



Teacher Shortage in Detroit Calls For New Policies

Summary

Children are being hurt because the Detroit Public Schools Community District lacks permanent teachers for many classrooms. The district can make itself more attractive to teaching candidates through several policy changes.

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By Ben DeGrow

Last year the Legislature gave Detroit schools extra cash and restored local control. These changes offer a rare opportunity for highly touted new superintendent Nikolai Vitti to help turn around the bleak fortunes facing many of the city's children.

Detroit has the lowest achievement scores in the nation, a distinction the Motor City has owned the last three times urban districts have been compared. Two dozen district schools were on track to be closed for persistently dismal results, but won reprieve by signing a three-year "partnership agreement" with state officials.

The revamped Detroit Public Schools Community District is slated to recapture about 5,000 students whose 14 schools will be returned from the Education Achievement Authority, the soon-to-be-defunct state reform district. It won't be so easy to attract other families who have left. It will be best for students if the district seeks to attract them through better performance rather than political schemes such as creating a Detroit Education Commission. That effort to restrict educational choices nearly succeeded last year.

Vitti has not ruled out the political approach, but he has emphasized the power of persuasion. "We are going to put charter schools out of business," he said during his job interview. "Why and how? We're going to offer a better product. If this is a marketplace, then we're going to compete."

Offering a competitive product will require making changes to the district culture, a daunting task. A district with better morale and internal accountability will use taxpayer resources more effectively. Sending a clear message of high expectations for students also would help improve achievement.

But the district must change some policies to fix its problems, too. And no problem confronted Vitti more quickly than one he heard about on his first day on the job: a teacher shortage. The Detroit Free Press reported that roughly 100 classes "are operating without a permanent classroom teacher." Vitti has said tackling this challenge is a "student-first state and local policy agenda" priority.

In addition to giving the district \$665 million to pay off its debt and have a fresh start, state lawmakers created some policy tools to address this problem.

First, they said the district could fill vacancies with noncertified teachers. Shortly after the law passed, however, local parent activists filed a lawsuit to pre-empt its use. They said that the law stigmatizes the district by saying, in effect, that it doesn't deserve quality teachers. Legislators could remove any stigma by giving all Michigan public schools more flexibility to hire subject-matter experts and other nontraditional candidates to fill classrooms.



Students deserve full-time, permanent teachers.

There are also other ways to increase the number of capable teaching candidates. The state's education department can approve more alternative certification programs. That would expand the teacher pipeline. Vitti himself has already said that today's training programs should give prospective teachers more hands-on experiences through internships and residencies.

Research makes a strong case for lowering the barriers to entering the teaching profession. Studies of other urban school systems have shown that certification is a poor predictor of teacher effectiveness. The first two years of a teacher's experience, not certification status, better predict future classroom performance.

Detroit's collective bargaining agreement should be revised to encourage more candidates with experience. Teacher pay is based on years of service, but even a teacher with, say, 10 years of good service elsewhere will be paid like one with only two years' experience. That potential salary reduction all but guarantees skilled teachers with experience elsewhere will stay away.

High-quality classroom instruction makes real-world impact, especially on disadvantaged students. To its credit, Detroit already has taken a modest stab at rewarding top-notch teachers — following a 2009 state law that most Michigan districts have ignored. About one in 30 teachers received a \$1,000 bonus in 2016 for demonstrating strong professional behavior and raising student test scores.

Last year's reform will push the district to reward excellent performance even more. For all teachers and administrators the district hires after July 1, 2017, job performance will be the primary factor in determining salary, not seniority or credentials. To ensure the district attracts more great teachers and weeds out poor performers, the evaluation system will have to improve. The current system identifies 68 percent of Detroit teachers as "highly effective," a figure that doesn't mesh with the results the district achieves.

Finally, the district could pay more to qualified applicants in hard-to-fill subject areas or to teachers who transfer into the most challenging schools. Both kinds of differential pay are seldom used in K-12 education, but they help alleviate shortages.

Strengthening the district's teaching workforce is an important part of giving Detroit families more quality options. To pursue that goal, Superintendent Vitti has many policy tools at his disposal.

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