

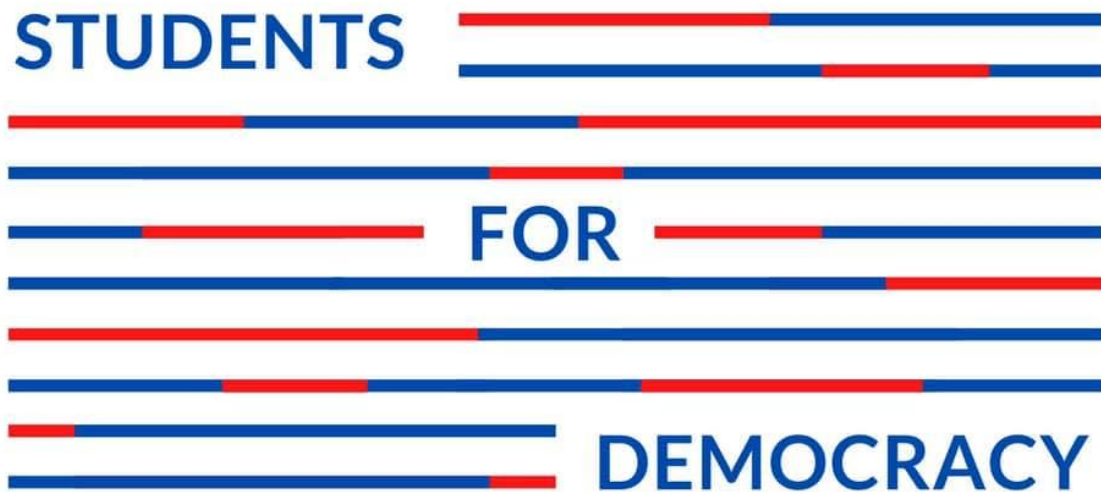
# STUDENTS FOR DEMOCRACY

JOURNAL REVIEW

FALL 2020.

VOLUME I. ISSUE I.





# Students for Democracy

*Intersections of Democracy and  
Systemic Racism*

Fall 2020



# Letter from the Executive Board

Dear Reader,

We are excited to present you with the first installment of the *Students for Democracy Journal*. We are extremely proud of our members for their hard work and dedication throughout the semester despite working entirely remotely.

Given the recent civil unrest following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, we felt that further attention must be drawn to the ongoing systems of oppression seen and felt in every aspect of life. We hope to open your eyes to the vast history of injustices that persist today through presentations that demonstrate our commitment to allyship through policy.

Founded on three basic pillars- to research, to educate, and to advocate- members have learned how to do all three over the course of only a semester and entirely virtually. First, they learned how to conduct thorough and unbiased research which culminated with many meetings to consult with experts in their respective policy areas. Second, they learned to write clear, concise, and unbiased policy briefs with histories, options for change, and their own unique recommendations for policy solutions. Finally, members presented their findings to their peers, family, experts whom they had previously consulted with, and the general public.

Although you, our reader, only see the short policy brief produced by each group, you do not see the countless hours of work put into the end result. Given the difficult nature of an entirely virtual semester, we applaud our members for their perseverance and growth over the course of the semester.

We hope that the content of these briefs will inspire discourse surrounding these policy areas and inspire future policy action. We sincerely hope that you enjoy reading the Journal as much as we have enjoyed producing it.

Sincerely,

Emma Smith | President  
Schuyler Janzen | Vice President of Internal Relations  
Rachel Milner | Vice President of External Relations  
Sophia Barnes | Vice President of Marketing  
Noah Purdy | Vice President of Finance and Operations

# Acknowledgements

*Students for Democracy would like to extend a special thank you to these individuals.*

**Myrna Pérez**

*For speaking with the members of SFD regarding the electoral process and steps towards a more fair and just system*

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*For speaking with and educating members of SFD regarding the inequalities of mass incarceration*

**Valerie Canter**

*For inspiring the founding of SFD*

**Rita Sheerin**

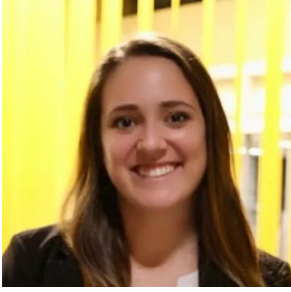
*For inspiring the founding of SFD*

**The Many Experts who Consulted with Members**

*For taking the time to speak with and educate members regarding how to create change and improve the democratic systems*

**And Many More...**

# Students for Democracy Executive Board



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Emma Smith is a junior studying Public Policy, focusing on International Human Rights Policy and Intersectional Identities with minors in Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences and Gender, Race, and Nation. In the future, she hopes to serve in the Peace Corps prior to attending law school. Upon earning a law degree, she hopes to work for an NGO focusing on ending global poverty.



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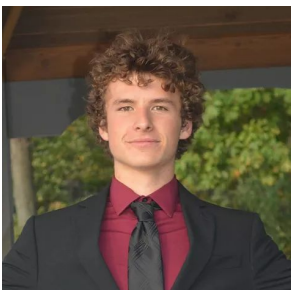
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# Policy Briefs

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# Voter Suppression in 2020: Florida's Felon Disenfranchisement Policies

Rachel Barkan, Macey Owen, Greta Schorer, Isabelle Zhan

## Executive Summary

Felon disenfranchisement is one of many forms of voter suppression in the United States today. In the state of Florida, consistently high rates of incarceration and restrictive policies prevent convicted felons from exercising their civil rights and participating in the democratic process. To combat this issue, there are three possible actions that can be taken: create a ballot initiative, institute a constitutional amendment, or pass a new law. We recommend passing a ballot initiative with the intent of an eventual constitutional amendment. This measure was taken in 2018 and succeeded after voters in Florida approved the re-enfranchisement of felons whose sentences are complete. However, the initiative's language was vague enough for the definition of completion of a sentence to be interpreted and altered, requiring felons to pay fees and fines before officially completing their sentence. This further restricts people who do not have access to information regarding their fees and fines and who cannot pay them. Therefore, it is imperative that the new ballot initiative advocates for a constitutional amendment with language explicitly excluding fees and fines from the definition of a felony sentence.

## Background

Despite being one of the most advanced and developed democracies in the modern world, the United States still bears voting restrictions that implicitly target marginalized groups. Today, felon disenfranchisement, laws that prohibit voting rights for citizens convicted of felony offenses, varies in degree from state to state. Only two states in the entire country place no restrictions on voters who have been convicted of felonies. The remaining states' restrictions range from: prohibiting felons from voting only while incarcerated and automatically restoring their rights after completion of incarceration time, removing voting rights during incarceration and automatically restoring rights after all other aspects of the sentence are complete, and the most extreme policies which do not restore voting rights until all aspects of the sentence have been completed and additional actions have been taken.

As of 2020, Florida is one of the 11 most extreme states in terms of felon disenfranchisement policies; 23% of the Floridian African American community is not eligible to vote due to strict state felony disenfranchisement legislation.<sup>1</sup> Florida's history of barring citizens from voting based on their past convictions stems back to 1868 (Brennan Center for Justice).<sup>2</sup> As recently as 2019, Florida Governor DeSantis appealed legislation eliminating past felons' right to vote if they had not fully repaid their remaining fees and fines as part of their sentence, which the Republican-controlled government failed to define through any central listing (an easy to access database that would allow felons to see what, if any, fees and fines they have). Felon disenfranchisement has the potential to greatly influence elections. For example, in the 2016 presidential election, Trump carried Florida by just 1.3 percentage points which are approximately 113,000 votes.<sup>3</sup> Looking ahead to the 2020 general election, reduced voter turnout is expected in demographic groups disproportionately affected by these policies, specifically African-Americans. Florida's voting laws restrict potential voters' participation thereby making the system less democratic and contributing to the marginalization of the Black community. There is no clear way for formerly incarcerated people who have served their felony sentence to find what fines they owe.

## Options

### 1. *Ballot Initiative*

Florida citizens can initiate constitutional amendments via an initiative on a ballot. Potential drawbacks of this option involve procedural obstacles; the cost of enacting a ballot initiative campaign is this option's primary drawback. Florida's ballot initiative laws require, as of October 2020, at least 766,200 signatures.<sup>4</sup> The approximated Cost Per Required Signature of Florida's 2020 ballot initiatives has a median of \$9.25, meaning over \$7 million would be spent just to acquire the minimum number of signatures.<sup>5</sup> However, this process has been done before through the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative in 2018, also known as Amendment 4. So long as

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, A., & Deckard, N. (2016). Felon Disenfranchisement Laws and the Feedback Loop of Political Exclusion: The Case of Florida. *Journal of African American Studies*, 20(1), 1-18. Retrieved September 25, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44508161>

<sup>2</sup> Brennan Center for Justice. (2006). History of Florida's Felony Disenfranchisement Provision. Retrieved November 13, 2020 from [https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/d/download\\_file\\_38222.pdf](https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/d/download_file_38222.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> McCaskill, Nolan D. "Felons Have the Potential to Swing Close 2020 Races." POLITICO, POLITICO, 11 Sept. 2020, [www.politico.com/news/2020/09/11/felon-votes-swing-2020-races-409495](http://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/11/felon-votes-swing-2020-races-409495)

<sup>4</sup> "Laws Governing the Initiative Process in Florida," Ballotpedia, 2020, [https://ballotpedia.org/Laws\\_governing\\_the\\_initiative\\_process\\_in\\_Florida](https://ballotpedia.org/Laws_governing_the_initiative_process_in_Florida).

<sup>5</sup> "Florida 2018 Ballot Measures," Ballotpedia, accessed October 2020, [https://ballotpedia.org/Florida\\_2018\\_ballot\\_measures](https://ballotpedia.org/Florida_2018_ballot_measures).

the ballot initiative includes explicit language regarding the subject matter, in this case, felon re-enfranchisement, it has the potential to create long-standing legislative change.

## *2. Constitutional Amendment*

Another potential option for felon disenfranchisement reform is through a constitutional amendment. An advantage to enacting a constitutional amendment is that there are many routes of proposal: commission, legislature, and ballot initiative. Another is the ability for the people to voice their opinions on this matter and have substantial influence through voting; at least 60 percent of voters must agree with the amendment in the closest general election.<sup>6</sup> One drawback to this alternative is that its feasibility depends greatly on the legislators' opinions, as any constitutional amendment proposed by them requires a three-fifths majority vote. Historically, many voters choose to pass amendments that make it to the ballot. Based on the content of our policy, it is not likely the Florida state legislature will pass an amendment of this kind due to their partisan makeup.

## *3. Passing a Law*

Current Florida law requires felons to have completed their sentence, including the payment of any fees and fines before their voting rights can be restored. A new law could be passed altering the definition of a sentence to exclude the requirements for fees and fines to be paid. For this to occur, a senator or representative would need to propose a bill, which then must be passed by both chambers and signed by the governor. One advantage of this option is that it is a much simpler process than amending the state constitution. As we mentioned, amending the constitution requires approval from at least 60 percent of statewide voters, and the processes by which an amendment can appear on the ballot are limited and often lengthy. Thus one advantage of this option is that a law introduced and passed by the state legislature would have a much shorter timeline and would implement immediate reform. Excluding fees and fines from the definition of a completed sentence would re-enfranchise an estimated 1.12 million returning citizens in Florida.<sup>7</sup> One disadvantage of this option is that the current governor implemented the requirement for felons to pay their fees and fines before their vote is restored, so he would likely veto the bill. The legislature could overturn his veto by a 2/3 vote, although this is not likely given that both chambers are a majority Republican (same party as the governor). Another drawback is that the Florida

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<sup>6</sup> Aboraya, Abe. "What Is Florida's Amendment 4, The Voter Approval Of Constitutional Amendments?" WUSF Public Media. USF, October 14, 2020. <https://wusfnews.wusf.usf.edu/politics-issues/2020-09-16/what-is-floridas-amendment-4-the-voter-approval-of-constitutional-amendments>.

<sup>7</sup> Lantry, Lauren. "Over 1 Million Former Felons Still Face Hurdles after Being given Right to Vote." ABC News. ABC News Network, March 8, 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/felons-florida-vote-million-face-hurdles-fees/story?id=69060375>.

legislature meets only once a year for 60 days so if the bill doesn't make it through the process by the end of the session, it dies.

