

Constructing an Evidence-Based Pathway Forward for Detroit Schools

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Civic Capacity

Civic capacity is defined as the ability of a community to support the fundamental and enduring **redesign of its school district for the purpose of eliminating the achievement gap**. Every center of influence and every voter counts, but in most cities there are seven overlapping centers of influence that are critical:

- business leaders
- elected officials (especially the mayor)
- parent activists
- the media
- religious leaders
- foundation leaders
- the local education fund

Most of these centers of influence have a major stake in the success of the school district, but without the leadership of the board of education, it is almost impossible for them to work in concert and sustain a commitment to action over long periods.

The Current Moment in Detroit Schools

Detroit finds itself at a critical juncture

- IN THE CHARTER SECTOR: The public has become increasingly disenchanted by a series of public scandals and lackluster results.
(Detroit Free Press, [State of Detroit Charter Schools](#))
- IN DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS: Even though academics and finances have worsened after six years of emergency management, Governor Snyder has appointed a fourth Emergency Manager.
(Detroit Metro Times, [DPS EM Shifts Funds](#))
- IN THE EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT AUTHORITY: Rather than lift “poorly performing” public schools, the EAA has used kids to develop and promote for-profit software for a private vendor.
(Detroit Metro Times, [The EAA Exposed](#))

Different definitions of Detroit's school problem

As the term of DPS Emergency Manager Jack Martin drew to a close in mid January, deliberations among various groups of stakeholders began to focus on what should be next for Detroit schools.

One of the groups that has most successfully leveraged media attention and its political relationships across the state has been the new Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren:

- developed by the Skillman Foundation and Excellent Schools Detroit
- strong relationship to both Governor Snyder and Mayor Duggan

Although the leadership of this Coalition is in the process of engaging various stakeholders, it has long promoted the idea of a Portfolio Management Model to govern certain administrative functions across all three Detroit public education sectors-- charters, DPS, and the EAA.

(Detroit Free Press, Detroit schools coalition will hit books in a hurry)

The Coalition has highlighted the effects of extensive fragmentation

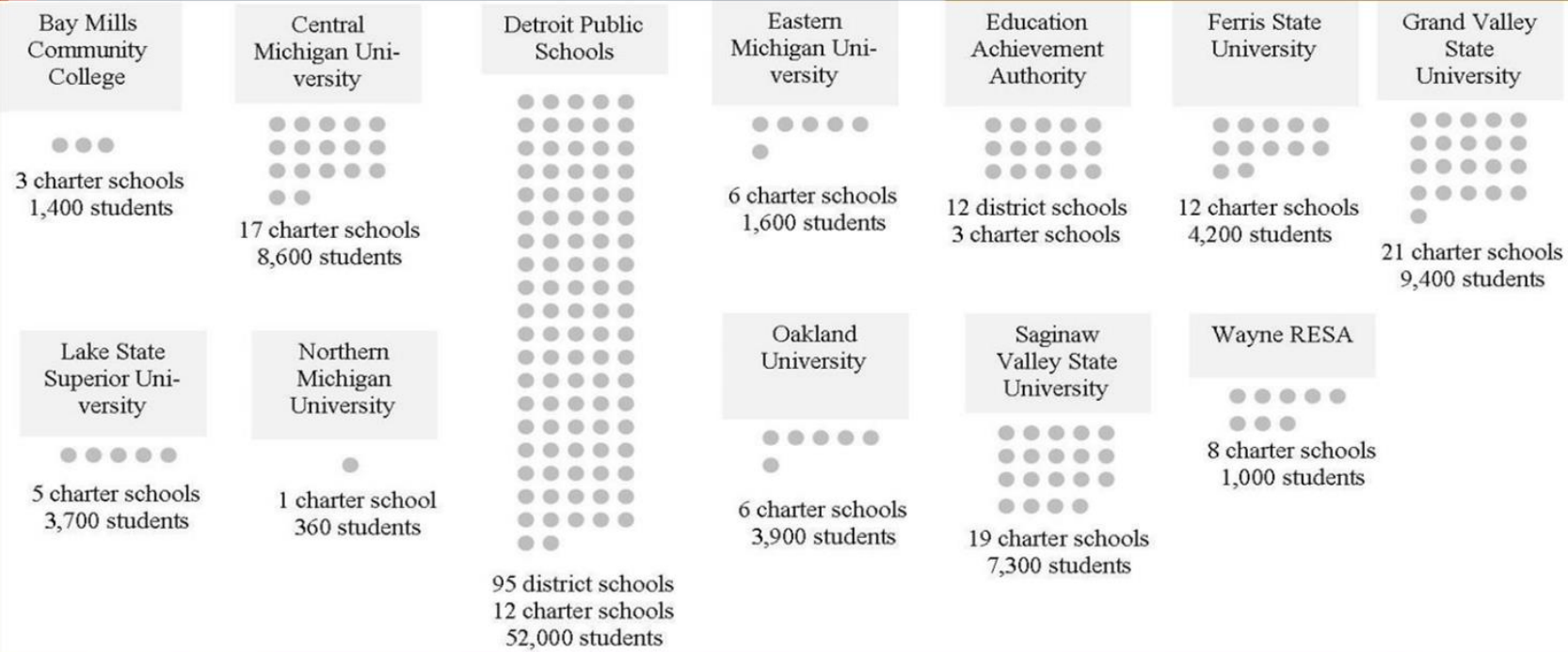


Image courtesy of 482 Forward

The solution to fragmentation

It would be difficult to deny the existence of fragmentation across the public education sector in Detroit.

