



Close Dysfunctional Schools

By Audrey Spalding

(Editor's Note: The following commentary has been adapted from a blog post that appeared on MichiganCapitolConfidential.com on May 16, 2013.)

Summary

The state of Michigan needs to close deeply dysfunctional school districts, such as Buena Vista and Pontiac. They should look to school districts such as Highland Park that have reformed themselves through charter schools in order to retain many of their teachers, all while improving students' learning environment and results.

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The Buena Vista and Pontiac school districts are in financial disarray. In recent years, the districts have severely overspent, and student academic performance has been dismal. And yet some are using Buena Vista and Pontiac's mismanagement to make a case for spending more.

But school districts do not simply find themselves one day without any cash on hand. It takes years of financial (not to mention academic) mismanagement to get to the point where the Buena Vista and Pontiac school districts have placed themselves.

While public outcry and political grandstanding has resulted in the Buena Vista school district being reopened for the remainder of the school year, one has to wonder whether students will see much academic benefit.

After all, this is the district where no student scored proficient on eight different MEAP tests. Last year, the district had five MEAP tests where no student scored proficient. There are only 18 different MEAP tests.

Meanwhile, Buena Vista approved a three-year teachers union contract in 2011 that awarded raises and paid for 100 percent of employee health care costs — even though student enrollment had dropped by 13 percent in a matter of months, meaning that state revenue would drop at a similar rate.

Pontiac is not doing much better. Average teacher salaries have soared in recent years as enrollment has tumbled. This appears to be a product of the district using seniority to make layoff decisions, instead of considering teacher cost and quality. A former superintendent was allegedly fired for trying to expose financial mismanagement in Pontiac schools.

Financial problems are generally a symptom of a dysfunction throughout the district. Dysfunction is the only way the Pontiac school district could have spent \$16,400 per student but not provide toilet paper to students. Dysfunction is the only way that Buena Vista officials could have taken state money for a program that doesn't exist and assume that there would be no repercussions.

The Highland Park school district was also dysfunctional: The district spent nearly \$20,000 per student. And somehow, the bathrooms were filthy. Somehow, holes in the ceiling were never repaired. Somehow, students at the high school saw rodents in their classrooms.



The Buena Vista and Pontiac school districts are in disarray as a result of financial mismanagement, not a lack of funds.

This year, under changes imposed by an emergency manager, a charter company runs Highland Park schools. At one school, a third of former Highland Park teachers chose to stay and teach at the new Highland Park Renaissance Academy. Students say that the school has changed for the better —that their teachers actually teach this year. How is it possible for a school to change so dramatically with so many of the same teachers as the year before while spending less money? By changing a culture of mismanagement and waste.

Excuses for mismanagement should be viewed with skepticism: There are hundreds of Michigan districts that are not in a spending crisis. They have survived or thrived while facing the same policy changes others blame for Buena Vista’s and Pontiac’s struggles.

District financial mismanagement means that vast amounts of taxpayer dollars are being wasted. It is especially deplorable that some public school districts with large disadvantaged student populations are spending so much while doing so little for their students.

Sometimes, dramatic change is needed. The worst thing to do for the students in Michigan’s worst schools is to let those schools limp on. The problem is more severe than simply a lack of funds.

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Audrey Spalding is an education policy analyst for the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that the author and the Center are properly cited.

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TED O’NEIL

Media Relations Manager
140 West Main Street
P.O. Box 568
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