



Detroit Community Schools | 12675 Burt Road, Detroit, MI, 48223 | 313-537-3570

DCS RESPONSE TO BRIDGE MAGAZINE ARTICLE

I write, as the CAO of Detroit Community Schools District (“DCSD”) to respond to a question posed to me by a writer for a local magazine¹, who has written an article that reports some false and some misleading information, masquerading as fact. In that the article makes allegations too numerous to detail in this letter, it is important to limit this response to the more significant challenges to DCSD and to me, as it’s CAO. ²I do not suggest that this writer intentionally misrepresented the facts, only that her understanding of the information underlying her assumptions was inadequate to conclude as she did.

It has been my fervent hope that, whatever choice the Governor makes to address the needs of the children of Detroit, DCSD will be a part of that initiative. We deserve to be considered on the basis of the recovery that we have created here at DCSD, since September of 2012 when I took over as the then Superintendent.

As a Board member of DCSD, I had planned to resign in September of 2012. The District had no administrative leadership: No High School Principal; no Superintendent; no academic committee and the school was being run by two counselors. Students were testing with extremely low scores and there was no plan to address the low scores. Most families were below the poverty level and there was no intervention. The District was at or near the priority status designation and at a “5” on the Top to Bottom list. Staff, at all levels, were authorized to suspend or expel students without a hearing.

I found nearly a million dollars in unpaid bills and little or no money in the bank accounts. The majority of the teachers were substitutes. The computer system had been corrupted and there was a zero percent graduation rate for the preceding year. It was rare that we found a student who could read and do basic mathematics at grade level. I could list another 70 issues that existed as of mid-September 2012 and I would be pleased to address those, if you would like, at another time. At this point, I will answer the article writer’s question (and I paraphrase):

“Why should the new entity created by the State not close DCSD”

1. The State and its new education program should use the process created at DCSD as a guide to improving underperforming schools in the City of Detroit: The plan developed for DCSD works and it has created an “unheard of improvement “³in a District that previously was failing.
2. Within the 18 months after the new administration took over DCSD, the State monitors no longer visited the school for monitoring and ultimately in early 2015, officially removed the District from priority status.

¹ Bridge

² For example, Echelle Jordan is not the Principal of the High School; Mr. Robert Hooper is the Principal and he is certified. Ms. Jordan also does not make a “6-figure” salary. At one time, years ago, she did the work of two employees and was compensated for a short period of time for the additional duties.

³ Gail Snoddy, Oakland ISD



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3. In the first year , the District went from 5 to 26 on the Top to Bottom List.
4. The State named DCSD a “Reward School” within the first two years of our administration. The Michigan Association of Public School Academies, in its Focused Lens Review, wrote that DCS was doing an exemplary job in its instructional program.
5. Student scores have improved incrementally over the last 4 years.
6. DCSD had one, of only two Detroit seniors, to be designated a “Gates Millennium Scholar” in 2014.
7. DCSD created a “Senior Graduation Project” which has resulted in the graduation of more than 98% of its seniors.⁴ In year 4 of our tenure, we will be out from under the cohort rate and the rate of graduation, already superior to nearly all schools in the State, will increase dramatically.
8. DCSD created Individual Student Learning Plans (“ISLP”) to track the progress of every student, which has resulted in earlier intervention for students who did not reach grade level during the previous years of their matriculation.
9. Several years ago, DCSD began a Community College program with the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce, which provided two years of tuition-free college for all graduating seniors, a program now being proposed by the City of Detroit for all Detroit schools. All seniors have applied to at least 3 colleges or universities.
10. DCSD created “Student Support Services”, a department that handles discipline thereby allowing the teachers to teach with less disruption. SSS also handles assistance to parents and families with housing, has a partnership with DTE resulting in restoration of utility services to families; works with the City of Detroit to restore water service and assists families with applying for other services for which they are eligible. Free coats and boots are provided to all students who need them every winter.
11. DCSD has a partnership with the University of Michigan and is in the process of building a community “Maker Space” on the grounds which will allow for students and the community to make such things as furniture. Additional partnering with the University has provided ACT and now SAT tutoring, 3D Printer training, STEAM and Art programs.
12. DCSD has a partnership with Henry Ford Health Services, which is providing the only health care available for children in the Brightmoor community. We are in the process of designing and building a clinic inside of the school which will deliver behavioral and medical services to both DCSD students and community children who do not attend DCSD.
13. DCSD has stabilized its teacher population and has a teaching staff; the majority of them are committed and dedicated teachers.

⁴ The cohort rate lowers the number for four years due to students with whom the current DCSD administration had no contact, who left DCS and dropped out of school.



