

Mackinac Center for Public Policy

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Elections Are a Poor Way to Change Schools

By [John R. LaPlante](#)

On Aug. 2, Detroit voters took the first step in selecting a new school board for the Detroit Public Schools. More than 136,000 voters cast ballots in the board's primary election, according to elections estimates at the time.

This was the first opportunity residents have had since 1999, when the state gave Detroit's mayor control of the schools, to vote directly for school board members. Despite the passage of six years, fully [one-third](#) of all people who cast a ballot in the election, which included a mayoral race, failed to cast a single vote for a school board candidate.

Is this a testament to the apathy of Detroit residents? Not exactly. More likely it's the result of a confusing ballot and a way of delivering education that reduces accountability to the public.

There were 11 seats up for grabs on the board — one for each of seven voting districts, and four "at large," meaning that all Detroiters could vote on members for these seats. In contention were [51 candidates](#), including 29 candidates for the at-large positions. In November, voters will face a choice from eight candidates for the at-large seats and a maximum of two candidates in each district. (In two districts, only one candidate was on the primary ballot, and in a third, only two were.)

Given the complexity of the ballot, it's little wonder that so many people chose not to vote. Even among those who voted, there may have been some confusion. When asked to report whom she voted for, one woman said, "I don't remember," according to the Detroit Free Press.

Overall, the process doesn't seem like taxpayer money well-spent.

But before we tar the voters with suggestions of "apathy," as a headline writer for the Free Press did, let's consider how the public's purchase of schooling differs from the purchase of almost everything else.

Typically, consumers do not concern themselves with who sits on what corporate boards when they decide what goods or services to buy. Whether choosing for their households or for their businesses, they look at performance, value for the dollar, benefits and total cost.

Very few people can name even a single member of the board of directors of a company they buy from. They don't have to: If the company does not meet a person's expectations, there are others who might. This makes the choices simple. Coke or Pepsi? Ford or GM? Detroit News or Detroit Free Press?

The true measure of any service provider — and the key to its success — is not who sits on the board, but how well it satisfies the customers. The best tool consumers have to ensure that an organization delivers quality service is the threat of walking away. If you're unsatisfied with FedEx, you take your business to UPS. It's a much easier and effective way of getting management's attention than pinning your hopes on the outcome of a board of directors election.

Unfortunately for everyone, the ability to exercise choice is not so easy when it comes to the primary and secondary education of children. With few exceptions, public schools as we know them do not compete with each other for the patronage of parents. Tuition at private schools is expensive, especially if the taxes already paid for the local school district are figured in. Moving to another school district is an option for some people, but even then, moving is both expensive and troublesome. Some families, especially those with low incomes, do not have other options, unless they can commute to suburban schools-of-choice or are lucky enough to gain admission to one of the city's limited number of charter schools.

Casting the fate of your child's education (or any child's education, for that matter) on elections is a haphazard exercise. That's why many people who live in poorly performing school districts move out of them once the children arrive. Those who for financial or other reasons cannot or do not move are left with the vagaries of political promises given, broken and occasionally kept.

It's time — or more accurately, *past* time — to raise the quality of education providers. Elections are at best imperfect instruments. Competition among providers, aided by tuition tax credits and other measures, is a surer means of achieving the value and quality that taxpayers, families and children need.

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