## **Recommendation**

Florida's current felony disenfranchisement laws disproportionately affect Black Americans and reduce voter turnout in these communities. Not only does targeted disenfranchisement disrupt and prevent participation in the most basic of democratic processes, but past studies have also shown that this pattern of voter suppression can influence presidential election outcomes. Therefore, it is recommended that Florida introduces a ballot initiative to propose a constitutional amendment. Modeled off of Florida Amendment 4, the Voting Rights Restoration for Felons Initiative (2018), this ballot initiative will include explicit language that clarifies the definition of a felon's complete sentence and enforces re-enfranchisement upon release from prison. The current definition allows room for interpretation which enabled the governor to determine that completing one's sentences required paying all fees and fines. This revision to the wording will specify that the completion of a prison sentence occurs as soon as the prisoner is released. The alternative to a citizen-initiated ballot initiative is a law passed through the state government. However, this would not be an effective option in the long-term, given Florida's tumultuous history of majority party control. Although a ballot initiative can be challenging to pass because of the monetary costs and signature requirements, the process has been successfully conducted in the past like Amendment 4, and thus can be replicated. The approval of this ballot initiative would enable the re-enfranchisement of 211,000 people on probation and about 1.6 million people with a current or previous conviction.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Dr. Bridgett King, Auburn University MPA Director & Associate Professor, for meeting with us. Her knowledge of Florida's disenfranchisement laws and studies of African American voter turnout offered valuable insight into our research. We would also like to thank Eli Savit, Washtenaw County Prosecutor and lecturer at the University of Michigan Law school, for providing his expertise on legislative procedures for civil rights issues.

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# Tackling Voter Disinformation

Jacob Bruetsch, Charlotte Dubin, Katherine Song, Charli Vogel\*

\*Contributor to only Background

## Executive Summary

Voter misinformation is a common form of voter suppression, specifically in Detroit, Michigan. This has especially been brought to light recently because of robocalls to Detroit voters making false claims to deter them from voting.<sup>8</sup> Such measures are particularly effective in Detroit because of the nature of the threats (especially regarding criminal records) and Detroit’s high African American population. Possible policies to adopt include creating a commission within the Bureau of Elections to monitor the spread of voting information and specifically reclassifying the intentional spread of voter misinformation as voter intimidation under the law. However, we have determined that to eliminate this type of voter suppression, the Michigan Department of State should directly provide voters with accurate information about voting procedures by mailing materials containing the information to citizens.

## Background

Since the passage of the 15th amendment, the United States has suppressed the votes of non-white people, most prominently African Americans, through various voter suppression tactics—notably via Jim Crow era laws, but also through more insidious ways such as misleading voters regarding voting procedures,<sup>9</sup> which is the focus of this report. Modern-day voter suppression can take place in the city of Detroit, Michigan. As the largest city in this swing state with a history of being a key source of Democratic votes—not in small part due to its 78.6% Black population<sup>10</sup>—Detroit is a key target of misinformation. Recently, many voting-eligible people have been receiving pre-recorded phone calls making false claims such as that if they vote by mail, their information will be given to police departments to track down old warrants or put on lists for mandatory vaccinations.<sup>11</sup> These and other similar measures are especially effective in predominantly Black areas, especially lower-income ones, because of the level of education,

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<sup>8</sup> Wright, Cohen, “Detroit and Chicago hit . . .”

<sup>9</sup>Abrams et al., *Voter Suppression in U.S. Elections*, 1-6.

<sup>10</sup>United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts.”

<sup>11</sup>Michigan Department of State, “Example of False Information.”

limited time, and criminal records of their residents. Such neighborhoods generally have relatively lower quality education systems, so students may not have learned the most important information about civic participation or been inspired to participate. Many residents also work multiple jobs or jobs with long hours to support themselves and their families and may not have the time to do proper research to prove the validity of information they receive. The calls about arrest warrants are particularly powerful because of the higher proportion of African Americans who have been charged with a crime.<sup>12</sup> This brief argues a policy to discourage such avenues of voting misinformation.

## Options

### 1. *Direct Mail Voting Information*

One possible measure is mailing accurate informational materials to voters during an election cycle. Such materials would be created and dispersed by the Bureau of Elections or by smaller entities like county clerks' offices. The postcards would resemble direct mail marketing used by political campaigns, with the cost usually in the range of \$0.50-\$0.90 each (including design, color, full printing, and postage).<sup>13</sup> Additional labor costs may also be included. This doesn't ensure that recipients will digest the information, as they likely already receive an abundance of election-related mail, leading some to disregard it. Also, this option would exclude those without a public address or a way to receive direct mail.

### 2. *Monitoring the Spread of Voting Information*

Another possible solution is creating a commission within the Bureau of Elections (within the Michigan Department of State) to monitor voting information being spread. Calls made or materials sent regarding voting to Michigan residents would need to be approved by this commission; any non-approved calls or materials would be removed from circulation by the commission. This policy also works well in tandem with the previous. The combination of distributing accurate information through both the mail and over the phone, along with being able to identify unverified sources, gives voters a clear sense of what is valid and thus what they should truly consider as they cast their ballot. However, potential weaknesses include the possibility that perpetrators could put a fake seal of approval on their disinformation or that it could give too much of a voice to nefarious actors. The cost for this solution could vary depending on whether or not the Bureau could be persuaded to add to its existing responsibilities, or if it requires additional paid positions.

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<sup>12</sup> Michigan Incident Crime Reporting, "2019 State Totals by Age, Sex, Race, and Crime Type."

<sup>13</sup> FedEx. "FedEx Print Personal Projects: Banners, Posters, & More."



### 3. *Reclassifying Misinformation as Voter Intimidation*

A third measure is to create policy further punishing voter suppression at the local level. Though voter intimidation is a federal crime, sending inaccurate information to voters is not.<sup>14</sup> The distinction between the two can be unclear in certain circumstances, and perpetrators take advantage of this and sway voters away from the polls. A potential solution is to reclassify misinformation spread in an attempt to keep citizens from voting as voter intimidation. Doing so removes incentives for the transmission of false information intended to suppress voter turnout. This requires introducing new legislation, an arduous process, while monetary costs will vary. However, it would take time to go through the process of introducing the policy, holding public hearings, and voting on and enacting the policy.

## **Recommendation**

We recommend that the Michigan Department of State adopt the first measure of creating accurate informational materials about voting and distributing them through either the Bureau of Elections or individual clerks' offices. The most effective way to combat voting misinformation is by providing citizens with verified instructions straight to their door. This is a solution that counters not only nefarious actors of voter intimidation, such as those behind the Detroit robocalls but also bureaucratic mistakes such as poll workers providing the wrong information or voters never being informed of a change in their polling location. Organizations such as All Voting is Local are already doing this work on the ground citing media engagement as a chief strategy, which comes in various forms. This variety is useful in the digital age as there is such a large variety of media, and different voters are exposed to different varieties every day. One piece of direct mail streamlines that process and allows those who lack access to some forms of media to be secure in the validity of their information.

This policy is particularly beneficial in addition to existing voter intimidation laws because enforcement of such laws generally depends on state leadership, whereas directly informing voters under this policy happens regardless of state leadership. The cost of the policy is minimal, as it only requires the creation of the mail and the additional time spent by postal workers delivering the mail. The former costs somewhere between \$30-\$150 to create an engaging design with the information on it and about \$35,000 to print one for each household in Detroit.<sup>15</sup> The latter is harder to calculate; a disadvantage in itself, and the additional strain on the postal system carries more than a monetary value. However, the benefit of each individual receiving accurate voting information outweighs these costs. Mailing out voting materials isn't found in many cities across the country, though, and yet many citizens have no issues receiving accurate information.

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<sup>14</sup> Election Crimes Branch, "Federal Prosecution of Election Offenses: Eighth Edition."

<sup>15</sup> FedEx. "FedEx Print Personal Projects: Banners, Posters, & More."

Given this, it may seem that our solution is excessive. However, merely 59.3% of Detroit households have access to the internet, 20 percent lower than the Michigan average.<sup>16</sup> This means that many Detroiters do not have the means to access information that other areas do, making it all the more important that we provide it to them.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Dr. Gregory Clay Ramsay, from the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy and Research Director at WorldPublicOpinion.org, for his knowledge on voter disinformation in 2010 and the present, as well as on the views of different party bases.

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<sup>16</sup> United States Census Bureau, "QuickFacts."

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# Solutions to Racial Gerrymandering

**Abby Grant, Kendall Koenen, Brody Mayoras, Nick Rea**

## **Executive Summary**

Racial gerrymandering suppresses the political power of minorities and disenfranchises people of color. Gerrymandering is difficult to remedy because it requires the majority party to create a new electoral map that takes away their demographic and partisan electoral advantage. Though there are many proposed solutions, only two are feasible for all states to adopt. One proposed solution is using an independent redistricting committee with individuals from many different parties to draw new district maps. Another solution is using a proportional representation model. Under this model, there would be no districts, and each citizen would vote for a political party, which would then select representatives based on the proportion of the vote they received.

## **Background**

Gerrymandering is the use of legislative redistricting to disenfranchise a particular group of voters. This is done by the party in power at the state level, and this trend poses a direct threat to our democracy because it has historically been used to suppress minority voters.<sup>17</sup> As a result, gerrymandering is a tactic utilized by the party in power to skew election favorability, and therefore representation, to their party. In turn, this leads to inequitable representation at both the state and federal levels.

Given the unjust nature of gerrymandering, it is clear that this trend is detrimental to our democracy because it can prevent the government from acting as a true representation of the people's will. However, in Chief Justice Roberts's opinion regarding *Rucho v. Common Cause*, he states, "The Constitution supplies no objective measure for assessing whether a districting map treats a political party fairly."<sup>18</sup> The Supreme Court may not approve of gerrymandering based upon

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/american-politics/gerrymandering-in-the-us/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/18-422>

partisan loyalty, but because of a lack of precedent and constitutional ambiguity, they could not determine a plausible solution to partisan gerrymandering.

To halt the many issues surrounding gerrymandering, a successful policy would need to be implemented to ensure that all citizens receive proportional and fair representation in Congress. The policy must create a framework for equitable districting without threatening the power granted by the Constitution to state legislatures to create congressional maps. Additionally, it must be a priority to protect minority groups from the disenfranchisement that often comes through gerrymandering.

## **Options**

### *1. Through the Federal Courts*

One potential route to rectify the effects of gerrymandering could come through the federal court system. In a 2019 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that partisan gerrymandering is a “political issue” that does not fall within the powers of the federal courts. Given that many racially gerrymandered maps look and feel similar to partisan districts, this decision emboldens states to gerrymander their congressional maps based upon partisan and racial lines without consequence from the federal courts, making this solution insufficient.

### *2. Proportional Representation*

A proportional representation model would allow multiple parties to gain seats in Congress. In this model, every individual votes for a particular party and each party gets a number of seats proportional to the percentage of votes they receive in each state. This is a model used by many foreign parliaments including the United Kingdom. This model of representation eliminates the possibility of gerrymandering because it would end the use of congressional districts. This also eliminates “wasted votes” in districts that overwhelmingly favor one party. Instead, a party would select their representatives to Congress after statewide votes. While this solution is the most likely to end gerrymandering entirely, it fails to protect all voters as it would limit the local ties that many representatives feel to their small districts. This would hurt the representation of local interests. Moreover, this potential solution risks placing the interests of voters in the hands of a potentially overbearing and autocratic party system. In addition, this manner of representation would require a Constitutional amendment that is unlikely to pass.

### 3. *Independent Redistricting Committee*

Another method is to use an independent redistricting committee. The most effective and unbiased method has been created by the Brennan Center for Justice<sup>19</sup> and gives seats on the redistricting committee to a large number of political parties. Specifically, they would have 15 member committees where 5 members are from the majority party in the state, 5 from the second-largest party, and 5 others from less popular political parties. The Brennan Center acknowledges that it is nearly impossible to find unbiased people to redistribute the districts. Therefore, the best method would be to find people from a wide array of political parties to balance each other out. The committee must follow six map-drawing criteria which include complying with the Voting Rights Act, ensuring minorities are given equal representation in the electoral process and being geographically contiguous. Any citizen of the state then has 45 days to file a petition against the redistricted map.

