



## A Reform Idea for Detroit Schools: Charter Them!

by Matthew J. Brouillette

### Summary

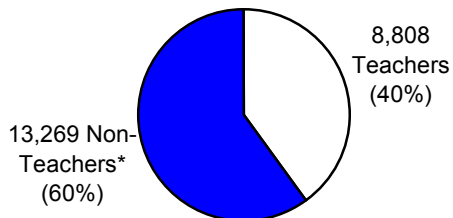
The educational needs of 180,000 Detroit students are not being adequately met by the city's wasteful and bureaucratic school district. One innovative way to improve education in Detroit is to convert all schools to charter schools and allow greater choice, competition, and accountability to reform a stagnant system that too often fails its students.

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Can Detroit's troubled public schools be genuinely reformed? After years of failed attempts to improve education for the district's 180,000 students, it has become clear that the biggest obstacles to effective reform are the sheer size of the district and the massive bureaucracy that goes along with it. Decentralization in the form of charter schools may be the answer.

A new study by the Virginia-based Alexis de Tocqueville Institution, *Mission Creep: How Large School Districts Lose Sight of the Objective: Student Learning*, confirms what many observers have long recognized: "Economies of scale" do not always materialize in education. Since the early 1900s, public school districts have been consolidated into larger and larger districts. In 1940, there were more than 117,000 school districts in the United States, but by 1990, there were fewer than 15,000. In those 50 years, the average school district size grew from 217 students to more than 2,600 students. Study author Mike Antonucci calls these centralizing trends in education "penalties of scale." He discovered that as school district size increases, the percentage of education money spent on teachers, books, and instructional materials decreases.

### Over Half of Detroit Public School Employees Never Set Foot in a Classroom



\*Includes janitors, bus drivers, food service employees, etc.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics,  
*Digest of Education Statistics 1998*

Detroit Public Schools is a classic example. As one of only eight school districts in the United States with enrollments exceeding 150,000 students, Detroit employs 8,808 teachers. However, it also employs 13,269 non-teachers who never set foot in a classroom. Some observers have noted that, with more than 60 percent of its employees being non-teachers, the Detroit Public Schools may be as much of a work program for adults as it is an education system for children.

In large districts like Detroit, school board members and superintendents are too preoccupied with the overwhelming administrative demands of employing and overseeing thousands of people and hundreds of school buildings. It is no wonder that key issues—like teaching children—often get lost in the shuffle.

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One solution to this problem is for the reform board of education to make each and every public school in Detroit a charter school. Doing so would free schools from cumbersome, centralized bureaucracy and allow parents, students, teachers, and principals to take responsibility for making their particular school work. The bloated district headquarters on Woodward Avenue would no longer control the budgets, personnel, and curriculum of schools like Gompers Elementary. Instead, individuals at Gompers would be free to work with nonprofit organizations, universities, groups of teachers, for-profit firms, or whoever could best help them improve their school. Local decision-makers at Gompers, not district bureaucrats, would be responsible, and held accountable, for the results.

Detroit's reform board would still oversee things by authorizing and evaluating each charter school, then deciding whether to renew its charter—or to hand over the school to someone else who could better manage it. But schools themselves would be free to hire, fire, and promote personnel on their own. They would determine their own pay, budgets, curricula, dress codes, length of school day and year, and so on. Detroit parents could then choose the schools that best fit their children's needs, regardless of where they lived. If they couldn't find a satisfactory school, they could band together with other parents or a community organization to propose their own charter school.

Charter schools are the fastest-growing form of public-school choice in Michigan. In only their sixth year of existence, more than 170 charter schools now enroll nearly 50,000 students across the state, and more than 100 schools are ready to open should the legislature lift the 150-school cap on university-authorized schools. The reason for charter schools' popularity with Michigan parents is that they please their customers. More than 70 percent of charters have waiting lists, and the majority of their students say they are learning more and are more interested in their school work than at previous schools.

The charter school model is not perfect, and some schools will likely fail to meet minimal expectations and standards. But when charter schools fail, they are shut down—unlike the status quo Detroit system, which lurches from failure to failure with seemingly no end in sight.

It is time for the reform board to take advantage of the charter possibility to effect positive, lasting change in a school system that has wallowed too long in mediocrity. Detroit's children deserve no less.

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