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De-fund the Detroit Public Schools

By Adam B. Schaeffer

Detroit is crumbling, with public schools leading the way toward total dissolution. After decades of mismanagement and malfeasance, after countless scandals and promised reforms, after losing about half of its student population since 2001, the end seems finally, perhaps mercifully, here. The Detroit public school system is on the edge of bankruptcy.

The restructuring ideas currently on the table, unfortunately, have a mediocre track record, at best. And Detroit is the worst of the worst. Something more proven and effective is needed. The families and children are left languishing in the system need and deserve an immediate ticket out.

Full school choice is the only option.

The Detroit Public School System is a failure in every way. Most important, it fails its students; the non-partisan Brookings Institution ranked it at the bottom of the nation's urban school districts and falling behind fastest. Less than a quarter of its students graduate.

Waste, corruption, and theft are endemic to the Detroit Public School System. A recent audit found 257 "employees" are receiving paychecks despite the fact that they seem not to exist. Separate audits of the District's finances have found \$600,000 missing or misspent, \$158,000 in furniture missing, and over-spending of \$1.9 million. A recent FBI investigation led to the indictment of two employees on charges of stealing around \$400,000 from the district. That's just what they can prove to date.

Detroit is planning on spending almost \$1.3 billion in 2009 on this abject failure. That's \$13,500 for each student. How much more money and how many more young lives is Michigan willing to sacrifice to this diseased system?

The money for success is there, but we need to give it to parents to spend on good schools of their choice, rather than the politicians and bureaucrats that have created this mess.

With that kind of money, private schools will rush to open seats and expand capacity to accommodate them. With that kind of money, new private schools would have plenty to spend on start-up costs and deliver a good, honest education.

Michigan needs a donation tax credit program to fund private school choice for Detroit's children, like the successful programs that Pennsylvania, Florida, Arizona, Georgia, Rhode Island, Iowa, and Indiana already enjoy.

In order to do that, a constitutional ballot initiative needs to be fast-tracked to allow real school choice in the state. And in the meantime, private philanthropies need to step in to provide scholarships so as many children as possible can escape what tragically passes for a government "service."

We all have to ask if we want the illusion of reform or tangible, certain results. Simply put, school choice works. It saves money and children.

Ten gold-standard studies, which use a method similar to medical drug trials, have analyzed the impact that school choice has on the performance of students who are offered a choice.

The results are decisive; nine out of ten studies find statistically significant positive impacts on at least some students. None finds a negative effect.

School choice also helps the kids who remain in public schools. There are 17 studies that analyze the impact of private school choice on public school performance, and again the conclusion is solidly in favor of choice. Sixteen out of those seventeen studies find that choice actually improves public schools. None finds a negative impact.

And on top of all the academic success, in state after state, study after study, we find that school choice dramatically eases the massive burden on tax payers that has been imposed by inefficient public school districts.

A fiscal analysis of the Cato Institute's broad-based education tax credit program demonstrates that it can save states billions of dollars. Illinois, for instance, could save more than \$5.1 billion over the first ten years.

Even small and restricted existing programs save taxpayers millions a year: \$32 million in Milwaukee, \$39 million in Florida, and more than \$30 million in Pennsylvania. In Florida, that means a savings of almost \$1.50 for every dollar invested in education through tax credits.

Detroit and Michigan can afford to bring school choice to every child. They can't afford not to.

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