## **Recommendation**

Proportional representation is the best option for state legislatures to adopt to curb racial gerrymandering. Though redistricting is feasible, districts will never be completely non-gerrymandered and will surely lead to legal battles over the accuracy of these distinctions. Additionally, redistricting does not account for the change in racial and socioeconomic group concentrations. Under this system, every 10 years, new maps would need to be drawn to ensure all races and ethnicities have the correct representation. Proportional representation largely reduces these problems and also ensures a fair representation of all political parties. There is a minimized opportunity for bias because the representatives are elected solely based on their raw vote count. Individuals would vote for a political party who would in turn choose representatives. One downside is that proportional representation doesn't adequately represent those who don't identify with a certain political party. Though this isn't ideal, proportional representation means that 3rd parties would have a seat in the national legislature, which will help to diversify the ideologies represented within Congress. Moreover, this method of redistricting would be the easiest for each state legislature to adopt because it is cost-efficient, safe from being challenged by the courts, and universal to every state. Under the proportional representation model, no redistricting committee is needed, so no money would be spent trying to build perfect districts that will never exist. Similarly, states would not be tied up in legal battles about the constitutionality and accuracy of each district.

Redistricting committees must look closely at each district and the possibility of migration means each district needs constant attention. Proportional representation does not require any district

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/policy-solutions/better-way-draw-districts>

oversight and can be applied without bias to all states. It is unreasonable to expect proportional representation to start on the national level because it is a stark change from our current way of electing representatives. However, as Justice Louis Brandeis observed, "States are the laboratories of democracy," so once proven successful on the state level, this system could be implemented nationally.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Gerald Webster for communicating with us. Through our conversations about gerrymandering solutions, we were able to improve our research about proportional representation.



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# Addressing Educational Inequality within Detroit

**Aneesa Berner, Marissa Garrido, Karthik Pasupula, Patrick Pullis**

## **Executive Summary**

Inequality in the education system is rampant in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) due to the failed distribution of funds and low quality of education for students in low-income neighborhoods. Some symptoms of these problems are low test scores, disproportionate graduation rates, and minimal advanced course offerings. Solutions include increasing teacher salaries, implementing controlled choice programs, and hiring behavioral consultants. The most viable option is to incentivize highly qualified teachers to work and stay in DPSCD by increasing their starting salary to a minimum of \$63,430 to match neighboring, high-performing districts. This is economically feasible and would impact DPSCD quickly. In the long-run, Detroit should work to attract new, sustainable industries to create a solid base for economic growth that would then create the necessary funds to sustain increased salaries and improved education.

## **Background**

DPSCD suffers from an achievement gap between students in Detroit and students in nearby suburban school districts. The minimal funding that DPSCD receives and the lack of proper distribution of these funds have led to the collapse of a system that does not adequately serve its community. In Highland Park, the poorest district in Michigan, the schools receive about 5% less in funding than the wealthiest districts in Michigan.<sup>20</sup> These problems are rooted in the systematically racist structure of DPSCD. 82% of students in DPSCD are African American, while only 13.8% of

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<sup>20</sup> Amber Arellano. "Michigan's School Funding: Crisis and Opportunity." Michigan: The Education Trust-Midwest, 2020.

[https://michiganachievers.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/01/Education-Trust-Midwest\\_Micigan-School-Funding-Crisis-Opportunity\\_January-23-2020-WEB.pdf](https://michiganachievers.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2020/01/Education-Trust-Midwest_Micigan-School-Funding-Crisis-Opportunity_January-23-2020-WEB.pdf).

students in Michigan are African American.<sup>21</sup> Instead of holding its schools to a high standard of education, DPSCD has failed its students by easing requirements for graduation and finding loopholes to reduce its quality of education and thus decrease spending. Students within DPSCD are not receiving the resources they need to succeed, as seen through the lack of Advanced Placement (AP) course offerings with about half of all DPSCD schools not offering AP courses.<sup>22</sup> This issue shows itself through statewide standardized testing, as DPSCD had only 28% of its student population test “proficient” on the Writing MME Performance test compared to the statewide average of 49%.<sup>23</sup> DPSCD must not be allowed to continue providing subpar resources for its students while presenting the facade that it is sparing no effort. Instead, DPSCD must be held accountable to meet expectations in quality of education to properly prepare its students to be actively engaged in the American democratic system.

## Options

### 1. *Fair Salary as a Magnet for Teachers*

One of the reasons DPSCD students are underperforming in school is because DPSCD teachers are chronically underpaid. Before the 2020–2021 school year, the average first-year DPSCD teacher was paid a yearly salary of \$38,400. This low salary drove teachers away from teaching at DPSCD schools in favor of either private or charter schools. To attract better teachers in the future, DPSCD approved a 33% increase in yearly salary for first-year teachers.<sup>24</sup> The new starting salary for DPSCD teachers is \$51,071. One argument against this increased teacher salary is that there will be fewer funds available to be used on student needs. Although this is true, DPSCD has increased direct student funding for years with little improvement in student performance. By increasing teacher salaries, DPSCD can successfully attract and retain better teachers for years to come. In turn, this will improve student performance as they learn crucial material from more qualified teachers.

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<sup>21</sup> “Schools at a Glance.” Accessed November 11, 2020.

<https://www.mischooldata.org/Legislative2/LegislativeDashboard4.aspx>.

<sup>22</sup> Detroit, Chalkbeat. “Promising Students in Detroit Lack Access to High-Level AP Classes That Are Common in Suburban Schools.” *Detroit Journalism Cooperative* (blog), October 19, 2018.

<https://www.detroitjournalism.org/2018/10/19/promising-students-in-detroit-lack-access-to-high-level-ap-classes-that-are-common-in-suburban-schools/>.

<sup>23</sup> Ballotpedia. “Detroit Public Schools Community District, Michigan.” Accessed November 11, 2020.

[https://ballotpedia.org/Detroit\\_Public\\_Schools\\_Community\\_District,\\_Michigan](https://ballotpedia.org/Detroit_Public_Schools_Community_District,_Michigan).

<sup>24</sup> “Detroit Public Schools To Raise Starting Teacher Salaries By 33%,” May 22, 2020.

<https://detroit.cbslocal.com/2020/05/22/detroit-public-schools-to-raise-starting-teacher-salaries-b-33/>.

## 2. *Controlled Choice Programs*

DPSCD could implement controlled choice programs to account for socioeconomic status when assigning students to schools. Controlled choice programs are weighted lottery systems that allow parents to rank their preferred schools for their students while simultaneously allowing schools to take into account income levels, parental educational background, and special needs when assigning students to their schools. This eliminates school boundaries and allows for larger zones, which in turn creates a diverse socio-economic student population. Successful implementation of controlled choice programs in Cambridge Public Schools and Berkeley Unified School District has led them to receive zeroes on both the Isolation of Poverty Index and the Isolation of Wealth Index, indicating students do not attend schools where 75% of the student population share their same socioeconomic status.<sup>25</sup> Some critics argue that controlled choice programs could drive families of high socioeconomic status out of their current communities; however, controlled choice programs still hold considerable potential in reducing achievement gaps for students with lower socioeconomic standings.

## 3. *Bolster Diversity in Education*

Statewide, the dropout rate for Black students is nearly double that of white students and more than double that of Asian students according to the Center for Educational Performance and Information.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, according to the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, researchers found that Black students were 54% less likely than their white peers to be recommended to upper-echelon, gifted-education programs, even after factors like standardized test scores were accounted for.<sup>27</sup> To fix this, teachers' implicit biases needed to be checked through behavioral consultants where teachers would have a support system and interventions would be possible to reduce racial biases. A program that DPSCD could pair with could be My Teaching Partner-Secondary, which helps develop these partnerships. With nearly 2,000 teachers, DPSCD would have trouble implementing this program because of its finances needing to be directed to pressing issues such as building infrastructure. However, this solution should be maintained as a viable option, due to its direct response to the disproportionate dropout rates.

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<sup>25</sup> Boser, Ulrich, and Perpetual Baffour. "Isolated and Segregated." Center for American Progress. Accessed November 11, 2020.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2017/05/31/433014/isolated-and-segregated/>.

<sup>26</sup> MI School Data. "Education Dashboard." Accessed November 11, 2020.

<https://www.mischooldata.org/dashboard/>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.apa.org>. "Inequality at School." Accessed November 11, 2020.

<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2016/11/cover-inequality-school>.

## Recommendation

Although the starting salary for DPSCD teachers was recently increased to \$51,071, this is still not high enough to attract new and qualified teachers who regularly choose to work at schools in the Detroit suburbs rather than the city itself. To compete with other suburban school districts such as the Birmingham City School District (BSD), which offers teachers an average salary of \$63,430, DPSCD needs to increase its starting salary to match that of BSD's at a minimum.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, DPSCD could attract more new teachers by offering benefits such as generous annual raises and bonuses if their students improve test scores. Increasing teacher salaries is the best policy solution to improve DPSCD schools because it provides the most immediate impact. New, highly qualified teachers would apply for positions within DPSCD the very same year starting salaries would be increased.

Some critics argue that increasing teacher salaries is unrealistic because DPSCD's budget would not allow for it. However, the city of Detroit could create instant revenue for DPSCD by increasing the income tax on money made in the city of Detroit by residents of nearby suburban communities. Additionally, a long-term solution is to attract new, sustainable businesses to Detroit. One way to do this is by offering businesses plots of currently unused land for free in exchange for a guarantee that they will operate in Detroit for a set number of years. This would provide stable tax revenue that could be used to further improve DPSCD schools and maintain a higher salary for DPSCD teachers for years to come.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr. Michael Heaney for meeting with us. Through our conversations about efficiency wages and political mobilization around education issues, we were able to improve our research about systemic racism and inequality of education in the city of Detroit.

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# Improving Air Quality to Fight Environmental Racism in Detroit

**Sarah Biagi, Heather Rooney, Sushanth Sunil**

## **Executive Summary**

The asthma hospitalization rate and the asthma mortality rate for Black people in Detroit are significantly higher than the state average. These high rates threaten the safety of Black people in Detroit and place them at an unproportionate risk for additional health issues and school and work absences. The current fees listed in EGLE's Renewable Operating Permit Program for companies that emit toxins are not enough, and solely increasing them will not combat the issues of environmental racism present in Detroit. Legislation similar to AB-617, that California has adopted, couples modern technologies with increased penalties to reduce air toxin emissions. This plan will allow Detroit to accurately measure air toxin levels and penalize companies who violate air emissions regulations. As a result, air toxin emissions should decrease. This will reduce asthma rates among Black people in Detroit and will improve their overall quality of life, something that is necessary for ending environmental racism.

## **Background**

The Detroit area is home to a bustling manufacturing and auto industries. Detroit's Black and non-white populations are consistently high because urbanization increased housing costs outside the city and limited employment access, forcing those people to remain in Detroit. Urbanization increased manufacturing in Detroit, which increased air pollution in the area. As a result, the high concentrations of Black people in this area are disproportionately affected by poor air quality. This is problematic because pre-existing health conditions, often connected to nutrition or genetics, make the Black population of Detroit most vulnerable to the consequences of air pollution. Air pollution causes high rates of asthma among Black children and adults and causes them to be absent from both school and jobs, which further challenges them. Consequently, asthma hospitalization rates are significantly higher for Black people than white people, especially in inner-city neighborhoods where access to proper healthcare is limited. This causes the asthma

death rate for Black people to be higher than that for white people. The rates of hospitalization and the mortality rate in 2011-2013 for asthma are 3x and 3.2x higher for Black people, and the city of Detroit's asthma hospitalization rate is 3x higher than the state average.<sup>29</sup>

The disproportionate level of Black people affected by asthma is problematic because the consequences of asthma extend beyond physical respiratory health. Childhood asthma is tied to additional health issues that can decrease quality of life and access to future opportunities. Additionally, many people in Detroit do not have access to adequate healthcare, which makes diagnosing and treating asthma difficult. This adds to higher rates of asthma in Black children and adults and higher rates of hospitalization. By protecting these marginalized communities from poor air quality, asthma rates and hospitalizations should decrease, which will increase the quality of life. Air pollution in Detroit must be minimized because access to clean air is a fundamental right. To uphold democratic ideals, the government must ensure this right for all.

