

Thank you for allowing us to submit testimony on this very important subject.

First, we would like to commend you for taking on the challenge of solving the financial crisis facing Detroit Public Schools. While MEA doesn't represent any educators in Detroit, we have significant experience in this area because our members teach in other urban districts around the state. Much of this package applies only to Detroit schools, but it wouldn't be surprising if that plan found its way to other school districts around the state. We would urge you to look at this package through the lens of asking yourself, "Is this what I would want for one of my school districts?"

Financial Considerations

The package appears to address the financial problems in a way that creates a sustainable new district. It includes mandatory training for the new school board; this is a key component for continued financial stability. It provides for financial oversight as well as a return to local control. We are concerned with the amount of time proposed to accomplish this, but agree in principle that returning Detroit schools to local control is the best possible outcome. These bills are silent in several key areas however. What happens to the EAA schools when their contract is up with Eastern Michigan University? Where does the needed stability come from concerning the opening and closing of traditional and charter schools?

Academic Considerations

Given the number of Detroit Public Schools that are in the bottom five percent of academic achievement, **we all have a responsibility to look beyond financial struggles to see the causes of that low student performance.** Any solution needs to begin with recognizing that 60 percent of Detroit's children are living in poverty and 47 percent of adults are functionally illiterate. Ideally, the schools should serve as a place of learning that leads to success that changes the above statistics and therefore the lives of the students. Unfortunately, they have to do it within the framework of this poverty. It might be manageable if they didn't also have to contend with buildings full of cockroaches, rats, mold, flooded rooms and falling ceiling tiles. Add in times

with no heat, huge class sizes and the challenges feel insurmountable. In light of these conditions, we are not surprised that Detroit can't find teachers to fill 170 vacant positions.

As a solution to the academic deficiency, this package includes a reading program. That is a policy that leads to improvement. It's good for the students. Unfortunately the package also includes several proposals that silence the voices of the teachers who spend their days with students. We have to wonder why it ever makes sense to silence those people closest to the students and capable of advocating for their needs.

Old Ideas That Don't Work

The bills tie teacher pay to student test scores through a so-called merit pay system. First, we already have mandated merit pay in law. Second, if teachers were motivated by money, they wouldn't go into teaching. And third, if the teachers in urban districts were motivated by money driven by test scores, they would teach in suburban districts without the challenges outlined above. Since additional money isn't available for those deemed to merit extra pay, it must be cut from other teachers. Is there anyone who thinks cutting the pay of the teachers in Detroit is going to improve teaching or help fill the 170 vacancies? **Are these vacancies that cause huge class sizes best for the children? No.**

Lowering Standards

This package does address the issue of teaching vacancies. Unfortunately, it doesn't address them through improved working conditions, better support from administrators, or safe buildings. It proposes to fill those positions with people who aren't certified to teach. **This isn't a solution that is in the best interest of the students.**

No Parent Choice

These bills also include mandatory year-round schools with no parent choice. MEA supports balanced calendar and even additional days and hours for students who need additional help. **We don't believe that eliminating parent choice and teacher input is best for kids, however.** Parents and teachers have much to offer in the discussion. Parent choice seems to be the cornerstone of much of what is called "school reform" these days, and yet it is strangely left out of this proposal.

Hurts Districts Around the State

It also includes moving all new hires to a defined contribution retirement plan. After years of state contributions designed to stabilize MPSERS, this would undo all that hard work and force districts around the state to pay for the shortfall this would create. **Cutting funding for other districts hurts the students.**

A New Approach

So what will work? Let's take a page from how the city is addressing the dangerous building conditions in DPS.

Mayor Duggan sent city inspectors to assess each school building to identify the needed repairs. Each building is different. Each building has unique problems that have to be corrected to achieve a safe building. True academic reform needs to be approached in the same way.

A comprehensive review and analysis of each low performing school is critical to provide information necessary to develop appropriate assistance and improve the quality of education for **Detroit's students**. The first step in any improvement model is identifying the problem.

MEA recommends conducting an educational audit as a first step to determine specific problems in a district, school, or classroom. Proper identification of problems would guide what should be proposed to improve schools for higher quality student outcomes.

This audit, which would include a review of school buildings and classrooms, could be similar to those developed by the Department of Education (MDE) as they pursued funding grants for Race To The Top federal programs. The educational audit does not include school finance. Rather, these educational audits analyze all aspects of the educational factors that affect student performance including classroom methodology, teacher and support evaluation, resource allocation, management leadership, professional development, etc.

Teams conducting these reviews should be independent from the school district and may include teachers, higher education faculty from education departments, business leaders, school administrators, Department of Education personnel, labor representatives, etc.

Developing solutions and targeting specific contributing factors obstructing and impeding educational improvement should be the goal of any legislative action. Educational audits are a necessary first step to provide guidance for effective school improvement.

As legislators, you have an opportunity to do something big. You can do something that allows you to look back years from now and say, "I was a part of improving the lives of the children of Detroit". That kind of legacy can't be accomplished by silencing the voices of the school employees or by choosing the easy answer when confronting academic improvement. Real change is hard. But real change will wrap the students in the environment they need to succeed.