



Fixing Detroit Schools – Five Principles

The proper approach should benefit students and protect taxpayers

By Michael J. Reitz and Michael Van Beek

Summary

While Detroit Public Schools is a financial and academic mess, merely doing “something” is inadequate. Five principles, which emphasize a focus on people rather than institutions, should guide any path forward.

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“We’ve got to do something about Detroit Public Schools!”

This sentiment is frequently expressed in education policy discussions in Lansing.

A review of the crisis confirms the need for action: The district teeters on the edge of bankruptcy, with more than \$500 million in operating debt and more than \$1.5 billion combined capital and bond debt. DPS is nearly \$100 million behind in payments to the state pension system. Enrollment has plummeted — the district is one-third the size it was just ten years ago. Since 1992, district enrollment declined from 161,000 children to 46,500. (But to be clear, declining enrollment isn’t necessarily evidence of a crisis.)

The remaining students are poorly served: DPS students lag woefully behind the state proficiency averages for reading, math and science. In fact, based on 2015 national tests, it’s arguably the worst-performing school district in the entire nation, registering the worst scores of the 21 largest urban school systems in the country.

Given these facts, doing “something” is inadequate. Rather, policymakers must do the right thing for children and families in Detroit. Several principles can assist the Legislature as it contemplates action.

The first principle is that any solution for DPS must preserve and even expand the ability of families to select the school that best fits their children’s needs. Intimations that parents can’t make the best choice should be swiftly dismissed. Parental choices are not perfect, but they are better than the alternative — top-down, one-size-fits-all, bureaucratic control that sacrifices educational diversity for efficiency and stability (that is not always so efficient or stable!). Bottom line: Parents are best suited to be the primary decision-makers on whether a student attends a neighborhood public school, a charter public school or a school in a different district.

To that end, a system where a central authority makes enrollment determinations is a step backward. There is merit in a common enrollment system with uniform paperwork and admission processes, though this must be coupled with eliminating the current default of assigning students to their local public school based solely on their address.

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Addressing the problems of Detroit Public Schools requires emphasizing the needs of children, not institutions.

A second (and related) principle is that a politically appointed board, commission or czar should not determine which schools are allowed to serve children in Detroit. The governing educational bureaucracy in Detroit needs to shrink, not expand. Power needs to be turned over to parents, not political appointees.

The third guiding principle is to maintain a sort of institutional agnosticism. This means that serving students better should be the number one priority — not preserving an existing school district. New Orleans provides an example here: The devastation of Hurricane Katrina necessitated tough decisions on how to best serve the student population in the Big Easy. The old system was essentially replaced by Louisiana's Recovery School District, which took control over most of the public schools in New Orleans, reopening them as charter schools. Ten years later, researchers can demonstrate that student performance and graduation rates in New Orleans have improved.

Fourth, policy leaders must safeguard taxpayers from repeated rescue missions of DPS. A one-time bailout may be unavoidable, but state taxpayers are rightfully skeptical of an entity that chronically falls into financial mismanagement. Muskegon Heights and Highland Park may serve as models: These districts were each split into two entities, one to manage ongoing educational functions and one to retire debt obligations.

The final principle is that a new system of schools in Detroit should be answerable to a new method of accountability that holds schools to higher standards. Policymakers should not settle for wiping clean the fiscal mess and allowing substandard academic performance to persist. They should consider, for example, an A-F letter grading system that measures proficiency and student growth, and, unlike anything that the state has tried before, actually holds schools accountable by closing them down when they don't meet reasonable performance benchmarks.

Education in Detroit can recover — there are thousands of educators in both charter and traditional public schools dedicated to this mission right now. Policymakers need to free these schools from the burden of past administrative failures and create the structure to allow schools and children to flourish. These five principles are necessary components to that end.

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