## Options

### 1. *Assembly Bill 617*

To further combat air pollution in Detroit, legislation similar to California's Assembly Bill No. 617 (AB-617) can serve as a template to create a plan.<sup>30</sup> AB-617 addresses air pollution by offering advanced technologies to monitor air quality and enforces measures that reduce emissions in areas with poor air quality.<sup>31</sup> Accurate air quality reports are important for monitoring and reducing emissions, so using effective technology is key. AB-617 requires the state to enact a monitoring and emission-reducing plan in the highest risk communities. As a result, accountability increases between companies emitting toxins and the communities directly affected by them through state intervention. One concern with this plan in both Detroit and California is a lack of funding. For this plan to be effective, a steady source of funding must be available to continue monitoring, development, and community engagement. These costs accumulate with frequent maintenance and improvements for the technologies. Despite high funding costs, this plan introduces protections for the quality of life of Black people in Detroit. A modification to AB-617 to also

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<sup>29</sup> Wisnieski L, Strane D, Anderson B, Wahl R, and Garcia E. Disparities in Michigan's Asthma Burden. Lansing, Michigan: Bureau of Disease Control, Prevention, and Epidemiology, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Assembly Bill 617 (C. Garcia, Chapter 136, Statutes of 2017)

<sup>31</sup> Davis, Stacey. "California's AB 617: A New Frontier in Air Quality Management...if Funded." Center for Clean Air Policy, August 2, 2017. <https://ccap.org/californias-ab-617-a-new-frontier-in-air-quality-management-if-funded/>.



designate manufacturing zones in which toxin-emitting companies can be located will maximize this plan in Detroit. This will prevent companies from emitting harmful toxins amid residential zones in Detroit, most of which have high proportions of Black people. This buffer zone between pollutants and areas where Black people live, work, and attend school is necessary for reducing asthma rates and improving the quality of life of Black people in Detroit.

## 2. *Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy Policies*

Air quality must be improved to reduce the disproportionate levels of asthma among Black people in Detroit. To do so, the Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE), which has previously been cited for environmental racism, must reduce the level of stored toxic waste in Detroit.<sup>32</sup> EGLE's current toxin emission thresholds under Michigan's Air Quality Division Policy and Procedure 13 (AQD-013) are too high.<sup>33</sup> Under this policy, companies that do not exceed the threshold are not required to report toxin emissions. This is problematic to air quality monitoring and the health of Black people in Detroit. Additionally, EGLE must also increase its existing harmful emission fees to disincentivize companies from emitting toxins. EGLE's current Renewable Operating Permit Program designates fees, based on facility type and potential output, that are too low to disincentivize companies from emitting harmful toxins.<sup>34</sup> Increasing the fees to the point where air toxin emissions can be minimized without encouraging the relocation of essential infrastructure for the Detroit economy will benefit Black communities without hurting the city. By using the revenue generated by these increased fees, proper air quality improvements can be invested in. Reducing air toxins will lessen asthma triggers in Black communities of Detroit which will reduce the high asthma rates and asthma hospitalization rates for Black people in Detroit.

## **Recommendation**

Implementing legislation to better monitor and reduce air toxin emissions is the best option for combating environmental racism in Detroit. Solely implementing new technologies or increasing fees is not effective alone. AB-617 combines two important solutions for reducing air pollution: increasing penalties and adding new, effective technologies for monitoring air toxin emissions. The increased penalties further disincentivize companies from emitting harmful toxins into

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<sup>32</sup> Leonard, Nicholas. "Nondiscrimination in Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) Programs Policy and Procedure Number 09-024 ." *Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy*, 27 July 2020, Nondiscrimination in Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) Programs Policy and Procedure Number 09-024.

<sup>33</sup> Asselin, Catherine. Issue brief. *Criteria Pollutant Threshold Levels for the Point Source Emissions Inventory*. Lansing , MI: EGLE, 2020.

[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/DEQ-AQD-PP-013\\_447005\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/deq/DEQ-AQD-PP-013_447005_7.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. "You Are HereEGLE Air Emissions." EGLE - Fee Calculations, 2019. [https://www.michigan.gov/egle/0,9429,7-135-3310\\_4103-288670--,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/egle/0,9429,7-135-3310_4103-288670--,00.html).

already disadvantaged communities, an essential component of air pollution reduction. These penalties will prompt air quality reform by reinvesting those additional funds earned into Black communities within Detroit to fund air quality initiatives in homes, schools, and other common infrastructure. Such initiatives would include providing adequate air filtration systems for homes, schools, and workplaces, as well as improving sustainable healthcare education within Black communities of Detroit. Long-term changes are key to halting environmental racism. Phasing out sources of pollution and instituting new, green policies and infrastructure will incite change. This will help reduce asthma rates and asthma hospitalization rates among Black people in Detroit as air pollution is a problem within and beyond physical infrastructure.

Cost is an important factor, and the technologies described in AB-617 are expensive. Despite this, these technologies are essential in building a universal air toxin monitoring and reporting system that ensures data transparency and combat environmental racism. AB-617 ensures active engagement between companies, communities, and the state. The increased costs incurred from these technological advancements would work to offset the money spent by Detroiters on asthma treatments, including hospitalization, prescriptions, and doctor visits. Consistent and accurate reporting of air quality levels and toxin emissions are a crucial part of any air pollution reduction plan. The city of Detroit, and the Black communities within, require an environmental overhaul that prioritizes individual safety. AB-617 offers a multilevel solution, using increased penalties and modern technology, to the complex problems of environmental racism. Together, these solutions will lead to the reduction of asthma rates as well as asthma hospitalization rates among Black people in Detroit.

## **Acknowledgments**

“We’d like to thank Dr. Staurt Batterman and Dr. J. Timothy Dvonch for meeting with us. Through our conversations about air quality in Detroit, we were able to improve our research about environmental racism, effective policies, and common misconceptions about air pollution.”

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# Unequal Funding in Milwaukee Public School District

Max Katz, Allison Nadelman, Rachel Song, Kate Weiland

## Executive Summary

In the 2018-2019 academic year, the Milwaukee Public School District (MPSD) had 22,055 students who were unable to read at a basic level. Of those students who failed to meet standards, 63% of them were African American while only 4.7% of them were Caucasian. Despite government action and national attention, schools continue to fail their students. As illiteracy rates of African American students in MPSD increased 8.4% in the last two school years—and the national illiteracy rates have exponentiated—it is clear that novel action is needed.<sup>35</sup> Two possible options that could address the educational disparities are the tax credit option or reallocation of school funding. We propose the reallocation of school funding from property taxes to income taxes because it would allow education experts and state officials to decide where the money is best spent and increase average performance throughout the state.

## Background

Government inaction coupled with ineffective school policy perpetuates school segregation and unequal funding. This creates a space in which African American students are disadvantaged before they enter the MPSD. Broken funding schemes such as the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) led to both a loss in funding for MPSD and “resegregation of schools by race.”

<sup>36</sup>Similarly, many schools receive funding through property taxes. As many inner-city families own less expensive houses, families are forced to pay a higher percentage of their income toward property taxes. Yet, their schools are significantly underfunded compared to suburban schools that pay a lesser percentage of their income toward property tax. Property tax funding schemes, and similar funding mechanisms, have been upheld by the Supreme Court through cases such as *San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez*.

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<sup>35</sup> Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, November 12, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Bonds, Raquel L. Farmer-Hinton and Edgar G. Epps, 2009.

Additionally, crippling state and national limitations/statutes, such as the CARES Act, allocate money intended for low-income schools to higher-income schools including higher education and private schools in the area. As a result of these programs, African American students have little opportunity to rectify their educational status. Thus, it is imperative that school funding schemes—and the federal statutes anchoring them—be analyzed and recreated, ensuring that every student has an equitable opportunity for education.

## Options

### 1. *Tax Credit Method*

One method to be implemented to eliminate educational inequity perpetuated by school funding is a tax credit option. A tax credit would allow families who choose to invest in primary and secondary education to receive tax benefits, incentivizing them to prioritize investing in education.<sup>37</sup>

Sometimes, families in educationally unequal schools do not view education as a critical component of success, as money can be a more limited resource in these areas. Thus, they do not tend to prioritize spending money on their children's education. A government-sponsored tax credit allowing families to save money if they spent more on education would lead to an increase in the percent of income directly applied to schooling. In turn, this should begin to create a more equitable public education system. An issue with this option is that historically, tax credits have only been utilized by upper/middle-class populations because of a lack of easily accessible information about the program. Rather than yielding more educational equity, a tax credit option could cater directly to the cohort of students who already attend quality schools, thus increasing educational polarization.

### 2. *Changing the Manner in Which Schools Are Funded*

Another way to address educational inequality in the Milwaukee Public School system would be to change the manner in which schools are funded. Currently, schools are mostly funded through local property tax, while the state and federal governments provide subsidies and benefits to specific schools. Oftentimes, schools with a greater percentage of poverty receive less funding than schools with a lower number because poor communities' tax base is lower, so the community is unable to adequately support students. In addition, political decisions, such as allowing residents of wealthy districts to impose taxes designed to raise money to support their schools and racial restrictions on property deeds, which keep housing prices and taxes higher in some areas, segregating minorities from wealthy whites, further exacerbate educational inequality in poor communities.<sup>38</sup> A possible remedy for educational inequality would be to fund schools

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<sup>37</sup> Jeff Raikes, September 19, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Linda Darling-Hammond, 2004.

through a system of state income tax. This would allow all public schools in the state to have an equal amount of resources, addressing the funding disparity between poor and wealthy schools in Wisconsin.

One downfall of using state income taxes to fund public schools is the property tax reduction. At first, property tax reduction may sound like a beneficial idea as it allocates money to schools to help them address the local tax burden. However, the property tax reduction is used to uphold the unequal distribution of funds, as many wealthier districts either accept the funding to increase their school revenue or allow those districts to maintain the same school services while decreasing their taxes.<sup>39</sup> This, in turn, permits the wealthier districts to increase their local wealth. In addition, the property tax reduction hardly benefits the lower-income districts as the money allocated by the state is not enough to improve the schools or eliminate their tax burden.

## **Recommendation**

Changing the funding sources of schools would be the most effective approach to addressing the unequal distribution of funding in MPSD. This is the best solution because, if executed properly, there will be an equitable distribution of funding in both wealthy and poor districts. Changing the funding sources will directly attack the root of the issue, forcing a more equal distribution of funding, whereas a tax credit option provides individuals with the option to invest in education, which is not as effective as citizens are not obligated to participate.<sup>40</sup> Further, tax credits polarize educational funding, making it more difficult for low-income families to properly contribute to their children's education. Changing the funding sources is an all-encompassing method that is aimed to benefit every citizen, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

The best method to reshape how schools are funded is through reallocating school funding from property tax to income tax. While every individual pays both property and income tax, property taxes are given to schools by the municipality. This is inherently unequal as areas with higher property values will subsequently have better-funded schools<sup>41</sup>. Many districts have challenged this distribution of funding through the courts, yet through cases like *San Antonio Independent School District vs. Rodriguez*, it has been found that this funding mechanism is constitutional. If income tax was to be used, the state would have the ability to redistribute funding to schools that need it most. This model would allow education experts and state officials to decide where the money is best spent. Although this may lead to a slight decrease in funding for top-performing schools, the average increase in performance throughout the state would be drastic. Further, over the last ten years, there has been a near 10% increase in the amassed income tax (on average, per state) while

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<sup>39</sup> Ailsa Chang, Jonaki Metha, July 7, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Reschovsky, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Raikes, Jeff, Darling-Hammond, Linda, Feb. 18, 2019.

property tax has only increased by roughly 3%. Shifting school funding to income tax would increase the amount of money each school can receive.

