the charter district and say that the dramatic change to a public charter district was worth the improvements made to the schools.

The first year of HPRA has not been without struggles. In addition to the facility and academic challenges, the charter district is facing organized protests and a lawsuit. The conventional district left the swimming pool at Highland Park's Henry Ford elementary school filled with trash and broken furniture. When the pool was cleaned and refuse was thrown out, the charter district was criticized for tossing district "resources." Staff members have since moved the trash back into the school. Principle Thomas Goodley says he cannot throw out the broken furniture for fear of triggering additional protests.

As Michigan tries different reform models in an attempt to fix its most struggling schools, policy makers should continue to monitor the progress of HPRA. Charter conversion allows students to stay in their neighborhood schools and minimizes financial risks to taxpayers. The progress shown at Highland Renaissance Academy suggests that charter conversion is a model to watch, and may prove to be a viable option for Michigan's failing schools.

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