

Muskegon Heights charter schools fail to meet state standards

David Brown
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Muskegon Heights Public School Academy System (MHPSA), America's first all-charter public school district, has been found out of compliance on over a dozen issues relating to its special education program. The educational crisis of the entire district is a resounding condemnation of the emergency manager system.

In investigating two complaints filed by parents, the Michigan Department of Education determined that MHPSA failed to deliver a host of services. On 14 different points the district was found noncompliant, including provision of occupational, speech, and physical therapy.

The charter system also failed to provide teacher consultant services for autism and a variety of physical disabilities. The investigations found that teachers were instructed not to recommend students for social work services regardless of need, because "no related service providers were available."

A former special education teacher of 15 years, Norm Kittleston, told Michigan Radio "In my opinion this was probably the worst delivery of special education services I've seen in my career."

Ultimately, failure to provide mandatory special education services is only part of the broader issues surrounding the decision to privately run a public school district.

The MHPSA was formed last year by emergency manager Donald Weatherspoon as a method of controlling the \$12.4 million of debt that the former district, Muskegon Heights Public Schools had accrued. Every school was removed from the old district and it maintained an existence solely as a vehicle for receiving property taxes and making payments to banks.

In the old district's place a new one was created,

privately run by Mosaica Education. All the teachers and staff that had worked for the public school district were fired and new staff was hired within 60 days of the classes starting last fall.

This drastic measure was taken as part of a broader reaction to the economic crisis. There are now six Michigan cities and three different school districts under emergency managers, including Detroit. The emergency managers are given a free hand to abrogate contracts and fire employees without any oversight.

Mosaica is an international for-profit company running schools primarily in the United States and Britain. At the time their bid was accepted, they were already running several schools in Michigan.

Since charter schools must be run by non-profits, it requires a bit of a shell game for companies to turn a profit. Educational management organizations like Mosaica accomplish this by setting up a non-profit board of directors that then hires their for-profit company as management.

Michigan has the highest rate of for-profit charter schools in the country at 80 percent of all charters, which has strong effects on the delivery of special education.

Between 2000 and 2010 per-pupil inflation-adjusted funding for special education in Michigan grew 17 percent in comparison to 1.4 percent for students overall. At this point the state provides about 50 percent more funding for a special education student.

Michigan's charter schools have certainly taken note. In 2000, 5.4 percent of charter school students were special education, but that number grew to 9.7 percent in 2010. As with all for-profit companies, charter schools have been chasing the biggest profit.

In the case of MHPSA, the state funding was given but the services weren't provided. Instead, while

Mosaica continued to make money from managing MHPSA, students went a school year without receiving the support they needed.

The problems at MHPSA are far from being limited to special education. Since the beginning of the school year, there has been one scandal after another.

There has been a huge turnover of staff, with Muskegon High now on its third principal. Within the first half of the year, an investigation showed that eight teachers lacked credentials, and could not legally be allowed to teach. A further quarter of the school's teachers had quit.

Two of the teachers who quit, including one who had worked in the old district, told Michigan Radio that a lack of clear "work expectations and the right supplies," contributed to their decision to leave. Base pay for teachers in the district is only \$35,000.

With such a high turnover rate and lack of stable environment, it is no surprise that weekly attendance rate for students at Muskegon High is around 60 percent.

The lack of services and chaotic environment are not just an indictment against budget cuts to education, but the entire process of replacing public schools with charter schools.

The process is becoming a routine one. First the local, state, and federal governments make cuts to education, reducing programs, increasing class sizes, setting the school up to fail. Then test scores come in low so the teachers and staff are fired and the school is handed over to a private company.

Nothing improves for the students, but the teachers are now underpaid and overworked, while a company like Mosaica gets to make a profit out of public funds.



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