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# Education, Housing, and Democratic Access

**Yasmine Elkharsa\*, Jason Steiger, Ethan Story**

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## **Executive Summary**

For too long, minority communities have been disadvantaged in the democratic process. Though there are several reasons for this, one key reason is education inequality, which damages the long-term prospects of already disadvantaged communities. Students of color often have far fewer resources with far more staff turnover, adding up to an inadequate education that eventually leads to lower career opportunities and decreased democratic participation. To solve these inequalities, initiatives such as increased or weighted school funding and inclusionary zoning should be implemented. These policies would help balance the scales and improve the quality of education across the board.

## **Background**

The implications of slavery and Jim Crow are far from over. Racist policies and behaviors, once very transparent in American society, have been quietly reconstructed to shape today's democracy. The intersection of education and housing policy within communities of color is a principal example of this disenfranchisement. Exclusionary zoning laws, among other housing policies, perpetuate segregation within schools and communities based on race and economic status.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in approximately half of the largest 100 cities in the United States, most African American students attend schools where at least 75% of all students are poor or low-income.<sup>43</sup> Since African Americans generally have lower incomes than do white Americans—due to the reinforcements of systemic racism—the property values within minority neighborhoods are often much lower than their predominantly white neighborhood counterparts. In turn, the widespread

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[https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/a\\_shared\\_future\\_disrupting\\_reciprocal\\_relationship.pdf](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/a_shared_future_disrupting_reciprocal_relationship.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> "School Poverty: National Equity Atlas." School Poverty | National Equity Atlas.

[https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/School\\_poverty#/.](https://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/School_poverty#/)

and heavy reliance on property taxes for school funding contributes significantly to the large disparities in school funding between low-income and high-income, less diverse communities.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the schools within minority neighborhoods often struggle to provide quality education to their students in comparison to schools located in wealthy districts.

The negative impacts of educational inequality are well documented. Students of color face the repercussions of disproportionate allocation of resources, present-day segregationist policies, and community division based on race and socioeconomic inequities. Due to these inequalities, there is an urgent need for housing and education reform. These reforms should empower students of color with improved career outcomes and increased democratic access.

## Options

### 1. *Inclusionary Zoning Laws*

A possible solution for segregation within districts and schools is inclusionary zoning (IZ) laws. In the status quo, IZ laws ensure affordable housing for families in need of assistance by mandating or incentivizing developers to provide a portion of their units at a below-market level.<sup>45</sup> Generally, developers who partake in IZ laws sell or lease 10-20% of their residential projects to families who qualify for below-market-rate units.<sup>46</sup> Since most developers build these affordable units on-site, IZ laws encourage both class and racial integration. Through increasing diversity within districts and, thus, schools, IZ laws would likely reduce structural disparities in access to quality education based on race.

While IZ laws have become increasingly popular in the last two decades, their effectiveness has yet to be determined because the methods by which IZ laws are currently implemented vary by state and by county. Local governments can either mandate or incentivize developers to establish affordable housing units for families in need. However, many critics of IZ laws argue that the policy does not generate enough affordable housing for very low-income families. Since the price of

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<sup>44</sup> Carmel Martin, Ulrich Boser. "A Quality Approach to School Funding." Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2018/11/13/460397/quality-approach-school-funding/>.

<sup>45</sup> Kriti Ramakrishnan, Mark Treskon, and Solomon Greene. "Inclusionary Zoning: What Does the Research Tell Us about the Effectiveness of Local Action?," January 2019. [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary\\_zoning.\\_what\\_does\\_the\\_research\\_tell\\_us\\_about\\_the\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_local\\_action\\_2.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary_zoning._what_does_the_research_tell_us_about_the_effectiveness_of_local_action_2.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> Kriti Ramakrishnan, Mark Treskon, and Solomon Greene. "Inclusionary Zoning: What Does the Research Tell Us about the Effectiveness of Local Action?," January 2019. [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary\\_zoning.\\_what\\_does\\_the\\_research\\_tell\\_us\\_about\\_the\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_local\\_action\\_2.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary_zoning._what_does_the_research_tell_us_about_the_effectiveness_of_local_action_2.pdf).

below-market-rate units is determined by the average median income (AMI), developers often provide a greater number of middle-income units—defined as those earning 80-120% percent of the AMI— and a lower number of low-income units—defined as those earning less than 50% of the AMI—as the latter necessitates a greater subsidy per unit.<sup>47</sup> As a result, only 2% of below-market units created through IZ laws target those who earn less than 50% of the AMI, meaning that most below-market-rate units target middle-income families instead.<sup>48</sup> Other critics posit that poor implementation and weak enforcement of IZ laws, coupled with fluctuations in the value of housing markets, impact 1) the number of affordable units allotted by the developer, and 2) the long term affordability of the units.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, these same factors may affect developers by augmenting the price of market-rate houses, which may reduce sales of market-rate units and increase construction prices. Thus, the debate regarding the effectiveness and viability of IZ laws hinges on whether or not local governments believe that the economic and educational benefits of increased affordable housing for low-income families outweigh the economic costs of the same on private-market developments.

## 2. *Weighted Student Funding*

Another possible solution is incentivizing teachers to join and work at low-income schools through increased funding. One of the major deficiencies of low-income schools is a lack of quality teachers, with inexperienced teachers being twice as likely to be assigned to low-income schools.<sup>50</sup> This causes a large educational gap, as experienced teachers are known to be more effective educators that can better motivate students and tailor instruction to different needs.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, teachers in schools that are majority-minority change schools twice as often as teachers at schools with fewer minority students<sup>52</sup>. It also is more expensive to educate

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<sup>47</sup> Benjamin Schneider. "CityLab University: Inclusionary Zoning." Bloomberg CityLab. July 17, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-17/inclusionary-zoning-everything-you-need-to-know>.

<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Schneider. "CityLab University: Inclusionary Zoning." Bloomberg CityLab. July 17, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-17/inclusionary-zoning-everything-you-need-to-know>.

<sup>49</sup> Kirti Ramakrishnan, Mark Treskon, and Solomon Greene. "Inclusionary Zoning: What Does the Research Tell Us about the Effectiveness of Local Action?," January 2019. [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary\\_zoning.\\_what\\_does\\_the\\_research\\_tell\\_us\\_about\\_the\\_effectiveness\\_of\\_local\\_action\\_2.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99647/inclusionary_zoning._what_does_the_research_tell_us_about_the_effectiveness_of_local_action_2.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> AFT Union. "Attracting Well-Qualified Teachers to Struggling Schools." American Federation of Teachers. November 03, 2014. <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/winter-2002/attracting-well-qualified-teachers-struggling>.

<sup>51</sup> AFT Union. "Attracting Well-Qualified Teachers to Struggling Schools." American Federation of Teachers. November 03, 2014. <https://www.aft.org/periodical/american-educator/winter-2002/attracting-well-qualified-teachers-struggling>.

<sup>52</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (1998). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Cited in Haycock, K. (2000, Spring). No more settling for less. *Thinking K-16*, 4(1), p. 3-12. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

low-income students, who often need laptops, internet access, and basic school supplies provided to them. Thus, state governments could drastically increase funding for low-income and majority-minority schools. One way to accomplish this is through Weighted Student Funding (WSF), which allocates funding based on individual student needs. In 2013, Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the third-largest school district in the country, adopted WSF for the first time. Nearly 80% of CPS students are low-income, providing a unique challenge for a school district that was once known as the worst in America.<sup>53</sup> Since WSF has been implemented, 41% of CPS funding is distributed according to student need, with schools receiving extra funding if they serve a disproportionately large number of low-income or English Language Learner (ELL) students.<sup>54</sup> This has strengthened Chicago Public Schools dramatically, with the funding used for providing students with the necessary technology and transportation needed to attend school while improving the teaching and counseling staff. Even still, many schools are still underfunded, signaling that WSF alone is not enough<sup>55</sup>. California took the WSF model statewide, implementing the Local Control Funding Formula. Early results have shown an increase in funding equity, as well as increased collaboration between financial and academic administrators.<sup>56</sup> However, this newfound equity is largely between school districts, not individual schools, meaning that low-income students are often still on the short-end of the funding stick. According to a study completed at the University of California at Berkeley, the Los Angeles Unified School District still short-changes low-income students, despite complying with the LCFF<sup>57</sup>. Administrative hurdles also persist, taking educators away from their primary job of teaching students the best they can. These examples are simply case studies, with WSF being a legitimate option nationwide for states to close the educational gap.

## Recommendation

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<sup>53</sup> Brown, Karin Chenoweth and Catherine. "A Few Unique Things About Chicago Public Schools." Center for American Progress. November 04, 2019.

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/news/2018/04/13/449513/unique-things-chicago-public-schools/>.

<sup>54</sup> The Chicago Public Education Fund. "Equity and School Funding in Chicago Public Schools," December 2019.

[https://thefundchicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Equity-And-School-Funding-In-CPS\\_spreads.pdf](https://thefundchicago.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Equity-And-School-Funding-In-CPS_spreads.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> The Chicago Public Education Fund. "Equity and School Funding in Chicago Public Schools," December 2019.

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<sup>56</sup> Aaron Garth Smith May 4, 2020. "California's Local Control Funding Formula Provides a Model For K-12 School Finance Reform." Reason Foundation. May 04, 2020.

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<sup>57</sup> CLASS, and United Way of Greater Los Angeles. "Progress in Los Angeles Schools – Rigor, Fairness, and Engaging Families," June 2018.

<https://news.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/United-Way-CLASS-Report-Final-Friday-1-June-Embargoed-1.pdf>.

The solution that would be the most beneficial in working to solve housing and education inequalities would be a combination of inclusionary zoning laws and increased school funding, with an emphasis on the latter. With inclusionary zoning laws, we recommend that states and localities mandate developers in certain areas to allot portions of their units to low-income families. Since there is a causal relationship between healthy, affordable housing and attendance and graduation rates, expanding inclusionary zoning laws would establish a positive feedback loop between housing policy and educational outcomes.<sup>58</sup> While mandates are necessary for ensuring that more families receive affordable housing, they may deter developers from building sustainable, high-quality housing complexes. To this end, we recommend that the IZ requirements increase proportionally to the size of the developer's proposed project. Additionally, to ensure that IZ laws target a wider range of low-income families, we suggest that the average price of a below-market-rate unit be lowered so that more families can afford to buy or rent a unit. The long term success of IZ laws in improving housing and education hinges on this suggestion, as families whose incomes fall between 30-80% of the AMI currently do not qualify for housing vouchers and can not afford a below-market-rate unit. Since lowering the average price of below-market-rate housing would further increase prices for developers, local governments should create and/or increase incentives (such as density bonuses) to ensure the viability of this recommendation. While IZ laws are just one of many policy mediums necessary in solving the housing crisis, they play an essential role in desegregation efforts.

Since school funding is currently derived from property taxes, inclusionary zoning laws would also create more equity within school funding by disrupting the cycle of housing segregation between affluent white Americans and people of color. However, since inclusionary zoning laws would not allocate additional funding to low-income public schools, but rather would redistribute money that is already circulating, it is imperative that these laws are coupled with weighted student funding policies. The impacts of weighted student funding are two-fold: More funding would incentivize experienced teachers to join and remain in low-income schools, while also ensuring that more resources are available to the students who need them most. With the success of WSF in many urban centers and states like California, school districts would have a model to build upon to create a more equitable education policy. The combination of inclusionary zoning laws and weighted student funding would foster more diverse populations throughout all districts, as well as play a significant role in equilibrating school funding.

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Cunningham and Graham MacDonald. "Housing as a Platform for Improving Education Outcomes among Low-Income Children." Urban Institute , May 2012. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/25331/412554-Housing-as-a-Platform-for-Improving-Education-Outcomes-among-Low-Income-Children.PDF>.