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14. Since the new administration took over in 2012, every annual audit has received an unqualified opinion from the independent CPA firms (Hungerford, and now Yeo and Yeo). The 2014-2015 annual audit report had no Material Weaknesses in internal controls, Significant Deficiencies or Audit Findings, for the first time since 2010-2011.
15. DCSD had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars of bills left by the former administration.
16. DCSD has a partnership with Detroit Public Schools Food Service, which substantially eliminated general fund support for the food service program, thereby making it self-sustaining. The meal program has increased to 3 meals a day and participation is at a high level.
17. Since September of 2013, DCSD has provided free busing to assist its parents, thus stabilizing the enrollment and improving daily attendance.
18. DCSD has developed a District-wide curriculum, common- core aligned , which did not exist prior to our arrival.⁵
19. DCSD students perform every year at the Detroit Music Hall, due to a partnership that makes the facility available to DCSD at no charge. ⁶
20. The DCSD competitive sports program is now included in elementary and middle school programming and in its second year won two regional tournaments; DCSD has created a Marching Band which received financial assistance for the purchase of instruments through aggressive fundraising. In our first year at DCSD, the high school boys' basketball team went to the State championship game against Detroit Country Day School.
21. DCSD's ACT scores have improved and a program to tutor students in both content and test-taking skills has been implemented.
22. DCSD provides male-mentoring programs, after school tutoring and life skills programs for all of the students K-12. All of this is new with this administration.
23. DCSD provides free prom attire to any student who is unable to afford to purchase it.
24. DCSD provides for the use of in-school washers, dryers and ironing supplies for students who do not have the ability to launder their clothing at home.
25. DCSD, not compliant prior to 2012 in terms of IDEA (Special Ed) and Title 1, among other programs, is now compliant with all federal programs.
26. DCSD provides parenting meetings for all parents.

⁵ There was no written curriculum available in September of 2012 at DCSD.

⁶ The CAO, a former Social Worker and lawyer, takes the position that "students cannot learn without self-esteem and nothing creates self-esteem faster than applause".



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27. Student employment programs are in place during the school year and summer season.
28. DCSD has an enviable Professional Development program, which includes a two –week teacher training program prior to the start of each new school year.
29. DCSD begins the school year with full-day college field trips for grades 8-12 to the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Eastern Michigan University.
30. DCSD, in its first year of the new administration, 2012-2013 stopped the process of social promotion and required mastery of the curriculum at each level to promote to the next grade.
31. DCSD has established a writer’s workshop: Students have published two books, a book of poetry and a book of short stories.

With regard to the allegation that I am not certified to be a Superintendent, the reporter is confused about this issue. When I arrived at DCSD, within the first couple of years, I indeed registered to take the certification program that would be required of a Superintendent.⁷ When the Board appointed me CAO, the courses were no longer required.

The allegation that the CAO designation was posted as of the inquiry from Bridge Magazine is false. Throughout the website, in many locations, staff has referred to me as the CAO including references in all of the minutes of Board meetings.

Much was said about the hiring of several employees and, without revisiting the judgment of the reporter, I will explain my decision: Like many other managers, some of which are elected officials, I have chosen to hire a few highly qualified individuals whose past may include an error in judgment. The Board of DCSD was informed and aware of the hiring of these individuals. None of the individuals that I hired have served any time in jail and none of them have committed any act of moral turpitude. Everyone makes a mistake now and then. DCSD benefits from these highly qualified individuals, who because of one mistake, are not able to obtain DCSD employment at a level that they could otherwise. Mr. William Coleman is such a person.

One of the individuals that I hired, our HR Director Patricia Peoples, is a distant relative of a former Mayor of Detroit, Kwame Kilpatrick. Shame on the reporter for attempting to make it look like the HR Director did something criminal! We all would like to be judged on our own merit...and not on the acts of others over whom we have no control. The statement that was made by the writer of the article as to Ms. Peoples “avoiding contempt of court” was entirely false and the reporter knows it. An e-mail was sent to her by me explaining the situation, which was that no subpoena was served upon Ms. Peoples.

⁷ I was registered at Saginaw Valley State University’s program.



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Finally, I hired former Judge Sylvia James, a licensed attorney, to be the Dean of Students. Again, Ms. James has never been charged with a crime nor was her removal from the bench the result of any criminal activity. A State audit showed no missing funds at her court. The main issue was whether prior approval of the Mayor was needed for the donations to such entities as the Goodfellows program. In that I represented her in the case, I am fully aware of the reasons for her removal.⁸

There is no question that DCSD has made dramatic and significant improvement since September of 2012. The obvious question, when such an article is written, is why would a reporter say these things if they are not true? There is no good answer to that question: It is possible that it was an unintended error but the damage could be incalculable.

At the close of my first year at DCSD, in June of 2013, a group of students came to my office and asked to speak to me. It was the first time that I had a sense of the how the students felt about my tenure. One of them began:

*"Ms. McPhail, do you know that before you came here,
no one cared whether we learned anything or not".*

I smiled at them but it broke my heart to hear that they knew that no one before me had cared if they learned anything. It also made my mission clear: I will do everything I can to make sure that no student ever feels that way again.

I invite all of you, with or without notice, to visit DCSD. Your appearance here would forever put to rest any possible assumption that no one cares.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharon McPhail".

Sharon McPhail
CAO, DCSD

⁸ What the writer did not mention is that Ms. James has filed suit against the Judicial Tenure Commission. The JTC moved to dismiss the case and, on two occasions, the 6th Circuit Court of appeals upheld Ms. James.