But if one defines fragmentation as the root of the problem, the solutions appear sensible, but somewhat limited:

The solution to fragmentation is recentralization of various functions formerly centralized within the administration of DPS:

- Single enrollment system
- Coordinated transportation system
- Unitary system of evaluation
- Centralized decisions about school openings and closings

(Detroit Free Press, [Group pushes for new Detroit schools commission](#))

But is fragmentation the root of the problem?

And will eliminating or diminishing the effects of fragmentation lead to a reversal of the deteriorating fortunes of public schools in Detroit?

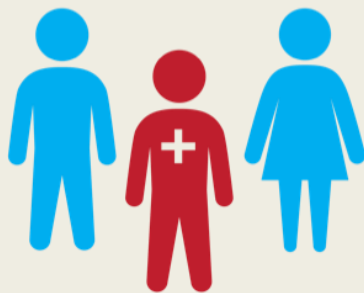
Is the better logistical coordination of the three sectors all that is missing from the ability of public schools in Detroit to finally reach their full potential?

Or are there other significant roots of Detroit's legacy of school decline?

- What has been the impact of poverty on the fortunes of our public schools, and how could its effects be mitigated?
- How have improper diagnoses of Detroit's educational woes contributed to further decline?
- How have improper diagnoses harmed the very institutional capabilities that are needed to right the ship?

REFORMS FAIL WHEN THEY IGNORE THE POVERTY-RELATED CAUSES OF ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

Lack of consistent physical and mental health care is a major driver of the opportunity gaps associated with growing up in poverty. Low-income children miss many more days of school due to preventable illnesses, relative to their wealthier peers—a reality largely dismissed in reform agendas.



1 IN 3 CHILDREN
LIVING IN POVERTY VISIT THE
EMERGENCY ROOM EVERY
YEAR FOR PREVENTABLE
MEDICAL CONDITIONS



85%
DECREASE IN HOSPITALIZATION
COSTS FOR CHILDREN IN
CINCINNATI WITH
SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH CLINICS

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, *Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Children: National Health Interview Survey, 2010*, Table 10; National Assembly on School-Based Health Care, *Cost-Savings of School-Based Health Centers*, 2010.

[\(Broader, Bolder Approach to Education\)](#)

Two narratives for the decline and fragmentation of Detroit Public Schools

We have promoted the decline and fragmentation of Detroit Public Schools for more than 15 years by misunderstanding what was constraining the possibility of better performance by DPS.

We have accepted one narrative as a valid explanation, while ignoring evidence that pointed, convincingly, to a second narrative to better understand the struggles of Detroit Public Schools.

The dominant model, which is at the center of the current reforms being developed by the Coalition, as well as previous reforms proposed by the same group of reformers, understands fragmentation to be the result of an ***unregulated market response to public sector failure.***

(*Detroit Free Press, [Group pushes for new Detroit schools commission](#)*)

Narrative 1: The problem today is the result of an unregulated market response to public sector failure

- According to this narrative, DPS was failing due to inefficiencies built into the public sector-- students were beholden to their neighborhood schools; teachers and admins were guaranteed customers despite performance.
- The arrival of charter schools in Detroit gave parents an exit strategy; parents could choose schools that performed well, and punish those that performed poorly through their departure.
- The massive departure of parents to charter schools produced fragmentation of the district; the proliferation of choice helped shake up a monopolistic and stagnant public sector, but it also presents new challenges, overwhelming public school customers.
- A portfolio management model, according to advocates, recentralizes, coordinates, and regulates the Detroit education marketplace for the benefit of overwhelmed educational “customers.”

Narrative 2: The problem today results from treating the public sector as the source of the problem

However, there is another way of explaining or understanding what has happened educationally, in relation to public schooling, in Detroit over the past 15 to 20 years. Not only does this alternative view better explain all the evidence surrounding educational performance and school decline over the past few decades in Detroit, it also suggests the need for different kinds of solutions.

- It rejects the notion that poor school performance in DPS, and in other U.S. cities, is largely due to the inefficiency of the public sector or the historical unwillingness of teachers and administrators to compete for customers, to stop taking their customers for granted.
- In this narrative, the original crisis in the public educational sector is real, but largely a product of socio-economic crisis emanating from outside the educational sector.

Narrative 2: The problem today results from treating the public sector as the source of the problem

- The public education sector fails not because of its own inefficiencies or monopolistic tendencies, but rather because it is not insulated from the larger socioeconomic crisis of the city. (see Rury and Saatcioglu, 2015)
- Historically poor educational outcomes in urban public schools are mostly attributable to the disruption caused by the decline of our cities over the past several decades.
- This narrative holds that although academic performance was not great in the 90s, we really shouldn't have been surprised, given the structural decline of Detroit's economy along with its fiscal isolation from the wealthier surrounding counties.

DPS in the 1990s: Struggling but not defeated

- Although academic performance remained poor in comparison to wealthier districts, scores were gradually improving relative to the rest of the state.
- Through the mid to late 1990s, enrollment was experiencing stable growth.
- During the same period, the district had a positive legacy general fund balance.
- After the first state takeover of DPS in 1999, charters and suburban districts became more appealing to many DPS parents, largely because state mismanagement threw the District into chaos.
- Put in place under the administration of pro-charter Governor Engler, the district quickly reversed course from the steady progress it had been making despite economic decline through the late 1990s.
- Government helped create an unlevel playing field, artificially boosting the appeal of charters and other options through DPS mismanagement.

DPS decline under state takeover

Within a few years, by 2002, the district was well into a cycle of decline from which it has not recovered:

- A positive general fund balance turned negative, inducing austerity measures that impacted programming.
- Cuts interrupted the academic progress the district had been making relative to the rest of the state.
- With worsening academics, parents began to leave the district for charters and suburban schools.
- The resulting enrollment decline led to a worsening financial position for the district, prompting further cuts.
- Further cuts produced a further decline in academics, which led to more enrollment loss.