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# Depression, Systemic Racism, and Primary Care

**Sarah Bellovich, Samantha Gordon, Madison Porter, Gaurang Vaidya**

## **Executive Summary**

African American residents of Michigan are at an increased risk for depression,<sup>59</sup> yet are less likely to be screened for this disorder.<sup>60</sup> Primary care doctors contribute to this health difference by failing to screen patients for depression as often as they should. Patient Health Questionnaire screenings (PHQ-2 and PHQ-9) are used to detect and diagnose depression. An increase in the quantity and quality of PHQ screenings administered by physicians treating African American patients in Michigan will increase the quality of care that patients receive for depression. A possible option for increasing the effective administration of PHQ screenings in Michigan is to provide primary care physicians a monetary incentive for administering a designated number of screenings. A second possible option is to develop and implement a training program for primary care physicians in Michigan who treat patients aged 27-65 to improve physician understanding and connection to mental health issues. It is recommended that this training program is implemented to increase diagnoses and treatment of depression among African American adults in Michigan.

## **Background**

The primary healthcare system in Michigan fails to properly address depressive disorders among African American individuals. Nationally, African Americans are 3.3% more likely to meet depressive disorder criteria than White Americans.<sup>61</sup> Despite this increased risk for depression,

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<sup>59</sup>Erik J. Rodriguez et al., "Relationships between Allostatic Load, Unhealthy Behaviors, and Depressive Disorder in U.S. Adults, 2005–2012 NHANES," *Preventive Medicine* 110 (May 2018): 9–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.02.002>.

<sup>60</sup>"Depression Screening Rates in Primary Care Remain Low," *Psychiatry.org*, 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/depression-screening-rates-in-primary-care-remain-low#:~:text=African%20Americans%20were%20half%20as,more%20difficult%20to%20recognized%20depression.>

<sup>61</sup>Erik J. Rodriguez et al., "Relationships between Allostatic Load, Unhealthy Behaviors, and Depressive Disorder in U.S. Adults, 2005–2012 NHANES," *Preventive Medicine* 110 (May 2018): 9–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.02.002>.

African Americans are half as likely as White Americans to be screened for depression.<sup>62</sup> This health disparity is in part caused by implicit racial bias among healthcare professionals.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, African American adults are less likely to seek outpatient mental health services than non-African American male counterparts.<sup>64</sup> In Michigan, 38% of the 1.76 million people experiencing mental illness do not receive treatment,<sup>65</sup> and depression is a commonly untreated condition.<sup>66</sup> African Americans in Michigan battle mental illness in a healthcare system that is not set up to support them.

Most patients with depression receive most or all of their care through primary care physicians.<sup>67</sup> However, primary care physicians underdiagnose and undertreat depression, largely due to greater focus on other chronic health issues and patient stigma.<sup>68</sup> Primary care visits are often brief as well, making a physician's ability to screen for depression more difficult.<sup>69</sup> The United States Preventive Service Task Force recommends screening all adults for depression regardless of risk level,<sup>70</sup> as well as adolescents aged 12-18.<sup>71</sup> Despite these recommendations, primary care physicians have the discretion to screen patients for depression. Primary care physicians use the PHQ-2 and PHQ-9 to screen patients for depression. The PHQ-2 is an initial screening tool for depression; a physician administers the PHQ-9 only if their patient's PHQ-2 screening indicates depression.<sup>72</sup> The PHQ-9 provides primary care physicians with information necessary to create treatment plans for their patients.<sup>73</sup> An increase in the quantity and quality of PHQ screenings

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<sup>62</sup> "Depression Screening Rates in Primary Care Remain Low," Psychiatry.org, 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/news-releases/depression-screening-rates-in-primary-care-remain-low#:~:text=African%20Americans%20were%20half%20as,more%20difficult%20to%20recognized%20depression.>

<sup>63</sup> William J. Hall et al., "Implicit Racial/Ethnic Bias Among Health Care Professionals and Its Influence on Health Care Outcomes: A Systematic Review," *American Journal of Public Health* 105, no. 12 (December 2015): e60-76, <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.2015.302903>.

<sup>64</sup> Earlise Ward and Maigenete Mengesha, "Depression in African American Men: A Review of What We Know and Where We Need to Go from Here.," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 83, no. 2-3 (April 2013): 386-97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajop.12015>.

<sup>65</sup> Rhyan et al., *Access to Behavioral Health Care in Michigan: Final Report* (Altarum, 2019).

<sup>66</sup> Schwenk, Thomas L, Linda B Terrell, Van R Harrison, Amy L Tremper, and Marcia A Valenstien. "UMHS Depression Guideline Update." *Michigan Medicine*, December 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Albert L. Siu et al., "Screening for Depression in Adults," *JAMA* 315, no. 4 (January 26, 2016): 380, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2015.18392>.

<sup>71</sup> Douglas M Maurer, "Screening for Depression," *American Family Physician* 85, no. 2 (2020): 139-44, <https://www.aafp.org/afp/2012/0115/p139.html>.

<sup>72</sup> "Patient Health Questionnaire-2 (PHQ-2) - Mental Disorders Screening - National HIV Curriculum," Uw.edu, 2015, <https://www.hiv.uw.edu/page/mental-health-screening/phq-2#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20the%20PHQ,criteria%20for%20a%20depressive%20disorder.>

<sup>73</sup> "PHQ-9 Depression Scale | University of Washington AIMS Center," Uw.edu, 2020, <https://aims.uw.edu/resource-library/phq-9-depression-scale>.

performed by primary care physicians in Michigan would likely improve the quality of care among Black individuals in Michigan with depression.

## **Options**

### *1. Monetary Incentive for Primary Care Physicians*

Primary care physicians can be incentivized to perform PHQ screenings through increased pay. Physicians currently decide whether or not to screen patients for depression; the ambiguity leaves room for dismissal of this important practice. Doctors may be motivated to perform more screenings if they receive a monetary incentive for doing so. This initiative could be government-funded and integrated into the Michigan Health and Human Services Budget. A limitation of this incentive is the cost; the initiative must result in increased treatment for depression to be worth the cost. Additionally, the quota to earn this bonus must be determined in conjunction with the number of patients seen and the amount of money to ensure effective motivation for the physicians. A bonus will likely promote the administration of PHQ screenings among primary care doctors, increasing identification and treatment of depression among Michigan residents.

### *2. Training Program for Primary Care Physicians*

Primary care physicians wield the power to improve the quality of life of their patients who struggle with depression, but they have to be attuned to this issue to provide quality care. Michigan Child Care Collaborative Training (MC3), a program implemented throughout Michigan, aims to help physicians understand how to properly address behavioral health issues among patients under age 26 and pregnant women. MC3 Training leaves a need for training and improved patient care for the ages 27 and above. A possible solution is to develop a training program for primary care physicians in Michigan who treat patients aged 27-65 that would teach them how to properly deal with behavioral health issues, such as depression. Patients older than 65 require a different approach to mental health as they enter into a geriatric health status. We propose that the development of this training will be government-funded. Primary care physicians who treat patients aged 27-65 will have access to this training program. A component of this training program will address racial bias in healthcare. This component will target the racial bias that contributes to lower-quality care for behavioral health issues among African Americans. The development of this training will require significant funding and planning by the Michigan government, as this program must be developed from the ground up.

## **Recommendation**

Physicians are likely to provide higher quality care when they feel connected to the issues they are addressing. A training program that will help primary care physicians in Michigan understand their role in combating depression will aim to make these physicians truly care about battling the high prevalence of this mental disorder and more aware of how to effectively do so. These physicians will be more likely to increase the effective administration of PHQ screenings if they understand depression and its expression in patients.

MC3 training has seen high satisfaction rates with 97% of primary care physicians satisfied.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, we expect that primary care physicians who treat patients aged 27-65 will also be satisfied with a similar program. MC3, acting as a model for this new program, will provide a solid framework for the effective development of this program. This program aims to increase the administration of PHQ screenings among patients aged 27-65 in Michigan; an increase in identification and treatment of depression in this age group will help address the statewide problem of underdiagnosed and undertreated depression. The program will also address racial bias among primary care physicians, aiming to limit discriminatory behaviors that lead to inadequate diagnosis and treatment of depression. Therefore, this program will predictably lead to higher quality care for African American adults in Michigan with depression through increased understanding and administration of PHQ screenings.

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Dr. Terence Joiner for meeting with us. Through our conversation about the role that primary care physicians have in addressing mental health, we were able to improve our research about ways to improve the quality of mental health care in primary care settings. We would also like to thank Tiffany Devon for meeting with us; our discussion about the disconnect between primary care and behavioral health helped us further explore the role that primary care physicians can have in addressing mental health issues. We also spoke with Michelle Mualem, and she helped us understand how primary care does not always address the mental health needs of its patient populations; this inspired us to look into the PHQ screenings.

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<sup>74</sup>“The Michigan Child Collaborative Care Program: Building a Telepsychiatry Consultation Service | Psychiatric Services,” Psychiatric Services, 2020, <https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/full/10.1176/appi.ps.201800151>.

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# Disproportionate Application of the Death Penalty in Georgia

Sarah Graber, Preston Parana, Lizzy Peppercorn, Talia Rubin

## Executive Summary

Throughout Georgia's history, it has been evident that racial discrimination exists through the application of the death penalty. In various death penalty cases that have been reviewed, the suspect's racial identity is believed to have impacted the severity of their sentence<sup>1</sup>. In the 1987 case *McCleskey vs. Kemp*, the Supreme Court held that statistical evidence of racial bias in the capital punishment system was not unconstitutional<sup>2</sup>. Shifting government focus to rehabilitation, abolishing the death penalty, and implementing selective criteria for qualification and peremptory strikes may reduce racial disparities in Georgia's death penalty sentencing. Since enhancing rehabilitation opportunities and eliminating peremptory strikes will respectively decrease the rate of crimes that qualify for the death penalty and minimize personal bias among jurors, this is the most effective solution to decrease discrimination in Georgia's death row.

## Background

The color of a victim and suspect's skin play a big role in the longevity and severity of their sentence in the United States. In comparison to white men, Black men receive federal prison sentences 20% longer for the same crimes<sup>3</sup>. In particular, the 1987 Supreme Court case *McCleskey v. Kemp* within the state of Georgia revealed the harsh racial disparities of the state's capital punishment system. The counsel on behalf of a death row prisoner Warren McClesky argued that death penalty sentences in Georgia were racially biased related to the race of the victim. The court ruled against McClesky who was executed by electrocution in 1991, ruling that racial disparities in the death penalty were not a violation of one's Constitutional right of "equal protection of the law"<sup>4</sup>.

Based on discrimination in our nation's history and the criminal justice system, it is clear that changes must be made to current policy on the application of the death penalty. As of 2020, 28 states are still utilizing the death penalty while 22 states have had it outlawed<sup>5</sup>. The death penalty is commonly perceived to be a crime deterrent, but this belief is not supported by the evidence.

For instance, The Times found that the homicide rate in states with the death penalty has been 48 percent to 101 percent higher than in states without the death penalty<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately, enhancing the government's focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment of all victims and abolishing peremptory strikes are crucial action steps that must be taken to address the blatant prejudice in the criminal justice system.

## Options

### 1. *Shift Focus to Rehabilitation to Lower Rates of Violent Crimes that Allow for a Death Penalty Sentence.*

Recidivism can be lowered by 25% with rehabilitation principles such as targeting the known predictors of recidivism, promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors, focusing treatment on high-risk offenders, and employing well-trained and interpersonally sensitive staff<sup>7</sup>. While the U.S. initially embarked on its tough on crime era with the notion that rehabilitation is ineffective<sup>8</sup>, existing research demonstrates that rehabilitation programs have reduced recidivism by 10%<sup>7</sup>. Those convicted of violent crimes usually have an intensive criminal history<sup>9</sup>. Lowering the recidivism rate for crimes that do not warrant the death penalty can decrease the occurrence of more violent crimes that result in death penalty sentences. There will also be a decrease in the prison population, alleviating the strain corrections expenses have put on budgets since the American prison population increased 700% in the last 40 years<sup>10</sup>.

### 2. Abolish the Death Penalty Altogether

Currently, it is up to individual states to decide whether or not to utilize the death penalty; therefore, Georgia's state government or state Supreme Court could decide to abolish it. The most likely way for Georgia to abolish capital punishment is for the U.S. Supreme Court to rule the death penalty unconstitutional and apply it federally. This is fairly feasible, since almost half the states have abolished it, and it was already done in 1972. The problem lies in reversibility, which occurred in 1977, making capital punishment legal again. One benefit of abolition is that lifelong incarceration is less expensive than execution<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, black men would no longer be put to death due to the discrimination associated with the death penalty.

