

## Deplorable school conditions: Investing in the future of kids in Detroit and all of Michigan

**R**esidents Living under stressful home conditions where parents are struggling to make ends meet. Walking to school with fear as you pass abandoned buildings through unsafe neighborhoods. Entering a building infested with rodents and mold—and breathing all of this in. Then sitting in a classroom with crumbling ceilings and uncomfortable temperatures while reading textbooks that are falling apart. Missing any meaningful physical activity because the gym and playground are both off limits for safety reasons.

Walking in the shoes of a student in the city of Detroit makes it clear that no child can learn like this. How did this happen and when did this become acceptable for our kids? The lack of focused attention and investment in the schools serving our children has been a growing concern for years, but it is especially evident with the outright dangerous environments in Detroit Public Schools.

### BOTTOM LINES OVER BETTER LIVES

In 2009, the first Emergency Financial Manager was appointed by the state to help the Detroit Public Schools manage its budget. Under state control ever since, the district has yet to end its school year with a positive fund balance.<sup>1</sup> In the process of trying to align spending with revenues, it appears that state government's decisions were made without children's education and future in sight—it was all about restructuring for cost savings. Now, state dollars to ensure that the district does not run out of funds before the end of the school year have been approved, and long-term fixes for the district's financial shortfalls are being considered.

At the same time, coalitions and teachers have brought to light the deplorable conditions in which children are expected to learn. Schools are falling apart. Following building inspections by the city of Detroit, a consent agreement was put in place in mid-February of 2016 to make the necessary safety improvements and repairs. Many other school districts around the state are struggling as well, and are or will soon be facing similar deterioration, putting more kids in jeopardy.

### STATE FAILING SCHOOLS, KIDS

Kids' ability to reach their full potential, including college attendance, job opportunities and future earnings, is directly tied to their academic performance. And too many kids are being left behind. This is especially true for

#### Education outcomes should not be based on race, place or income.



**83%** of DPS students are African-American leading to racial inequities in education







**75%** of DPS students are economically disadvantaged lacking sufficient resources and support further straining the district



## Student Health Jeopardized

**26 of 90** buildings were inspected by the city of Detroit. These were considered to be amongst the worst. More than half had **more than 10 violations**—one school had **more than 30**.

Documented violations included:

-  Insect and rodent infestation
-  Mold and mushrooms growing
-  Non-functioning heat, boilers, and AC units and dust and debris in ventilation systems
-  Water damaged ceilings, floors, and walls
-  Leaking school building roofs
-  Missing or damaged drinking fountains and other plumbing fixtures

low-income kids, kids in high-poverty neighborhoods and children of color.

The level of toxic stress—or chronic, prolonged stress without adequate support—and the environmental health and safety issues endured by these children in order to receive an education is disgraceful. Research shows that chronic stress, or adversity, can interrupt normal brain development and has a cumulative effect on physical and mental health leading to developmental delays in younger children and lifelong consequences as adults.<sup>2</sup> Environments matter. Where a child lives and learns has a significant impact on their cognitive, emotional and social development, which has a clear connection to educational outcomes.

## INVESTING IN SAFE SCHOOLS, COMMUNITIES AND SERVICES

Every single child deserves a safe environment to learn. Children should never have been or be subjected to these unhealthy and unsafe conditions—nonetheless be expected to learn without appropriate supports. School conditions in Detroit Public Schools should have never gotten this bad, and many other school districts are close behind.

State leaders have a responsibility to make the necessary investments to ensure that all Michigan’s children have the opportunity to receive a quality education. This includes increasing funding for at-risk students, but

also investing more in our communities and the support services these students and their families depend on. In Detroit and every other community in Michigan, a quality education is key to improved outcomes for children and adults, and policymakers must treat it as such.



## ENDNOTES

1. Bethany Wicksall, “Detroit Public Schools Historical Budget Trends,” House Fiscal Agency, February 24, 2016.
2. Center on the Developing Child – Harvard University, “InBrief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children’s Development,” 2007. Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu) on March 1, 2016.