



## ANATOMY OF A FAILURE: The Detroit Public School System

---

*Gottfried Brieger*

Let's start with a bit of history. In his excellent study of the history of the Detroit school system, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System*, Jeffrey Mirel points out graphically how, during almost the entire last century, the Detroit public school system has been dysfunctional. This may come as a surprise to those that seek facile solutions to explain this dysfunction. Is it economic decline? Ethnic conflict, inadequate financing? Antiquated curricula? Degraded infrastructure? Unions? Politics?

Let us start with the facts, as gathered from the annual reports of the DPS itself, with the proviso that Mirel included in his study: "One of the biggest frustrations in researching the history of the Detroit schools is that, over the past eighty years, school administrators rarely used the same criteria or categories to report statistical data about the system . . . . In financial reports, administrators rarely indicated what they included in categories of revenue or expenditures. . . . I have simply chosen to report the numbers as I found them, inconsistencies and all." I need to apply the same caveat to this account.

The school-age population in public school is currently approximately 95,000 and has been steadily declining even faster than the population at large, as charter schools have begun to proliferate in response to the dismal state of public education. This decline has led to a significant surplus of school buildings, resulting in the closing of at least 80 schools;

these closings added to Detroit’s inventory of dilapidated and vandalized properties. Nevertheless, the District has added new facilities, using borrowed funds it could ill afford. More about finances later.

Of the approximately 6000 graduates, approximately 60 % graduated in 2009. What sort of education did they receive? As measured by MME/ACT scores, the average was 15.6 for 11<sup>th</sup> graders who took the test. Of those graduates who applied to colleges or other advanced schooling, about 35 % were accepted. This leaves an annual production of 4740 graduates with an uncertain future. Regarding what they might have earned, we can take a reasoned guess based on the MEAP scores for 11<sup>th</sup> graders (Table 1). Notable are the scores in reading, writing, math, and science, basic skills required for a reasonable working future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

---

Table 1: DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOL MEAP SCORES

---

School Yr	Reading	Writing	ELA	Math	Science	Social Studies
2008–2009						
District	34%	19%	26%	16%	22%	55%
State	60%	44%	52%	49%	56%	81%

---

What is the current cost for this educational package? The per-student cost is approximately \$12,000, constituted primarily from State funding, Federal supplements, school taxes, and grants from a number of private sources. Unfortunately the school district has accumulated regular, sizeable deficits, currently running at about \$486 million. If the accumulated debt from past bond issues, i.e. long-term debt, are factored in, the total outstanding indebtedness is around \$1.5 billion.

We must at this point ask a currently fashionable but relevant question: why wasn’t the Detroit school system “too big to fail”? Of course this is not a situation of someone who sold a misrepresented mortgage, but rather of a failed system that has

produced thousands of un- and undereducated adults, who will be a permanent loss of a competent citizenry to the state and nation. The harvest is already in. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey done in the 1990's, about 47 % of adults in Detroit are functionally illiterate. As of 2009, unemployment hovers around 15 %, 28 % live in poverty, defined federally as less than \$ 28,000 for a family of four.

The question of "why?" looms large. Actually most of the possible reasons listed above have already been explored by Mirel. Detroit public schools were bad before there was a significant minority presence. Ethnic conflict, real and stimulated by real estate speculators, did reduce tax support. The curriculum was indeed "dumbed down" by ignorant school administrators who assumed that the huge influx of unlettered autoworkers would be best served by such a move.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the public school infrastructure was in terrible shape. Most buildings stemmed from the Civil War era. For a few short years in the 1920s, a remarkable coalition of the city financial elite, politicians of all stripes, and the unions, united behind school improvement, and the system flourished, at least financially. Then came the Depression, and the elite were the first to pull out. Since that time, there has been a continual conflict over control of the school system, with the State, the mayor, the city council, the school board, and the unions jockeying for power. Especially today, with an annual budget of over a billion dollars, the plum is well worth fighting over. The public school system is, after all, the second biggest employer in the city, right after City Hall. We know from recent events how lucrative such power can be. The students are a rhetorical afterthought.

So, is it the unions? We should not think narrowly here of the DFT. Virtually all the employees of the school system are unionized. In personal correspondence about the DPS with David Adamany, then acting superintendent, complained that he had power over exactly 18 people. Presumably this meant the right to fire them for cause. Let us consider briefly just the teachers union. Their concerns would be over tenure, salaries,

and working conditions. Working conditions are surely variable and we cannot discuss these in detail. However on the salary issue, it can be confidently asserted that, compared to their suburban peers, salaries have at least been consistently at the median range. Tenure has been a given for decades. These cannot account for the lamentable academic results.

Much has been made of the sociological factors, such as single-parent households, unstable housing, poverty in its many manifestations, as well as the lack of parental involvement with their children's education. How do you expect students to do homework under such chaotic conditions? Curiously, the school system has never taken a systematic approach to this soluble problem. Extend the school day. Extend the school year. Provide what the home cannot.

A major hurdle to school improvement has been the regular revamping of the curriculum. It appears that schools of education see it as their principal task to provide new and sweeping learning programs, without acknowledging that the basics must be firmly in place first. This is felt all the way up the academic ladder as colleges strive increasingly to provide remedial courses for students who lack basic skills.

Unless it can be demonstrated that the basics have been acquired, there seems to be little need for yet another innovative curriculum, despite the fact that granting foundations much prefer such ideas.

There is one major flaw that is endemic to the DPS-attendance. While the school system asserts that attendance is as high as 80%, and of course even 90% on Count Day, the actual fact is that attendance is sporadic at best. No teachers can be expected to carry out their functions with a part-time clientele. Apparently truancy is a 19th century anachronism.

Lest the reader think that these are but the idle groublings of a disenchanting suburbanite, in fact this author has spent time on a volunteer basis teaching in Detroit public schools, as well as in Pontiac, and has seen first-hand the consequences of a dysfunctional public school system. It is very important to point out, however, that there are excellent schools and teach-

ers within both school systems, a living proof that the job can be done.

We can only conclude that there are serious systemic flaws in Detroit public schools, most likely of an administrative nature and a lack of accountability on the part of teachers. We, as taxpayers in relatively responsible school systems, should insist that the State, which controls the major part of the DPS revenue, set up adequate financial and instructional goals and accountability, including teacher accountability, so that the tragically disenfranchised students of Detroit get their educational due, and the State gains a productive work force.

## REFERENCES

Detroit Literacy Coalition, 2008. *Detroit %20Literacy %20Coalition %20%7C %20Mission %20Statement*. *webarchive*.

Detroit Public Schools, *Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, June 30, 2009*.

Detroit Public Schools, *District Profile, Student Demographics, 2004–2009*.

Michigan Department of Education, *Annual Education Report, District Level Student Assessment Data for Wayne RESA Detroit City School District*, 2011.

Michigan Department of Education, *State of Michigan 2007 Cohort 4-Year Graduation and Dropout Rate Report by Subgroup*.

Mirel, Jeffrey, *The Rise and Fall of an Suburban School System*, The University of Michigan Press, 2002.