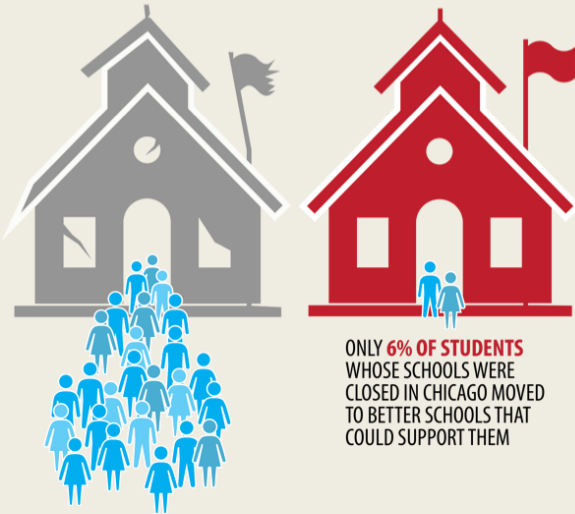
How have solutions, based in a misreading of the Detroit reality, actually worsened things?

Excellent Schools Detroit's endorsement since its inception in 2010 of a single point of accountability, the vanquishing of the elected board's power, and the creation of a Detroit-only recovery district have only further propelled fragmentation of the district and, as a result, the district's further decline, both academically and financially.

What has been the impact of developing policy based on a misreading of the causes of Detroit's public educational woes?

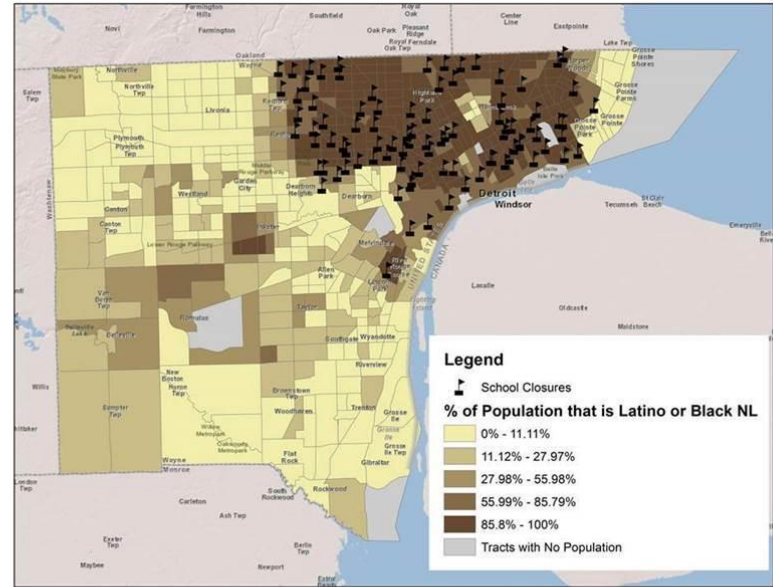
SENDING STUDENTS FROM ONE 'LOW-PERFORMING' SCHOOL TO ANOTHER DID NOT IMPROVE ACHIEVEMENT

Reforms closed "failing" schools in DC, NYC, and Chicago, promising better student outcomes. But students stagnated or lost ground, as new schools were no better, and moves also meant instability and longer (and sometimes more dangerous) commutes.



Source: Marisa de la Torre and Julia Gwynne, *When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools*, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2009.

[\(Broader, Bolder Approach to Education\)](#)



By: Maiyoua Vang using school closure data from Annenberg Institute of School Reform and American Community Survey Tables: 2006 -- 2010 (5-Year Estimates) US Census Bureau Data Accessed from www.socialexplorer.com New York City, NY: Social Explorer 2012.

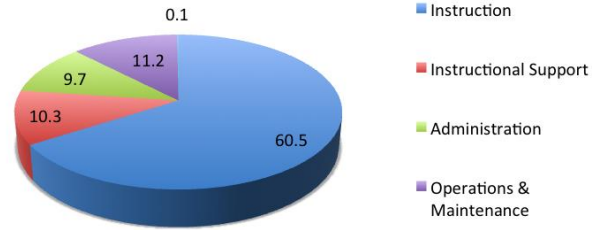
Corporate versus democratic governance, across Michigan and in Detroit

What has been the record of more corporate and more democratic forms of school governance nationally, and in Detroit?

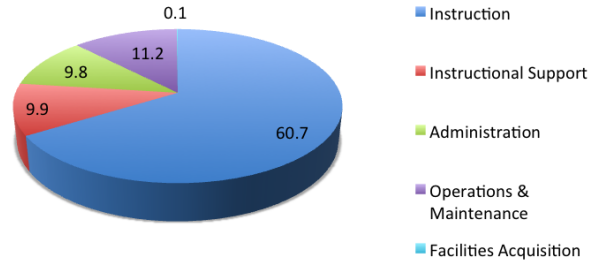
- Across Michigan, David Arsen has looked at internal spending allocations within charter schools, which have boards that are highly susceptible to pressure by both their authorizing entity and their private sector partners.
- He found that, fairly consistently, charter entities tended to allocate a greater proportion of resources to administrative functions, and a lesser proportion to functions directly related to classroom instruction.

