

Testimony before the Government Operations Committee
Senate of the State of Michigan
Senator Arlan Meekhof, Chairman
Presented by Dr. Keith L. Whitney
February 16, 2016

To the chairman of this honorable body, Senator Meekhof, and to the committee members and the public present, I wish to thank you for this opportunity to speak before you. I am Rev. Dr. Keith L. Whitney, pastor of Sanctuary Fellowship Baptist Church of Detroit and Chairman of the Educational Task Force for MOSES. I have experienced education in the City of Detroit in several arenas. I am the son of a retired teacher who was chosen as a Newsweek Teacher of the Year, and the brother of a current Detroit Public Schools teacher. I am a graduate of Mumford High School and I have had children in DPS. They attended Cass Tech and The High School For The Fine And Performing Arts(DSA). I have worked as a substitute teacher in both the DPS and charter schools communities. I was a member of the governing board of the Andrew Young Early College Charter School. I have also been an adjunct professor at Wayne County Community College District and at Ashland Theological Seminary, Detroit Campus. Additionally, my role as a member of the faith community gives me an insight into how the chaos of the last sixteen years has affected the community.

At this time I speak as a parent. For the last fifteen plus years I have watched the decline in the quality of education in the Public Schools. I have seen children with classes that are too large, a lack of books or books out of date. Our students have had multiple teachers for a one semester class. We are aware of the deteriorating buildings that have been neglected and the hazards that our children face when they enter them. I have supported teachers in the public school system who teach because they

love to teach and are dedicated despite the public abuse and very low pay. In fact, one of my members has been teaching for thirty two years and she now makes as much as she did in her tenth year of teaching. This due to the continued salary cuts. As a parent I have seen the business model fail our children. We cannot treat them as products from a factory. Mis-educating or under educating our children is detrimental to them and to our community as a whole. My children did fairly well, but they had parents who made sure they would. However, many children fall through the cracks, because they did not have the education system that would give them not just a quality education, but a good quality education.

Please do not think that the charter system is better than the traditional public school. The quality of charter schools varies and to be sure there are some good and bad traditional public and charter schools. In some charter schools teachers are hired without a teaching certificate and the school operates under the certificate of a particular teacher. The Andrew Young Charter school lasted about six months. We started out with good intentions, recruiting students from the community. Teachers were hired, some with very little educational background. With the Andrew Young school the challenge was to keep the school open. To make things more problematic, there were several other charter schools in the area seeking the same students. With that challenge and a small number of students the school was forced to close, and parents had to scramble to find a place to educate their children. It is my experience that we have too many charter schools opening and closing with very little notice.

What does that have to do with parents? There may be some parents here whose only worry is their paying tuition on time or fixing something for the fund drive at the school. But for many parents in Detroit and in our state, their concern is wheter the

neighborhood school either traditional public or charter will be open to educate their children. They have also seen what a closed school does to a community. Schools are the anchors of communities. When a school closes the fabric of a community is torn. In many cases houses are abandoned, families move out and a neighborhood dies. Parents in Detroit like parents anywhere in this state desire the very best for their children.

I need to speak to this committee as a member of the faith community. I am sure that each member of this committee has a faith system. In that system we are taught that justice is not just a legal term but something to be practiced. As honorable members of this committee I believe that you want the very best for this state and for the city of Detroit. I believe that in your decision making you may not invoke the name of who you follow, but I believe you should follow the principles taught in your faith. I am a Christian pastor who seeks to follow the teaching and practices of my faith. With that in mind, how we treat the disinherited, the marginalized, and the outcast is not a Sunday thing, but the proof of our profession of faith. As you deliberate on the matters at hand, may I remind you that what you profess does enter the room. I am aware of your alliances and agendas, however I believe that in your decision making the tenants and practices of your faith system will come into play. As a pastor, I have witnessed the effects of the educational chaos in Detroit. I have counseled parents in despair who only want the best for their children.

I know the difficulty you may have seeing Detroit as a place and not a problem. However, it is a city filled with the same kind of people that are found everywhere in this great state. Our relationship with Lansing has not always been positive. Yet we strive for the same things. We want a good environment to rear our children, a stable community, a good job market and a great

city to be proud of. In addition we want to govern ourselves and our schools. However, as those who must make decisions concerning education and yes money, we must recognize that your decisions have more than political, economic, or social repercussions, they are moral and ethical as well.

I must speak now as a citizen. As a longtime citizen of Detroit and the state of Michigan I have learned the meaning of trust. We trust you to do what is in the best interest of the citizens of this state. We trust that you will do what is fiscally sound but also morally good. We trust you as our elected leaders that you would recognize that the entire state is connected. We trust that you would recognize that you can help create order out of chaos in the city of Detroit. We believe that you trust the citizens of Detroit to govern and run our school system. You are trusted, what will you do with that trust? I recognize that you did not start this mess, but you are now tasked with ending it. As a former Naval officer I am aware that when you are given the helm of a ship you are responsible for safely steering the ship. Even when the captain is asleep he is still responsible. This is about the future of not just Detroit, but of Michigan. Not just the children and families of Detroit, but the children and families in every corner of this state. There needs to be a governing body in Detroit, The Detroit Education Commission or whatever name is chosen should oversee the opening and closing of schools; both public and charter. We are not just looking at schools, but communities and places where tax paying citizens can contribute to this state. This issue is not just about Detroit, but of how you will govern an entire state. What happens in Detroit is the bell weather for all of Michigan.

As you deliberate, remember the words of a fictional Roman general. "Brothers, what we do in life echoes in eternity". It is my hope that you act to positively make a difference in the

educational landscape of Detroit. Thank you again for this opportunity.

