

The Detroit News

Finley: Use COVID cash to Wipe out illiteracy

Nolan Finley The Detroit News

Published 11:00 p.m. ET April. 24, 2021

Detroit schools are getting more than \$800 million from the latest federal COVID-19 relief package. With less than 20% of that money, the district could move rapidly from a failure factory to a success machine.

Roughly 85% of the 50,000 students enrolled in the Detroit Public Schools Community District read below grade level. A majority of the district's 12,000 high school students will graduate on with 4th or 5th grade reading skills, says Pamela Good, director of the Beyond Basics literacy tutoring program.

That handicap will make it tougher for them to manage college or succeed in the job market. And it will continue to be a major barrier to creating a more equitable society.

The COVID dollars provide a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to erase illiteracy from Detroit schools, and in doing so raise achievement levels across all subjects.

"It would change everything," Good says. "We'd have kids going from Ds to Bs. We'd take kids who are illiterate and put them in the capable bucket. Teachers could do their jobs. Academic scores would go up."



Good's program offers intensive, one-on-one literacy tutoring that has a 90% success rate in bringing students to grade-level reading skills in an average of six weeks.

Beyond Basics, a nonprofit that relies heavily on volunteers, is tutoring 3,000 Detroit students now. Good says if the commitment and money are there, she could bring all 43,000 Detroit school children to reading level within three years.

The price tag would be roughly \$150 million, money Detroit schools normally wouldn't have but is now available thanks to the federal largesse.

No investment would produce a greater return in quickly lifting the performance of Detroit schools, or the economic outlook for the city.

And it would fulfill the moral obligation to provide a quality education to all children.

"We have a solution," Good says. "Everybody can learn to read. It's wrong to continue to fund education for kids who can't read and thus can't access it. We need to make sure they are literate, and then things will start falling into place."

Good wants to go well beyond the schools. She suggests Detroit form a literacy task force to explore how to use its stimulus dollars to get the entire city reading, including setting up family literacy centers and programs in jails and juvenile centers.

“If we made literacy a priority, imagine what this city would look like in three years,” she says. “It would be a phenomenal use of stimulus dollars.”

The payoff for Detroit — and other communities that followed a similar path — would be a better educated, higher skilled workforce to lure employers to the the city. Incomes would rise and social service costs and crime would drop.

Better performing schools would make Detroit’s neighborhoods more attractive to families.

If communities aren’t strategic in spending their COVID windfalls, if they don’t think about how to invest it in ways that deliver an ongoing return, the money will be gone and the chronic problems will persist.

But if Detroit uses a small part of its relief cash to wipe out the scourge of illiteracy, it could change the future for its children, and the city.