Spending allocation within different types of schools (Arsen)

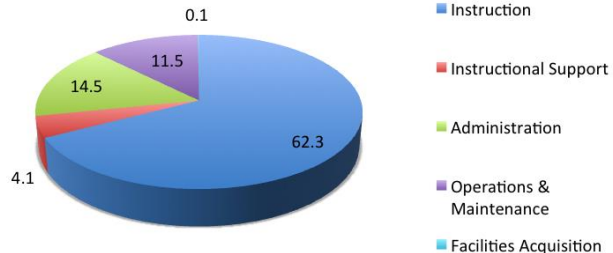
All School Districts



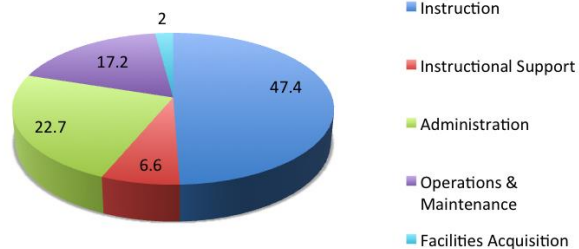
All Non-Hold-Harmless School Districts



Single Building School Districts

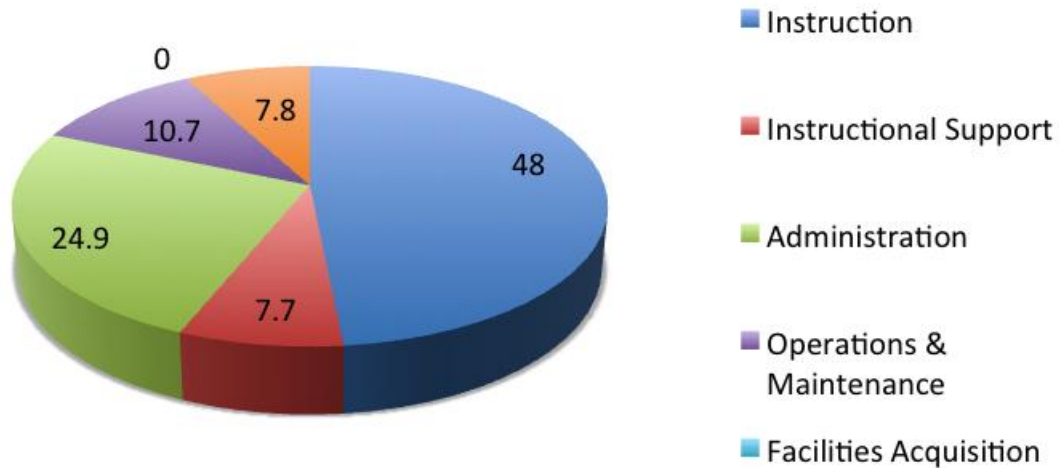


