

City leaders, think tankers suggest various causes of Detroit's high illiteracy rate

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A damning [report](#) released this month showing that nearly half of all adults in Detroit, Michigan are functionally illiterate has pundits and officials playing the blame game.

“The National Institute for Literacy estimates that 47% of adults (more than 200,000 individuals) in the City of Detroit are functionally illiterate, referring to the inability of an individual to use reading, speaking, writing, and computational skills in everyday life situations,” a report from the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund reads.

Karen Tyler-Ruiz, the Fund's director, [explained](#) the difficulties this presents to the average illiterate.

“Not able to fill out basic forms, for getting a job — those types of basic everyday [things]. Reading a prescription; what's on the bottle, how many you should take... just your basic everyday tasks,” she said. “I don't really know how they get by, but they do. Are they getting by well? Well, that's another question,” she told WWJ Newsradio 950.

In a town where unions rule, some have pointed to the teachers' union as a possible reason for the city's high illiteracy rate.

Andrew J. Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, told The Daily Caller that the teachers' union monopoly has contributed to much of the educational deterioration in the city.

“Apparently [the school system is] not learning that the cause of the problem is the monopoly because they would have gotten rid of it by now. That is the big message from this report, [it] is not what this particular organization is doing to try to alleviate the problem,” Coulson told TheDC. “What they need to do is get rid of the monopoly.”

According to Coulson's calculations, Detroit spent \$15,945 per pupil for the 2010-2011 school year. By comparison, the average per pupil expenditure during the 2007-2008 school year nationally was [\\$10,259](#).

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), however, is adamant that the problem actually lies with the city's failure to effectively enforce school attendance.

“I don't think that that the teachers' union has a responsibility for making sure that adults can read,” DFT president Keith Johnson told TheDC.

“I think the unfairness of the criticism [against the union] comes from the fact that there is a direct correlation between student attendance and student performance,” Johnson added. “During the 2008-2009 school year, the average Detroit school student — you ready for this — missed 46 days of school. That was on average. There were 10 percent of our students that missed 100 days or more. It may shock you to know that Detroit

public schools do not have an attendance standard.”

According to Detroit’s attendance policy statement in their “[Orientation Kit](#),” students are expected to attend 92 percent of classes, or miss no more than 14 days annually. Johnson believes there have to be harsher [consequences](#) for those who miss significantly more days.

Some say the responsibility for the absentee epidemic falls at the feet of parents who fail to supervise their children. Richard Rivers, a counselor at Cody’s Academy of Critical Thinkers and Medicine and Community Health, said that the best way to fix the literacy problem is to get parents involved.

“I talk to truants all the time, and I call their parents,” he [told](#) the Detroit Free Press. “I do believe that truancy can be prevented when parents are working with me to get the students to school every day and on time.”

As people point fingers, the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund is largely focused on remedial work, aiding those adults who cannot read. While this is good, Coulson believes the goal ought to be fixing the problem at its root in the schools. School choice, he believes, is one policy that may help.

“What policies could they adopt to fix this problem? Virtually everything they have done has failed. What they need to do is give parents choice,” Coulson said, adding his preferred method is tuition tax credits.

Emergency financial manager for the Detroit Public Schools Robert Bobb told TheDC that the city has set goals to help mitigate the city’s illiteracy problem.

“DPS has set rigorous goals under its five year academic plan, and specific initiatives already implemented this year are 120 minutes of daily instruction in reading for every elementary student in every DPS school, and a corresponding double-dosing of English at the high school level,” Bobb said in a statement. “Such sustained focus on this and the other core content areas will lead to meeting our goals including a 98 percent graduation rate and all third grade students reading at grade level by 2014-2015.”

Responding to the argument that chronic absenteeism is a major contributor to the city’s illiteracy rate, Bobb responded, “equating adult literacy with current absenteeism of students does not make any sense.”

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