### 3. Implement Selective Criteria for Imposing Death Penalty Sentences and Abolish Peremptory Strikes

Peremptory strikes allow for factors such as an individual's skin color to impact how death penalty sentences are ultimately made. Abolishing peremptory strikes can prevent lawyers from striking down potential jury members based on race. Likewise, creating guidelines for statewide use can



reduce death penalty sentences as the jury would have to unanimously find, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the defendant violated one of the aggravating circumstances. This plan may be ineffective because not all capital cases are reviewed by a jury. Nationally, nearly 80,000 people were defendants in federal criminal cases in fiscal 2018, but only 2% of them went to trial<sup>12</sup>. However, it is proven that this benefits taxpayers through equal juror representation. Abolishing peremptory strikes will lead to fewer capital punishments, which decreases the amount spent by taxpayers on further appeals<sup>13</sup>.

## **Recommendation**

The focus of the Georgian justice system should shift from punishment to rehabilitation while imposing selective criteria for death penalty cases as this is the most effective solution to decrease discrimination on death row. While investing in mental health resources, counseling, academic and art classes, and personalized treatments may be costly, prisons will save money on housing and feeding prisoners with shorter sentences and reduced recidivism. By implementing rehabilitative programs such as focusing treatment interventions on high-risk offenders and targeting the known predictors of recidivism for change, inmates that would usually be at risk of committing a serious crime and receiving the death penalty (disproportionately Black men) will be better prepared to reenter society with support and resources from intensive programming.

Obtaining nationwide agreement on criteria that would necessitate the death penalty, specifically on abolishing peremptory strikes, will ensure equal representation within the jury and therefore decrease discrimination on death row. Furthermore, imposing standards that limit death penalty qualification for cases will be highly beneficial to the taxpayers and the defendants themselves. As shown through the supreme court case *Gregg v. Georgia*, the death penalty could only be considered under extreme circumstances, which will decrease death penalty sentences and therefore lessen the cost to taxpayers that corresponds with the outcome of each case. Lastly, while it is clear that not every death penalty case faces a jury, eliminating peremptory strikes will ensure that each defendant has a fair case by minimizing personal bias among jurors.

## **Acknowledgments**

We'd like to thank Ms. Kellie Divis and Ms. Mary Catherine Johnson for meeting with us. Through our conversations about the local Georgian attitudes toward prison reform and current rehabilitation efforts, we were able to improve our research about what policies are feasible in the Georgia prison system. We would also like to thank Mr. Eli Savit for answering our questions surrounding the feasibility of our policy recommendations. His input helped us strengthen our recommendation greatly.

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# Felon Disenfranchisement

**Luke Albritton, Kyto Batt, Mara Pusic, Emily Wallace**

## **Executive Summary**

Discriminatory criminal justice policies over the last 30 years have led to increased arrests, harsher sentencing, and a system of mass incarceration nationwide. Specifically, mass incarceration has disproportionately impacted minority communities in Michigan, specifically African Americans. In Michigan, state law bars incarcerated individuals from voting, thus disenfranchising tens of thousands of potential voters. There are a wide array of possible reforms to the criminal justice system that would increase the amount of eligible voters and participation in our democracy. Some possible policy solutions include creating civic participation classes in prison, abolishing all voter restrictions attached to criminal history, and reforming the parole system. Reforming the parole system is the most logistically feasible and politically attractive option. The size and diversity of the board, frequency of meeting with inmates, and preparation resources for inmates should be all expanded. By reforming these aspects, inmates will be given proper resources to prepare for their meeting with the parole board, and parole board members will be more attune to the needs of criminals. Ultimately, these reforms will ensure Michiganders spend less time in prison and have their voting rights reinstated sooner.

## **Background**

Felon disenfranchisement in the United States can trace its origins all the way to the Civil War and Jim Crow eras. However, modern mass incarceration is largely due to the War on Drugs, which intensified prosecution of drug crimes; the number of non-violent drug-related incarcerations rose from 50,000 to 400,000 between 1980 and 1997. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the U.S. prison population rose from roughly 20,000 people to nearly 160,000 between 1972 and 2009. African Americans made up as high as 42% of these arrests in the early 1990s, despite only 13-20% of drug use being attributed to this population.

Due to policy changes that occurred during the War on Drugs, between 1980 and 1989 arrests for Drug Abuse Violations tripled among African Americans in the state of Michigan. Increased arrests paired with harsher sentencing resulted in long standing effects on minority communities, including disenfranchisement. Michigan State Law bars anyone incarcerated from voting. This

means that over 30,000 individuals are currently disenfranchised in the state of Michigan. For reference, the 2016 Presidential Election was won in Michigan by just over 10,000 votes. Recently, there have been many attempts to decrease the rate of recidivism by increasing the number of individuals on parole, and using “treatment courts” for individuals suffering from drug abuse. However, issues of voter disenfranchisement and rehabilitation in the state of Michigan are far from being resolved.

## **Options**

### *1. Civics and voter participation classes in prisons*

Although Michigan does restore voting rights to individuals upon their release from prisons, this does not necessarily translate to automatic voter registration and/or participation. There are many factors in which this occurs including individuals not knowing how to register to vote or knowing that they are eligible upon their release. This will be more effective than automatic voter registration by ensuring a higher chance of civic participation upon release. These classes may be run by peer educators or other instructors and will enroll inmates 12 months prior to their release. The classes will focus on American civics (ex: differences between the branches of government) and their voting rights.

### *2. Abolishing voting restrictions based on criminal history*

Currently in the state of Michigan, individuals who have been convicted of a crime and are actively serving a sentence in jail or prison cannot vote. A statewide removal of this restriction would grant voting rights to currently incarcerated individuals, which was nearly 40,000 individuals by the end of 2018. This policy would promote the notion that the only requirement to vote in the United States should be citizenship, but many raise concerns about incarcerated individuals’ mental stability. This proposed extent of abolishing all voting restrictions based on criminal history has already been done in Maine and Vermont. Thus, there are no constitutional concerns about passing such a law; however there is a concern of political attractiveness and logistical feasibility.

### *3. Parole Reform*

In Michigan, no current inmates can vote in any local, state, or federal elections. As a result, prison stands as an effective form of voter suppression. The State of Michigan ought to consider reforming their sentencing laws. Currently, the sentencing system in Michigan is quite complex and many actors are involved. To accomplish increased fairness, the Michigan legislature should consider reforming the parole board. Currently some problems with the Michigan parole board include: size, frequency of meeting with inmates, lack of preparation resources for inmates, and the role of prosecutors and victims. The parole board should never allow prosecutor or victim input

to influence parole determinations, inmates should be given resources to prepare for their meeting with the parole board, and each inmate should be given one meeting with the parole board every year after they become eligible for parole. Moreover, the board should be expanded to include people of different backgrounds, including the formerly incarcerated.

## **Recommendation**

Our policy recommendation aims to reform the Michigan parole board as a feasible option that would undertake the issues of criminal justice reform and systemic racism within Michigan. By reforming its parole system, Michigan inmates will not only have a leg up through increased resources for preparing for parole meetings and increased frequency of meetings with the board. They will also have the burden of prosecutorial and victim testimony lifted from the parole process. Beyond this, the parole board itself will be more attuned to prisoners. This policy change will ensure Michiganders spend less time in prison, and have their voting rights reinstated sooner.

Expanding the parole board is a relatively feasible policy recommendation that would address the issues of voter disenfranchisement and criminal justice reform in the state of Michigan. The size of the parole board was last changed in 2011 when Governor Snyder decreased the parole board by 1/3 from 15 to 10. He transferred the authority to appoint the new board from the governor's office to the Corrections Department director (who is currently Heidi E. Washington). Thus, to try to get this policy implemented we would have to have to work directly with Ms. Washington, the MDOC, and the Governor. Governor Whitmer recently praised Washington as leader in prison management. Given Washington's history in criminal justice policy and the fact that the parole board size was changed twice in the last 2 decades, it is logistically feasible that this policy recommendation could be implemented, and the parole board could be expanded.

This policy is also least likely to encounter partisan rejection while directly addressing the issue. This policy has never been proposed in Michigan and, therefore, the reactions from parties is unknown. However, it is unlikely that this would receive a strong partisan rejection since this proposal aims to bring fairness to the criminal justice system and allows both parties to influence the reformed parole board. Furthermore, this reform could be addressed via executive order by the governor which can help bypass any partisan rejection.

This policy does have some unattractive consequences that may make it more difficult to implement or pass through the legislature. The most significant barrier is cost, as expanding the number of full-time members of the parole board requires the government to pay each of those additional people a full-time salary. Additionally, enabling inmates to meet with the parole board

more frequently will increase the amount of time each of the parole board members spends working, likely increasing the compensation of each one.

## **Acknowledgements**

We'd like to thank Dr. Heather Thompson for meeting with us. Through our conversation about criminal justice reform in the state of Michigan we were able to improve our research and policy brief.

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# A Policy Approach to Addressing Food Deserts in Detroit

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## Executive Summary

The city of Detroit is experiencing a public health crisis due to the prevalence of food deserts resulting from historical discriminatory housing practices such as redlining, disproportionately harming Black individuals and families. The lack of access to nutritious food options—which are often more expensive than fast-food and convenience store products—results in negative health outcomes for individuals. These health disparities exist predominantly in poor and historically redlined neighborhoods which often house Black individuals. There are several policy options to address food deserts and their adverse effects on these communities, such as creating a tax incentive for grocery stores to invest in low-income communities who rely primarily on convenience stores for food or creating food education programs within schools to promote lifelong nutrition choices. The most effective policy recommendation is to implement a tax incentive to financially engage nutritious grocery stores, creating a partnership with local businesses and community organizations, hiring local disadvantaged individuals, and forming a commission to ensure that the incentive targets neighborhoods which are not already experiencing gentrification.

## Background

The city of Detroit has historically been racially and economically segregated due to redlining and discriminatory housing practices. Redlining refers to lending discrimination policies, which would deny mortgages for non-white families and would effectively segregate neighborhoods (Mendez). These practices have a particular impact on food insecurity, specifically for already housing-insecure families and communities. In 1968, the U.S. Congress passed the Fair Housing



Act, banning discrimination in the sale or rental of housing based on race, sex, religion, handicap, or national origin (Massey). However, the law was ineffective and did not address the existing inequalities in access to housing and food resources from decades of redlining segregation. In 1999, the State of Michigan further escalated these problems within Detroit by passing Act 212 of 1999 Residency of Public Employees bill. This law prohibited the requirement of municipal workers to live in the areas where they work (Ligon). This further expedited the population and resource loss of Detroit, while also allowing the individuals involved in the decision making of the city to lose their connection to the area.

Public health inequities have always been connected to housing discrimination. As the New York Law School noted in a 2012 study, “the lack of supermarkets within low-income inner-city minority communities is not a demographic accident or a consequence of ‘natural’ settlement patterns [but] rather, government policies.” The concentration of supermarkets and other businesses in areas where Black families have been excluded through housing practices has led to 19 “food deserts” in Detroit alone (Michigan Department of Agriculture).

Food deserts are “geographic areas where residents’ access to affordable, healthy food options (especially fresh fruits and vegetables) is restricted or nonexistent due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient traveling distance” (Food Empowerment Project). This lack of access to quality and affordable food creates inflation in food prices and “forces many residents to purchase food at convenience stores or settle for fast food,” exacerbating health disparities between low-income and high-income communities (Abdel Baqui). In addition, food deserts in majority-Black neighborhoods contribute to the exacerbation of health disparities among Black communities such as “higher rates of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease than other groups, and black children have a 500% higher death rate from asthma compared with white children” (Harvard School of Public Health). Essentially, where one lives plays a large role in access to housing and food networks which contribute greatly to overall health. In a democracy, the government has a responsibility to provide equitable access to these social determinants of health. These health disparities reflect the divide in how different demographics are served and distributed resources by governments and corporations alike.