Charter Schools

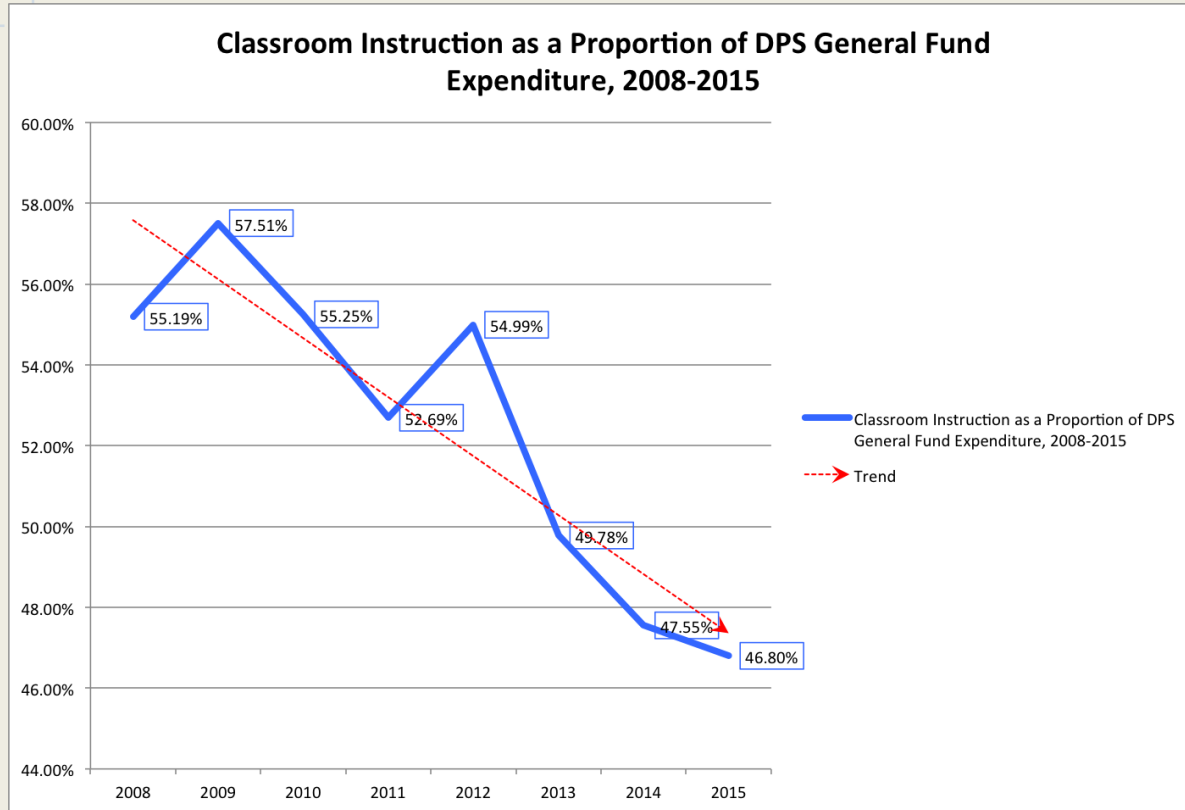


DPS has recently matched the pattern of charter spending that Arsen documented

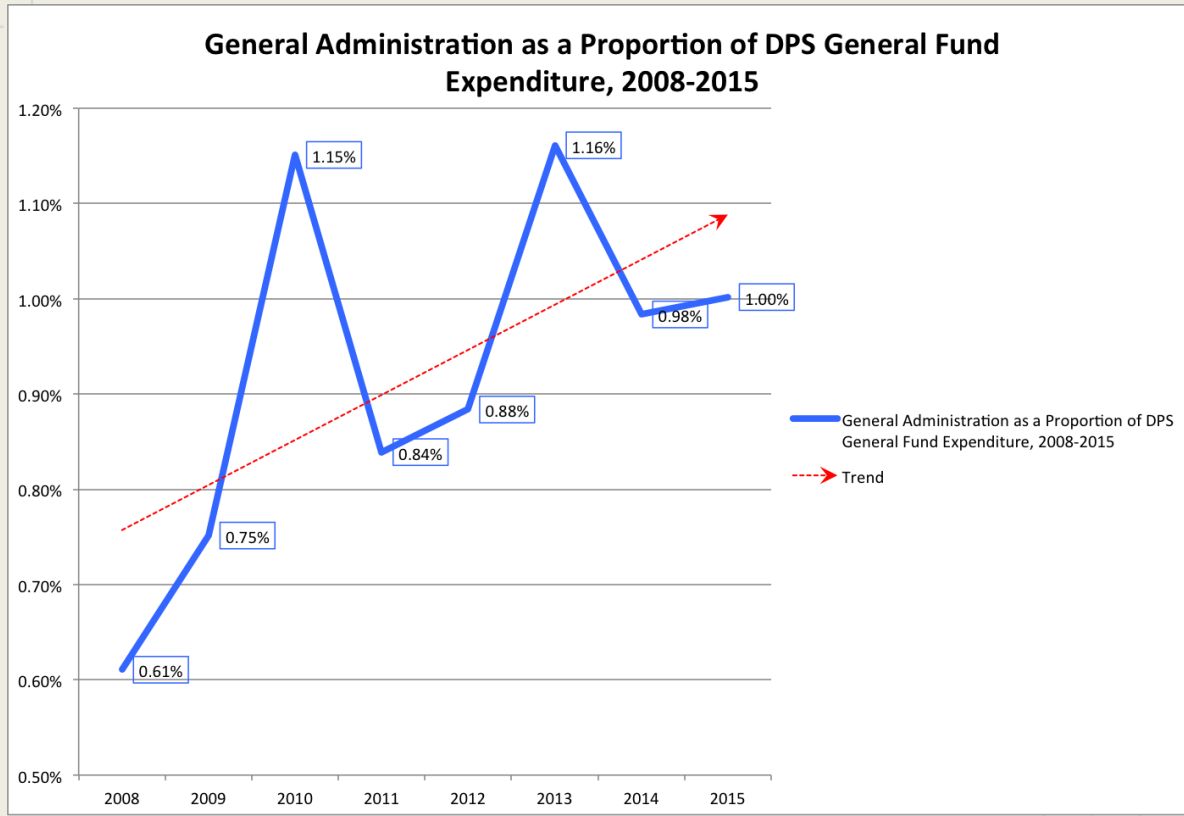
DPS FY 2014



The implementation of reforms based on a misreading of DPS has brought further decline

