



Parents Should Have More Options When Schools Commit Academic Fraud

by Matthew J. Brouillette

Summary

Recent scandals in two Michigan school districts put the spotlight on financial fraud, but *academic* fraud is a crime that deserves more attention. Because too many districts are not providing students with the quality education that they promise, it is time to give parents more choices in where their children attend school.

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Fraud is a worry in any society where goods and services are exchanged. From buying a car to booking a vacation, people expect to get what they pay for. And consumers, to minimize fraud, are willing to pay for solid information about the products and services they wish to purchase, as the success of such publications as *Consumer Reports* magazine indicates.

But when it comes to one important service in particular, too many people are willing to tolerate a level of performance that they wouldn't stand for when purchasing almost anything else. That service is education.

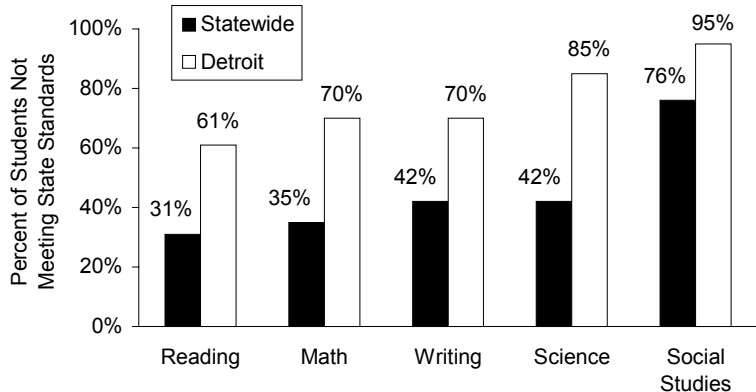
In 2000, two major scandals in Michigan public schools were uncovered. FBI probes revealed that East Detroit Public Schools officials embezzled more than \$438,000 and misspent millions of dollars on a building project. Today, the 6,000-student district continues to deal with the deficits left by corrupt administrators. Meanwhile, an audit of the high schools in the neighboring Detroit Public Schools District revealed employee fraud exceeding \$630,000. Money designated for the education of children was embezzled or spent

by school officials for vacations, alcohol, parking tickets, and personal items. Superintendent Kenneth Burnley promptly fired, demoted, and reassigned a number of bookkeepers and principals responsible for the misconduct.

Legal actions and subsequent punishments for misbehaving officials in the East Detroit and Detroit school districts should deter other school employees from committing such crimes against taxpayers, teachers, and children.

Yet despite the legal process for punishing financial fraud in our public schools, a more egregious fraud in our schools remains unpunished. *Academic* fraud is the crime that

Many Students Not Receiving Quality Education Promised by Schools



MEAP scores for the class of 2000 reveal that many public school students, particularly in Detroit, are not learning even the basics in their schools.

continues to go unpunished—and in too many instances, unnoticed. Although the children of Michigan again and again have been promised a quality education, too many never receive it.

Just how extensive is academic fraud in Michigan? Our state currently spends nearly \$14 billion per year in K-12 education. Despite those enormous expenditures, Michigan colleges, universities, and businesses still must spend at least an additional \$600 million per year to provide basic reading, math, and writing skills to high school graduates and employees—skills that should have been learned in the K-12 school system.

State assessments of student proficiency in math, reading, writing, science, and social studies confirm that many children are not receiving the education they have been promised. MEAP scores from Detroit’s class of 2000 reveal that 7 out of 10 students failed to meet Michigan standards in writing and math. Scores in science and social studies were even more dismal: Only 15 and 5 percent, respectively, met state standards. Statewide results on the tests also show educational deficiency: Between 31 and 76 percent of the class of 2000 were unable to meet state standards in core subject areas—and that’s just among those students taking the tests.

Perhaps the greatest scandal of our time is that students are not receiving the education promised them, and parents are paying an even higher price for this educational failure. But what is the recourse for children, parents, and taxpayers? While school officials tell parents and taxpayers to wait for years until the next set of reforms takes effect, children continue to be remanded to schools that fail to provide an adequate education.

At least one Michigan school district is taking a new approach to address the problem of academic fraud. Over a decade ago, Rockford Public Schools in Kent County recognized the need to guarantee that its graduates possess basic skills. If a student does not attain a certain level of competency, the district provides, and pays for, remedial education. In this way, Rockford seeks to ensure its diplomas are representative of academic achievement. Dr. Michael Shibley, superintendent of Rockford, recently challenged all public school districts in Michigan to adopt similar accountability measures.

But parents shouldn’t have to wait for schools to reform themselves. An even better approach would allow students to immediately escape poorly performing schools in favor of other options. Increasing the number of charter schools or providing tax credits to help more families pay tuition to private schools are two ways to accomplish this.

It’s time that our public schools guarantee that they will provide every child who attends them with a quality education. If they are not up to that challenge, then parents deserve more options when schools commit academic fraud.

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