## **Options**

### *1. Option 1: Using Programming for Healthy Eating and Nutrition*

One policy-based intervention created to address inequalities in food access is to create healthy food options and programming in public schools. An example of this legislation is the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010, created and passed by Congress (“Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act.”).

There are strong benefits to intervening at school to improve public health outcomes for those at most risk for food deserts. This can create a positive change in the diet of children, which is especially prevalent and noticeable in low-income children who often rely completely on school-provided meals through programs like the National School Lunch Program. This is shown to create better meal habits within children (Block and Subramanian). Providing healthful food and nutrition education to school children is one strategy to ensure short- and long-term benefits including better health and learning outcomes.

While there are obvious benefits to this policy, some studies on the effect of child care center interventions do not show positive outcomes, “especially in Hispanic and black children, showing no effect” (Block and Subramanian). Additionally, if policymakers are not aware of the economic costs of purchasing nutritious food for low-income families, the short-term benefits of nutrition programming may not outweigh the costs if these practices cannot financially continue into later life. We must also consider the costs of labor for employees who will implement these policies, and how the economic ability of school districts to do so varies across cities. Another cost of a policy like this is the inability to account for community-based wants and needs for nutritious foods. Parents may not have access to these options due to a lack of quality grocery stores in their community and are financially unable to abide by these recommendations. This is why a broad-based economic plan with school districts is necessary to implement these policies.

## *2. Option 2: Institution of Tax Incentives for Grocery Store Investment in Low-Income Communities*

Another way of addressing food deserts in major cities is to provide tax incentives to grocery stores willing to invest in low-income communities. A policy that implements a tax credit, the Healthy Food Access for All Americans Act, was proposed in 2019. Under this proposal, businesses whose products were at least 35% fresh produce, poultry, dairy, and deli items would qualify as “healthy food providers.” By setting up in an underserved community, they would receive a one-time 15% tax credit.

There are obvious benefits to this policy. Because the costs of developing store spaces and regulatory measures can be prohibitive, a tax incentive would lower the financial barrier of entry for businesses interested in operating in underserved areas (ChangeLab Solutions 2-3). Additionally, opening up healthy grocery stores in food deserts would allow families to eat healthier than when the primary source of food is fast food or convenience stores. The introduction of local grocery stores also dramatically increases competition which increases access to fresh foods and expands consumer options. This effect is most pronounced in lower-income households, which would derive the most significant health benefit from changes in diet (New York City Department

of City Planning 3). Incentives are also conducive to the revitalization of a community. As the Reinvestment Firm found, “A new supermarket can have an economic impact by increasing the number and quality of jobs in the community, increasing overall economic activity in the neighborhood and region, and generating additional tax revenues at both the state and local level”.

However, under this specific policy, businesses would only receive a one-time tax credit. As a result, this may not motivate businesses to remain in underserved communities. Additionally, tax incentives would constitute a sizable portion of a city’s budget, potentially cutting into other social programs needed to help these communities. Many low-income residents often depend on programs such as food stamps or housing assistance programs. Implementing a costly program to encourage grocery stores to invest in these neighborhoods might do more harm than good if not done in the right way. Lastly, engaging in a tax incentive policy requires policymakers to consider the changing economic landscape of their neighborhoods. A tax incentive introduced in 2000 in Washington D.C. had relied on decade-old data, leading many stores in gentrified regions to receive tax credits. (DC Fiscal Policy Institute) Thus, policymakers must commit to periodically examining the criteria and regions that received tax incentives.

## **Recommendation**

Detroit must recognize and address the prevalence of food deserts that have stemmed from historical housing discrimination. It is recommended that Detroit pursue tax incentives for healthy grocery store development to accomplish this. Although pursuing such a policy would incur financial risks, including the upfront budget and the diverting of spending from other sectors such as healthcare, the introduction of healthy stores into underserved areas could provide significant health and economic improvements. Such a policy may be susceptible to the faulty distribution of funds caused by redistricting and population movement, which could be mitigated through a commission of experts who monitor gentrification trends.

Pursuing tax incentives remains the most viable option compared to nutritional programming. Utilizing educational programming in schools is an indirect method of alleviating food insecurity as it does not directly address financial hurdles families face in accessing nutritious foods. Our proposal provides direct economic resources for underserved communities by incentivizing grocery stores to invest in these communities and employ underserved residents. A study by the National Institute of Health found that African-American communities had about 12.5% less healthy food options than white neighborhoods while having 60% more fast food options (Hilmers). A tax incentive policy would dramatically reduce this discrepancy by encouraging healthy food stores to invest in these underserved communities. This would provide greater access to healthy food options, ultimately fostering long-term health benefits.

This will be modeled after a Memphis legislation, the Supermarket Tax Credit for Underserved Areas Act, which called for and successfully implemented the increase of the rate of a rehabilitation tax credit for supermarket buildings and allows the distribution of business tax credits for the sale of fresh food in these underserved areas (Cohen). This legislation also encouraged the hiring of disadvantaged youth, community residents, and veterans, often the very individuals experiencing the residual effects of discriminatory housing practices (Cohen). To address Detroit-specific demographic and economic trends, we suggest partnering with local community organizations and creating a commission to track where the program is being implemented to avoid exacerbating gentrification trends in certain areas. This option can and should be explored by Detroit as an effective solution to mitigating the public health disparities resulting from food deserts.

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# The Effect of COVID-19 on Public Education in Detroit

**Reggie Galanto, Danielle Goodstein, Sammy Jalazo, Drew Theut**

## **Executive Summary**

Secondary education is in critical condition due to COVID-19, especially in large and highly diverse cities like that of Detroit, Michigan. The city is scaffolded into socioeconomic groups which makes attaining a quality education during this turbulent time a pressing issue. To ameliorate this, we can focus on improving three specific points that will tailor a more democratized educational community in Detroit. This memo suggests that policymakers focus their attention and efforts on improving internet access for students in the city school system, providing additional support and structure for hardworking teachers, and fitting all schools with proper ventilation systems. Most of all, we recommend that these schools allocate their resources towards improving their infrastructure by implementing a HEPA air filtration system to better school safety, performance, and accordance with COVID-19 guidelines.

## **Background**

In the 1950s, the city of Detroit flourished financially as the center of the automobile industry in the U.S and housed two million people. The automobile industry declined due to manufacturers outsourcing labor overseas, and this, combined with discriminatory housing processes, left the city with a lower tax base, thus sending it into economic difficulties. Detroit's housing practice of redlining deliberately decreased the economic value of minority neighborhoods, which resulted in devalued neighborhoods, and likewise the education of its residents. As Detroit rose and fell due to economic changes, so did its public school system. The school system, which is 79% African American, still faces many hardships despite small successes in improving the city. This is largely because the Detroit school district has more than double the unemployment rate of the rest of Michigan schools at 19.8%, (Michigan statewide is 7.4%). Additionally, 37.9% of people in the Detroit school district live below the poverty line in comparison to Michigan statewide is 15.6%.

Lastly, 40.7% of families within the Detroit public school district live on food stamps<sup>75</sup>. These factors create an environment where the kids living in this district need significantly more resources for academic success than their peers yet they attend schools with insufficient infrastructure, in debt, and need frequent help from state-appointed emergency managers. Ultimately, an environment emerges that systematically hurts a largely minority district due to the fragile school system that is lacking in resources needed to adapt to the unique circumstances granted by COVID-19, as it is barely able to function properly in normal times. Overall, this left a district underprepared to participate in our country's electoral process due to the subpar education they had received.

## Options

### 1. *An increase in internet access for Detroit public school (DPS) children*

As has been done in other districts throughout the country, DPS should look to partner with private companies and charities to provide wide-scale internet access to students at the school. According to the district's estimates, only around 10% of students that attend DPS have sufficient devices and bandwidth to support online learning.<sup>76</sup> This could be done through lower-cost methods such as expanding the range of public wifi options available on buses or schools. Also, DPS could look for private funding to contribute aid to the school so the school can provide sufficient wireless devices to the kids that would allow them to complete their online schooling. We would aim to partner with multiple local philanthropic foundations in the city to provide the necessary funding. A potential disadvantage could be the lack of feasibility resulting from issues in finding proper funding. However, if proper funding the low cost to the district with a positive outcome of providing all children with the necessary virtual learning tools.

### 2. *An increase in DPS teacher benefits*

An increase in teacher benefits would allow for teachers to maintain the necessary means to productively teach without fear of insufficient support, as well as prevent low teacher retention rates in schools. In August, Governor Whitmer announced that \$65 million in federal aid would be made available for schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students.<sup>77</sup> A

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<sup>75</sup> "Census Profile: Detroit City School District, MI." n.d. State Of The Detroit Child. Accessed November 11, 2020. <https://sdc.datadrivendetroit.org/profiles/97000US2612000-detroit-city-school-district-mi/>.

<sup>76</sup> Students, DPSCD, Receive Wireless, and Wireless Tablets. 1970. "DPSCD Students To Receive Wireless Tablets And Internet Access Through \$23 Million Investment." January 1, 1970. <https://www.detroitk12.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&ModuleInstanceID=4585&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=34069&PageID=1>.

<sup>77</sup> "Whitmer - Governor Whitmer Announces \$65 Million In CARES Act Funding For Michigan Schools." n.d. Accessed November 18, 2020. [https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499\\_90640-537247--,00.html](https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/0,9309,7-387-90499_90640-537247--,00.html).



portion of these funds should be allocated for teacher benefits. A potential advantage is granting teacher benefits will greatly increase political support in the community. The disadvantage comes with the increased cost to the district that is lacking in necessary funds to support other areas of its operations.

### *3. Fitting all Detroit public schools with proper ventilation systems*

For those schools that have remained open throughout the pandemic, as well as those that begin to gradually allow students back in, it is integral to academic success that teachers and students alike are provided with the necessary protections to allow for safe learning. In addition, studies have shown that improved indoor air quality is correlated with higher test scores<sup>78</sup>. Given the current underfunded state of Detroit public schools and their infrastructure, it is unlikely that sufficient ventilation has been installed. Installing portable HEPA filters in every classroom would ensure that disease is not being carried through the buildings as well as an increase in student performance. This could be achieved through reserving 0.3%-1.12% of the 85 million dollars given to the Detroit Public Schools through the CARES Act funding.<sup>79</sup> A potential disadvantage could be that this money would not be allocated to other worthwhile pursuits, however, the installation of these filters are necessary to ensure a productive and safe work environment.

## **Recommendation**

Overall, we feel that our third policy recommendation concerning air filters would be the most effective towards closing the educational gap facing students at Detroit Public Schools. In our conversations with Dr. Vitti, he expressed concern over the low number of parents who felt it was safe to return their kids to in-person school despite the impressive safety protocols set up by the District. These air filters would provide an extra layer of protection with studies proving not only their effectiveness against preventing COVID-19 but also proof toward helping the students achieve better academically. The ultimate goal of any school district should be to return to in-person learning as soon as possible and the establishment of air filters helps to achieve this.

We believe that this solution would best aid our policy goal because of its direct and tangible effect on the schools and their students. We believe that targeting the infrastructure of the schools would improve the quality of education for students in the long run and address the health and safety concerns of parents wanting the best education possible for their children. We also believe

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<sup>78</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools/evidence-scientific-literature-about-improved-academic-performance>

<sup>79</sup> This range was formulated using the average cost of portable HEPA filters of \$100-\$350 ("HEPA Air Filtration." n.d. Climate Smart Missoula. Accessed November 18, 2020.

<https://www.missoulaclimate.org/clean-air-for-schools--daycares.html>.

) multiplied by the number of classrooms overall in Detroit public schools. The cost range came out to be \$272,200-\$952,700, which is 0.3%-1.12% of the 85 million dollars to DPS.

that tackling the need for infrastructure improvements for both these reasons would appeal to parents and those concerned with the education of these children, which should increase interest in proceeding with this policy. Allocating school funds towards the application of these filters may be a barrier in this policy, particularly spending money on more immediate needs during this pandemic, but pushing for improvements within schools to create a more safe and healthy learning environment for children would be a great long-term investment.

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