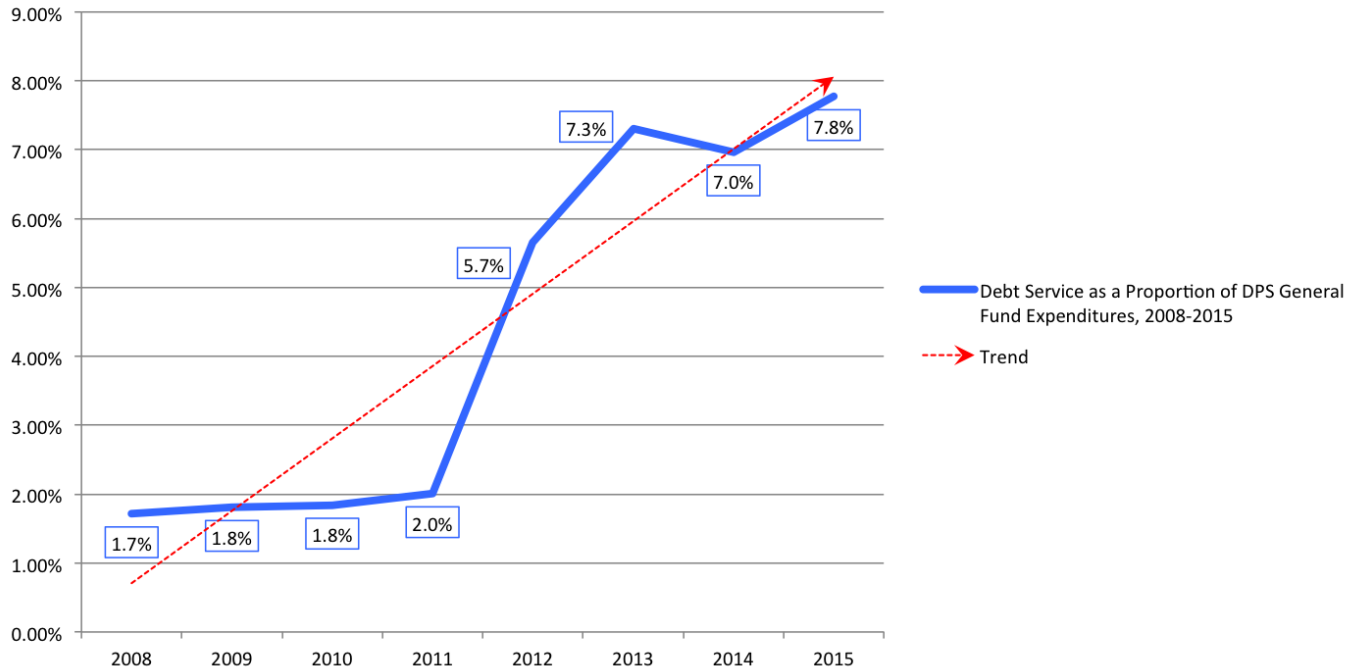


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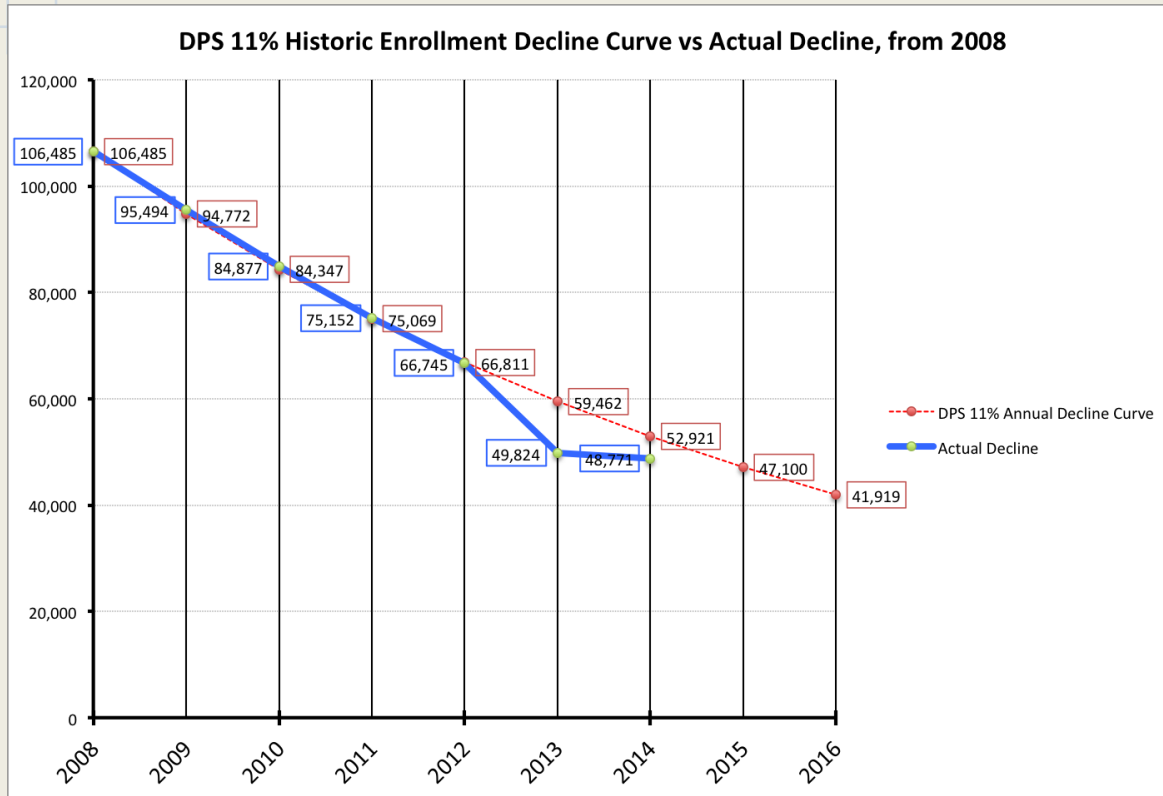


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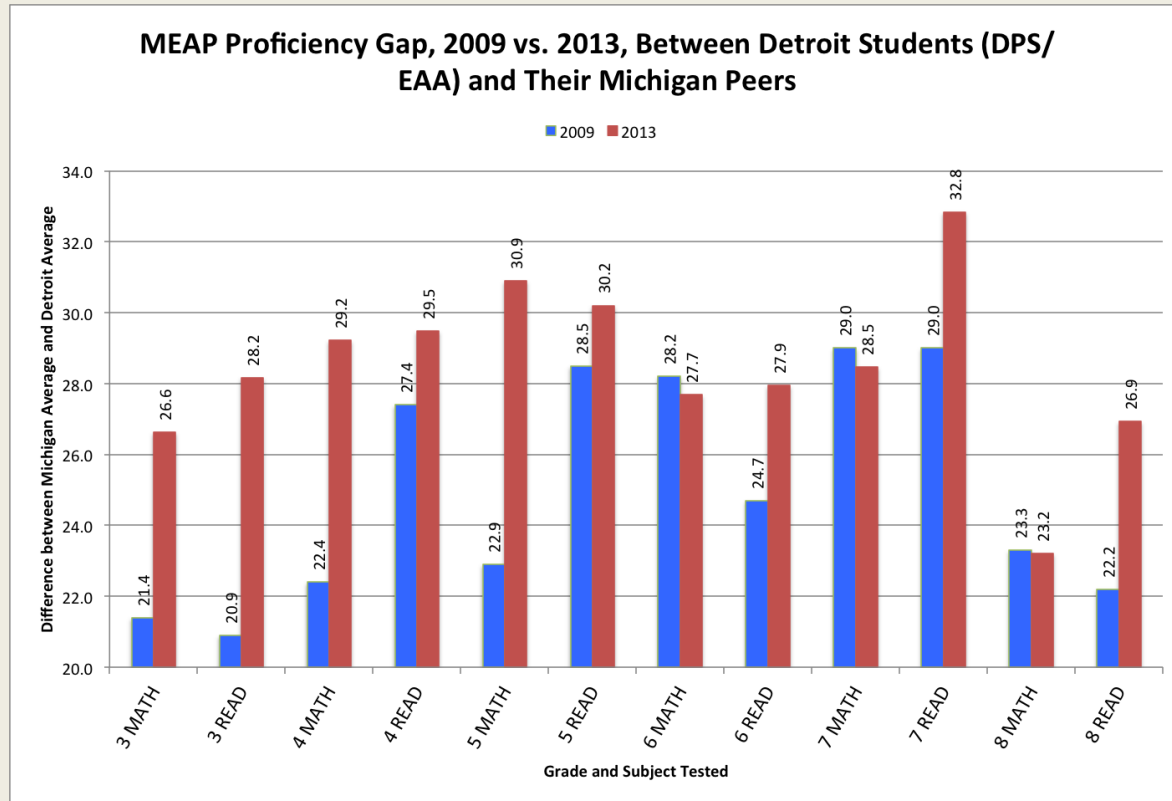
Debt Service as a Proportion of DPS General Fund Expenditures, 2008-2015



