



Summary

Democratic Party gubernatorial candidates tell fictional tales about public schools in Michigan

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Campaign Promises Show Misunderstanding of Charter School Landscape

By Ben DeGrow

Some things can only be explained by the return of the “silly season,” a pre-election ritual in which candidates try to distort reality to win votes from their respective political bases.

This year’s Democratic gubernatorial candidates are doing their best to spread the narrative that Michigan’s conventional public schools are hurting for lack of money. Even though the state has increased its funding to schools in each of the last eight years, all three candidates have based their education platforms on the claim that funding has been cut. And all three are wrong.

In June, Gov. Rick Snyder signed into law a budget that gives nearly \$17 billion to the state’s public schools, universities and community colleges. Of that amount, \$14.8 billion will go to K-12 education — \$1.7 billion in federal funds and the rest from dollars collected by Lansing.

The state treasury, over which these would-be governors wish to hold sway, is easily the largest funding source for Michigan’s elementary and secondary schools. The \$13 billion it set aside is a big increase from eight years ago, even after adjusting for inflation. Furthermore, Michigan has about 89,000 fewer students to educate than it did in 2010, meaning that school dollars should go even further.

Yet the three Democrats seeking the keys to the state’s executive office refuse to let basic facts get in the way of a good story. “Our educational system has shown a steady decline in recent years because Lansing politicians have cut funding,” Shri Thanedar says. His rival Abdul El-Sayed similarly laments that Michigan’s “public education system has been ravaged by disinvestment.”

And front-runner Gretchen Whitmer’s campaign plan alleges that “over the past eight years, Republicans in Lansing have sided with Betsy DeVos to push an education agenda that included slashing school funding.”

This political fiction isn’t new. It has a persistent history of reappearing during election years. Today’s Democratic gubernatorial hopefuls carry on a tradition that dates back at least to their party’s 2014 candidate, plus the state’s last Democratic governor. It is also embraced by the party’s current legislative leadership.

While faithfully carrying on that tradition, the Democratic front-runner has added to the colorful campaign story by promising to clamp down on the



Gretchen Whitmer offers recommendations based on misguided premises.

Photo via Wikipedia Commons.

state's charter public schools. Whitmer has taken a more moderate public stance than her rivals on educational choice, as Thanedar has pledged to close down so-called for-profit charter schools.

Whitmer's education plan takes a subtle, but misguided, approach, blending false impressions about charters with recommendations that appear to be serious. Her campaign's website declares: "We cannot continue to let Michigan's charter schools fail our kids. It's time we put much-needed oversight in place to hold charter schools accountable." Never mind that studies show the average Michigan charter provides students with extra months of learning each year and gets a much better bang for the buck.

Each one of Whitmer's proposed solutions to an imagined disparity between district and charter schools misses the boat. For example, her platform calls for "holding all schools to the same performance standards." Yet all public schools — including charters — are rated according to the same metrics, including how well their students achieve and make progress on the same standardized tests. The key difference is that only underperforming charters can and have been closed; their district counterparts have been given reprieve after reprieve.

Whitmer also advocates "requiring all schools to accept all students, regardless of student needs." This law already applies to charters, though not to some district-run schools. Under her plan, magnet public schools with admission standards would have to change how they operate. Her restriction would also apply to affluent districts with residency requirements that keep out poorer kids.

Whitmer's other proposals ignore the fact that charter schools must hire state-certified teachers and operate under the same level of financial and academic oversight as other public schools. Finally, her education plan implies that charter boards need tougher conflict-of-interest laws. Yet the law governing charters is more stringent than a similar one covering districts. A person cannot serve on a charter board when a personal or family financial interest is involved. District board members, by contrast, just have to recuse themselves from relevant votes.

The dual claim that districts need extra funding to succeed while charters need further regulations to ensure fairness is based on deeply flawed premises. Worse, it distracts from more promising approaches. No one has all the solutions to the challenges of successfully preparing Michigan students. But we will have a lot harder time reaching the goal if we start with faulty diagnoses.

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