SENATE GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS COMMITTEE, HEARING ON DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS
February 16, 2016

Remarks. NICK CIARAMITARO, Director of Legislation and Public Policy
Michigan AFSCME Council 25, nick@miafscme.org, 313-330-5313

Thank you Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. For the record my name is Nick Ciaramitaro and I am the Director of Legislation and Public Policy for the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees here in Michigan.

AFSCME Council 25 represents about 750 DPS employees who provide food services and critical assistance for special education students in the classes and on buses. More than 15,000 AFSCME members live in the city of Detroit many of whom have children who attend DPS schools.

As such we are always concerned and active in improving public education in the City of Detroit. Through President Keith January of Local 345 in the DPS system, we participated in the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren and our organization fully supports the recommendations of that stakeholder task force.

It is clear, in our view, that state management of local units of government has not been successful and it is time to restore local control. The State of Michigan needs to PARTNER with local governments not punish them. Only by restoring this necessary balance will we be able to assure quality in the services that our members struggle to provide to the people we all are committed to serve.

My remarks today will concentrate on the two bills that have been introduced recognizing that those two bills are just the beginning of what needs to be done to restore our State's largest school district to the quality and status that the people of Detroit and Michigan deserve. I will, with the permission of the Chair, then conclude my remarks by addressing some of the other issues with which we must grapple to conclude this effort.

SB 710

Senate Bill 710 would create a new "community school district" to run traditional K-12 public schools in Detroit. It would maintain the existing Detroit Public School system only for the purpose of collecting the State Educational Tax, other local property taxes (including those allowed to pay off existing bonds) and to pay off the District's current debt including MPSERS accrued unfunded liabilities generated by failure to make current payments to the retirement fund by the Emergency Manager. That will allow the full Foundation Grant to go to the new Community School District unencumbered by existing liabilities to rebuild the school district's physical and human infrastructure. While this bill does not hold the School Aid Fund harmless from the additional cost, it is our understanding that all involved are committed to restoring the decreased revenue from other sources and the Governor's has proposed allocating a portion of Michigan's Tobacco settlement to that purpose.

One of the most important features of the bill is that it would restore local control to the operation of Detroit's schools to an elected school board by the beginning of next year. Michigan AFSCME strongly supports the return of self-government and local control through an elected school board as soon as possible.

We also strongly support provisions of the bill that provide for minimum disruption of operations by transferring and protecting employment, contracts (including collective bargaining agreements) and assets from the Detroit Public School System to the new Detroit Community School District thus assuring an orderly transition and continuation of service delivery. The stability of the workforce, particularly as the district is already understaffed and having difficulty recruiting staff, is essential.

SB 711

Senate Bill 711 provides for State oversight by modifying the existing Financial Review Commission currently in place for the City of Detroit. The modification of membership of the Commission would remove the Mayor of the City of Detroit and the President of the Detroit City Council and replace them with the President of the newly elected Detroit Community Schools Board of Education and the Detroit Community Schools Superintendent.

As the State is committing a substantial amount of new money we understand its need for oversight of those additional funds. However, we believe State oversight of money that would come to the local school district had emergency management not resulted in the increased debt should only be subject to the same oversight in place for any school district. It is obviously difficult to separate those dollars, but it is less difficult to separate other functions that we believe do not require enhanced oversight.

Most important in that regard are the issues of day to day operation and academics. Neither the fiscal situation nor the academic performance has been significantly enhanced due to state control of the Detroit Public School district. It is time to stop pretending that the State is better equipped to run the school district than the community it serves. As Winston Churchill once observed, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." While our State has mechanisms in place to partner with a locally elected governing body, it is time to realize that a locally elected governing body is just as competent, just as capable and, much more accountable to the community it serves – the community that has the greatest interest in delivering a quality education to their children and most aware of their particular needs.

We therefore recommend that the choice of a Superintendent should be a local decision and not be subject to the FINANCIAL Review Commission's approval.

Missing

I would be remiss if I did not point out a number of critical issues that need to be decided to assure the ability of the new Detroit Community schools to be successful. We have identified three areas that need to be addressed, one of which appears to be well on its way to accomplishment:

(1) Elliminate the State Educational Achievement Authority and return the students and resources to the Detroit community school system.
(2) Provide for a mechanism to coordinate the placement of schools – traditional and other – to assure access of all Detroit children to a quality education. As you have seen on repeated slides presented to you in earlier testimony, the lack of coordination has resulted in too many schools in some areas and not enough in others. This lack of coordination is also impacting on taxpayer costs as Moody has indicated that a recent downgrading is due to what they refer to as the unbridled proliferation of charter schools.

(3) Create a local system of reforming underperforming schools – both traditional and other – that assures a PARTNERSHIP between the Detroit community and the State of Michigan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to thank Sen. Hansen and the leadership of the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren and others who have put in so much time and so much hard work and effort in addressing the crisis before us. I believe real progress has been made to date as a result of these discussions and believe we should be able, with continued cooperation, to develop a system that will allow the children of Detroit to enjoy the quality education they need and deserve.