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REFORMERS CLAIMED MASSIVE TEST-SCORE GAINS THAT DATA PROVED FALSE

Reformers in DC, NYC, and Chicago reported “success” in large test score gains and shrinking achievement gaps. When the data were recalibrated, broken down by subgroup, and compared with reliable numbers, however, the gains vanished and gaps grew.



NYC MAYOR BLOOMBERG CLAIMED TO HAVE CUT THE RACE-BASED
ACHIEVEMENT GAP **BY 50%** FROM 2003 TO 2011



IN REALITY, THE GAP CLOSED **BY 1%**

Source: Aaron Pallas, “The Emperor’s New Close,” *GothamSchools*, March 7, 2012.

(Broader, Bolder Approach to Education)

Governance and Achievement

“No conclusive evidence that governance changes increase achievement. Student achievement has been the toughest nut to crack. While school leaders tout many improvements in test scores, attendance and graduation rates, in fact, we were unable to establish conclusively that the change in governance had any causal relationship to improved performance, or that, using nationally-normed test data, our cities had greater improvements than anywhere else.”

The key reform factor: Academic Focus

“Boards composed of more members holding an academic focus, are much more likely to govern districts where students beat the odds—that is, these districts showed better academic achievement per dollar than similar districts...The boost associated with academic focus is the highest of any school board characteristic that we tested.”

Hartney, A. F. (2014). [*Does School Board Leadership Matter?*](#)
Thomas B Fordham Foundation. Washington D.C: Fordham Institute.

Recent reform models in Detroit have had little focus on academics.



Roles of a School Board

- **Set the vision and goals for the district**
- Adopt **policies** that give the district direction to set priorities and achieve its goals
- Hire and evaluate the **superintendent**
- Adopt and oversee the annual **budget**
- Manage the **collective bargaining** process for employees of the district

Efficacy of BOEs on Achievement

- Elected boards have been found to be highly effective at setting visions and **aligning education organizations to be accountable to a strategic plan.**
- Elected boards have unique ability to **restore civic capacity** and build social capital, revitalize community and neighborhoods for more attractive Detroit.
- Countless examples of high achieving districts nationally are the result of a strong Superintendent & Elected School Board Team.
 - Long Beach Unified School District, 2006 Broad Prize Winners
 - “*Research shows that **effective teaching is the primary factor contributing to high levels of student achievement.** In LBUSD, strong teaching and learning is promoted by a comprehensive curriculum, supplemented by additional programs, district-mandated instructional approaches, pedagogy, a range of assessment information and a ‘top down, bottom up’ model of instructional leadership.*”

Revitalize attractive community and neighborhoods: Restore civic capacity and build social capital

Educating the Public

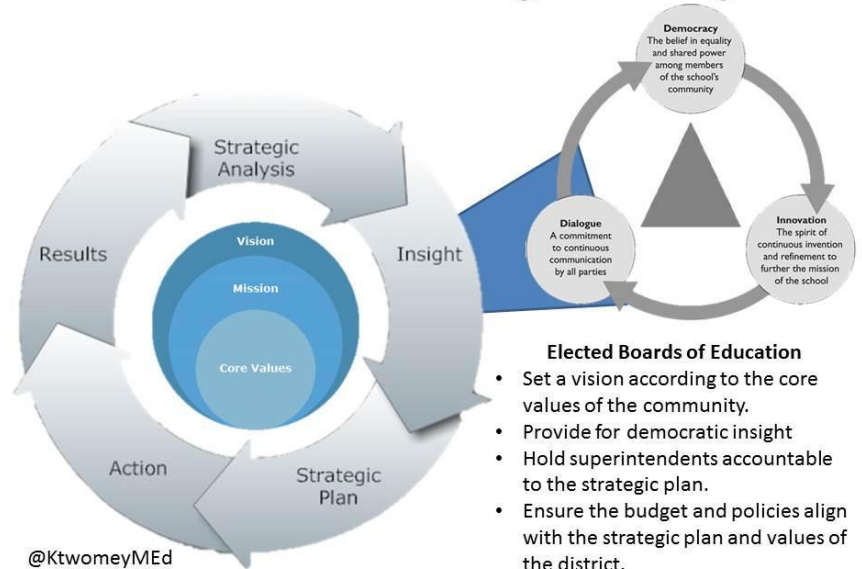
If local citizens are not sufficiently informed to make decisions about what children should learn in school, the answer is to educate the citizens rather than take power from them. The debates surrounding what schools should teach and what standards should prevail, could, if properly framed, serve as a primary means by which communities can be educated about the condition of education. It is through such education that trustworthy communities might be created and defined and through such discussions that the common ground that binds communities could be discovered.

“Restoring Civic Capacity and Building Social Capital,” from *Leading for Learning: How to Transform Schools into Learning Organizations*, by Phillip C. Schlechty, 2009

8 Characteristics Effective Board

1. Commit to a **vision of high expectations for student achievement** and quality instruction and define clear goals toward that vision.
2. Strong **shared beliefs and values** about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels.

