

In Search of a Greener Playground:

An Examination of the Impact of Proposal A on Detroit's Education Landscape

The Scope of the Problem

One of Michigan's most notable education reforms is Proposal A. Proposal A was established a little over a quarter of a century ago in 1994. During its conception, lawmakers in Michigan promised more equity across local school districts, lower property taxes, and more school accountability. These were the intended outcomes of Proposal A.

The outcomes resulted in three policy choices:

- creating a per-pupil foundation allowance system
- creating public charter schools, and
- allowing school districts to enroll non-residents

Despite the well-intentioned policy outcomes of Proposal A, specifically schools of choice and charter schools, unintended implications disproportionately impacted underserved and minoritized communities. As it is specific to Michigan, the policy known as schools of choice allows Michigan students to enroll in a school district they do not reside in, which was not the case prior to Proposal A. Furthermore, Proposal A permitted charter schools to receive government funding based on per-pupil allocation while operating independently of the state school board's regulations.

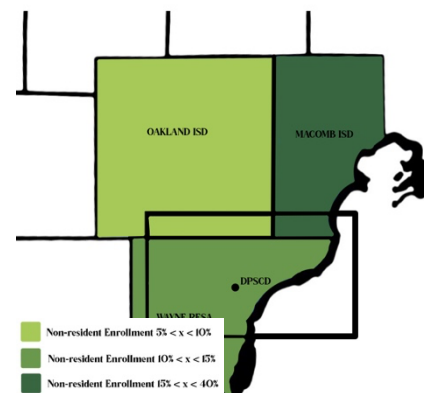
Both the school choice and charter schools' policy promote the ability for families to have unlimited options of education choices but at a cost. The cost and the impact of the policy are seen when observing their impact on Detroit and Detroit's education landscape.

Detroit and Detroit's Education Landscape

Proposal A's impact on Detroit students was seen immediately at the start of the 21st century. Previously known as Detroit Public Schools, the Detroit Public Schools Community District was one of the country's top 20 largest school districts in 2001.¹ Today, the Detroit Public Schools Community District is short of the 125th largest school district. Since the early 2000s, 111,043 students have left the public school district, and enrollment has declined by about 71.1%. In one academic year (2016-2017), 19.2% of students not advancing to either elementary, middle, or high school left the district.²

1 out of 5 Detroit students attend a school of choice, and 1 ½ out of 5 Detroit students attend a charter school. This means that about half of students who live in Detroit do not attend a Detroit public school. Often, it is assumed that students are choosing not to attend a Detroit public school because they are not performing well academically and would be able to perform better in a school of choice or charter school. However, through examination, the assumption proved to be false. Detroit students' academic performance stays relatively the same regardless of where a student who lives in Detroit chooses to attend school. There is no data to prove that attending a school of choice or charter makes a Detroit student better or worse off academically.

Despite that, school districts north of Detroit experience high non-resident enrollment rates at some rates as high as 57% directly bordering the Detroit Public Schools Community District. The visual on the right shows that those school districts north of Detroit in the Macomb ISD have the highest non-resident enrollment rate.



¹ "List of the Largest School Districts in the United States by Enrollment | 2016."

² Cutrona, "DPSCD Enrollment Plan."

Furthermore, within that ISD, clusters of districts are experiencing fluctuations in enrollment more generally, resulting from the education options that students have, which will always lead to fluctuating retention within and around the Detroit district

Impact on a Community and Civic Level

Understanding the impact of Proposal A on Detroit and Detroit's education landscape involves more than just understanding how it impacts the students within the classroom. It also involves reflecting on the community and civic changes seen through the students.

After surveying and interviewing several students, it becomes apparent that students are disconnected from the community around Detroit. Detroit students who attend school outside of Detroit often emphasize that their sense of community is dilapidated. Other issues such as lack of or inadequate public transportation to and from school prevent students from experiencing and interacting with community functions that they otherwise would be able to. These community issues have become worse since the start of the century. Since 2002, 195 district schools, many of which in Detroit's inner-city neighborhoods, have been closed.³ This created educational deserts in neighborhoods where a neighborhood school is not within reasonable walking distance, requiring students to attend school elsewhere, often leaving the city.

Issues of civic engagement persist because students who do not attend a Detroit public school do not learn and are not engaged with the civic functions of the city. Many schools of choice and charter school students even acknowledge that once they become of voting age, they do not intend to vote in elections because they are not actively engaged in the community and its civic functions of government. Overall, many students choosing not to attend a Detroit public school are missing out on the complete experience of being a Detroit resident.

The Assessment

Despite the intended outcomes of more equity across local school districts, lower property taxes, and more school accountability being generally accomplished, Proposal A's policy outcomes had real unintended consequences on students' responsiveness to their community and the city of Detroit.

These issues brought forth by students who reside in Detroit paint a broader picture of what is taking place beyond the walls of their school building. The educational landscape is about more than just figuring out how to provide academic support and keeping the students in the Detroit school district. It is about building capacity in and around the city so that regardless of what school they attend, Detroit is cultivating a space where the next generation of learners become leaders in and around Detroit are capable of growing. That means investing in the community by providing students with resources, organizations, and activities to become key influencers in Detroit.

³ Cutrona, "DPSCD Enrollment Plan."