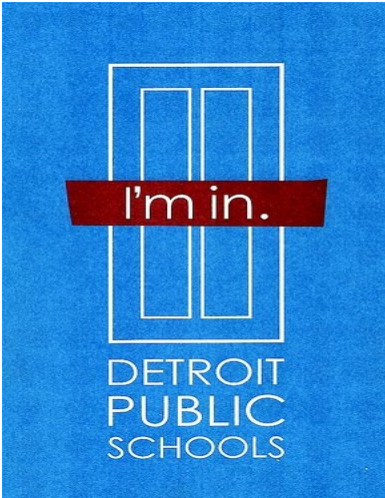




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Detroit: Education, Lift Your Weary Head

By Molly Harrison



Detroit, Michigan has recently been receiving mass media attention from around the country. This publicity is largely based on problems with the condition of our city: the crashing auto-industry¹, high unemployment rates, and our ever-growing urban decay². However, one topic that comes to the forefront of our discussion for many concerned citizens of Detroit is the state of our education systems.

Recently, the mention of education was mentioned in Mayor Bing's "State of the City" address given on February 22, 2011, where he said: "We cannot afford to wait any longer and send another generation of young people out into the world unprepared to compete for jobs. When we make a case to the business community to reinvest in Detroit, education must be one of our top priorities. It is the key to developing our workforce"³.

If education is one of the city's "top priorities", one cannot help but wonder *how is this*

"Education must be one of our top priorities"

-Mayor Bing

issue being addressed?

Mayor Bing's "developing our workforce" approach to education leaves much to be desired by educators and students alike.

His statement alludes to education being treated as the "great equalizer" for our city; education to be seen as the key to the "American Dream" for our new generations.

This sentiment (while by

no means new) makes us question *what is this American Dream?* What do we dream for our students of Detroit?

We dream of innovation, of hope for this city instilled in a new generation, of the endless possibilities we want to be able to provide our youth. We cannot allow ourselves to see education as merely a machine to produce students: though efficient, production is heartless and cold.

Education cannot be a device that we are able to polish, fine-tune, and perfect to emit the type of students America will need for our future – it needs to stand for something more. It needs to stand for creativity and ideas. It needs to stand for growth and progress. It needs to stand for making a difference in a student's life. It needs to stand for *our* American Dream, and the future of Detroit.

As we develop these dreams, Detroit Public Schools must undergo many evolutions. Such evolutions have already

begun to be addressed by the city: the \$327 million budget deficit⁴ the school district faces has forced Robert Bobb, the Emergency Financial Manager, to propose the closing of half the district's schools⁴. This plan has been heavily critiqued because it will place as many as sixty students in one classroom.

Such a plan is extremely troubling to the individuals who will be placed in these classrooms; the teachers and students who will deal with such a reality day-to-day.

When working in Detroit Public Schools over this past summer (through a Michigan State fellowship), I was able to see how class size makes an immense difference for struggling students. Students who are often lost in the shuffle of a busy classroom of 30 students were able to thrive and find their voice in the small summer classes of only 10 students.

I was struck by this reality when working with one of my students in a tenth grade English classroom. This student was a hard worker, always wanting to know what was due, what she could work on next, and if she was doing a "good job"- so you can imagine my surprise when my mentor teacher announced that this student was typically a "problem" during the full school year.

When I inquired further about my student's typical behavior, my mentor teacher claimed that this student was always out of her seat, never focused, and never turned her work in. She then mentioned that she could see an enormous difference in this



“We should not sacrifice the kids of the city of Detroit”

-David Nathan

student's work now that she was in summer school with three teachers to attend to her.

With such an example, one can't help but wonder: if problems already exist with class sizes of thirty students, what will happen if they are doubled to sixty students? What will happen to students like my summer school students?

“The district has made real progress”

- Arne Duncan

State Representative David Nathan, a Democrat from Detroit, is also against this mass closing of schools, claiming that "we should not sacrifice the kids of the city of Detroit to save a bond rating for the state"⁴. So while we recognize that Detroit's deficit issue needs to be addressed,

we must ask ourselves *is our solution actually going to help?*

Another suggested solution for issues with the budget is to re-enter the "Race to the Top" program funded by the ED Recovery Act. This program has been designed to reform public education in America by adopting further accountability standards for students, teachers, and testing.⁵

DPS spokesman Steve Wasko says "Detroit Public Schools would look forward to an opportunity to apply for and win Race to the Top funds if another round is approved by Congress".⁶ Although many critics are skeptical of issuing more standards to struggling school districts, Wasko's intent to continue in the "Race to the Top" demonstrates that Detroit Public Schools is indeed prepared to make drastic changes for its future.

These potential changes in the district have caused officials such as U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan to

comment on the state of Detroit's education: "The district has made real progress," Duncan claims. "(But) the district frankly has an extraordinarily far way to go. If you look at some of the results from different cities around the country, Detroit's at the bottom in a lot of the results. So the work is nowhere near done."⁶

“The work is nowhere near done”

- Arne Duncan

Indeed, the work is nowhere near done for Detroit's educational reforms. Possible

solutions in contrast to doubling classroom size also exist: Bobb has additionally proposed labeling the district as “bankrupt”⁴, which would allow the system to rid itself of its debt.

Although the stigmatized label of bankruptcy is not looked upon favorably with many politicians, one must recall Representative Nathan's comment: we can't sacrifice the education of our students for a more positive economic rating. At this point, the district is so hard-pressed to make a decision, that many representatives such as Nathan believe filing bankruptcy would be one of the lesser evils-especially when keeping in mind the best options for students.

As we continue to adapt our outlook on education in Detroit Public Schools, it is my hope that we will be able to look to the future (of both our students and our community), and make beneficial long-term decisions, instead of accepting quick fixes. Because no matter what decision is made, one solution is clear: teachers must band together with their communities of students and parents and work together- we must secure a future for our children's education.

¹ <http://www.michiganreview.com/2.4776/michigan-auto-industry-in-turmoil-1.644696>

² http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1882089_1850973,00.html

³ <http://detnews.com/article/20110222/METRO01/102220439/Text-of-Mayor-Bing%E2%80%99s-State-of-the-City-address>

⁴ <http://www.npr.org/2011/03/03/134208042/detroit-public-schools-face-draconian-cuts?ft=1&f=1006>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_to_the_top#Criteria_for_Funding

⁶ <http://detnews.com/article/20110221/SCHOOLS/102210336/1409/rss36>