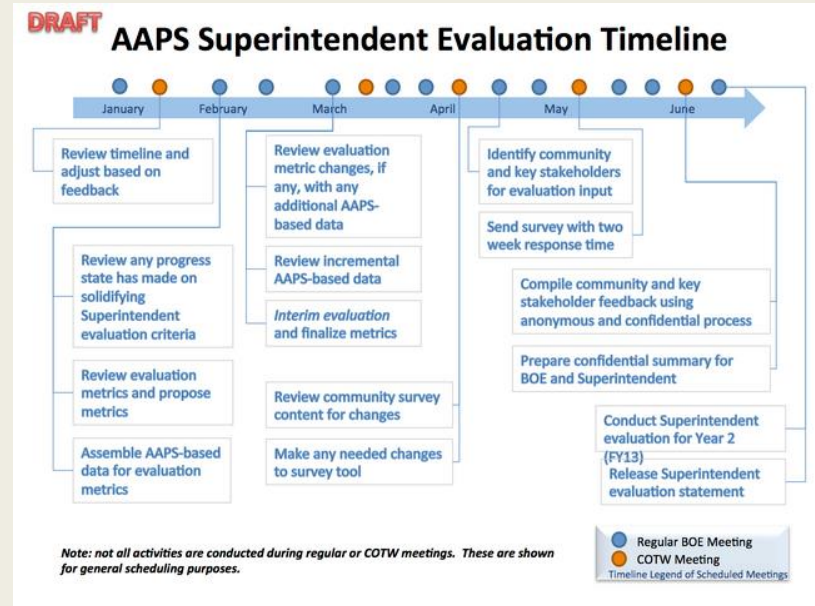
Democratic District Strategic Planning



Vision

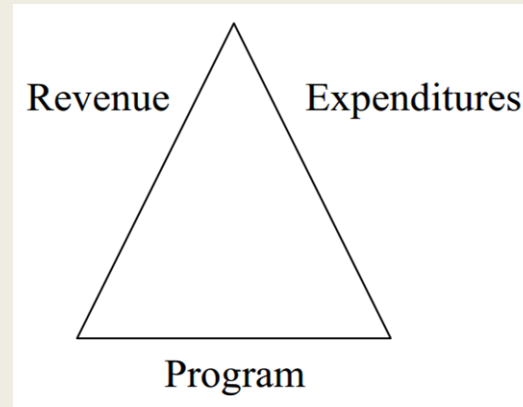
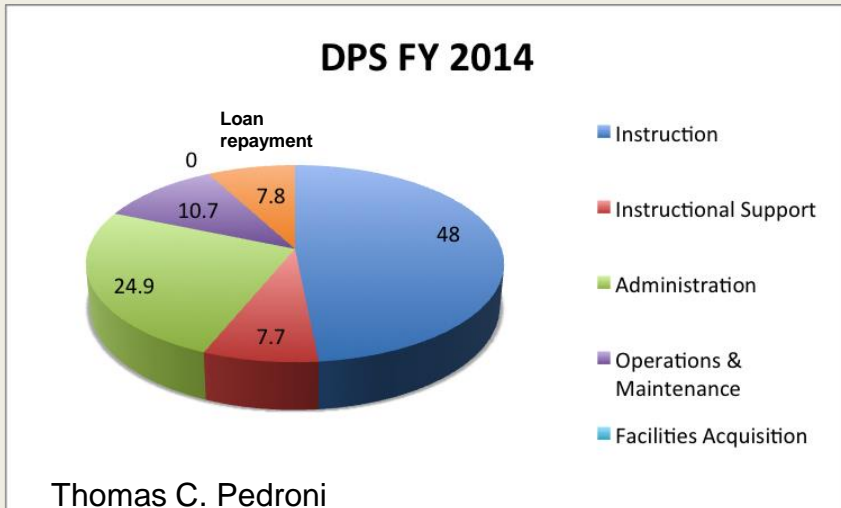
8 Characteristics Effective Board

3. **Accountability driven**, spending less time on operational issues and more time **focused on policies to improve student achievement**.
4. Have a collaborative relationship with staff and the community and establish a strong communications structure to inform and **engage both internal and external stakeholders** in setting and achieving district goals.



8 Characteristics Effective Board

5. Embrace and **monitor data**, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement.
6. **Align and sustain resources**, such as professional development, to meet district goals.



8 Characteristics Effective Board

7. Lead as a united **team with the superintendent**, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust.
8. Take part in **team development and training**, sometimes with their superintendents, to build shared knowledge, values and commitments for their improvement efforts.

Summary of advantages of an elected BOE

An elected Board of Education has a unique ability to build political and social capital. Boards for this reason can be valuable resources in going beyond the classroom walls to rebuild healthy and attractive communities and neighborhoods. Elected boards excel in their function of leading democratically robust strategic planning processes which when focused on high academic goals have been proven highly effective. School boards have the capacity to provide alignment of the policies and budget to the strategic plan and district values, and then hold the superintendent accountable to those goals. Finally, as elected officials Boards are beholden to the Open Meetings Act which guarantees transparency above any other model.

Needs/Recommendations

- **Focus on Academics:** Research based academic plans that go beyond measuring and into treatment; we need good quality instructional delivery.
- **Evidence Based:** Recommendations be vetted by the best experts in an environment of public transparency.
- **Restoration of local citizen control:** Consider the strengths of locally elected school boards in aligning the educational organization to the vision and increasing transparency, accountability, political capacity, and social capital.
 - Create policies that hold the member accountable, not the voter.
 - Open Meetings Act
 - Conflict of Interest Policies
 - Create systems of support for the development of local boards.
 - Development of the leadership team (Superintendent & Board) as a process, not an event
 - Development of policies, processes and internal accountability controls

Questions

