

A Look Inside Detroit's Crumbling Public Schools

It's no secret that Detroit public schools are in turmoil. While public schools around the country are struggling, no system has suffered quite like those in the Motor City.

This week the [Atlantic offered a glimpse](#) into city's crumbling system, which came under state control seven years ago. (State administration [has not improved the system](#).)

The video—based on [this report](#) which can be purchased for \$100—offers both macro and micro perspectives. Here's an overview where the school system stands today:

- Its high school dropout rate is more than double the national average.
- The system is \$3.5 billion in debt.
- More than two-thirds of the school system's buildings have been closed since 2000.
- Students that can afford to are fleeing to the suburbs.
- Teachers are striking over “dangerously dilapidated buildings, low pay, and inadequate resources.”

Reading this, it's easy to forget Detroit was once hailed as a great American success story, the engine of democracy. The city's population soared from 285,000 in 1900 to 1.5 million just 30 years later.

At its peak from 1966 to 1975, Detroit public schools were teaching roughly 300,000 students in 380 schools. Today, about 50,000 students attend classes in 97 schools.

What happened? The *Atlantic* glosses over this point a little. (To be fair, it's a rather difficult question to answer.) But we're left to believe that white flight to the suburbs, social unrest, labor disputes, and financial mismanagement are the

primary culprits.

Few would argue that these did not play a significant role in the system's demise. But most major cities dealt with these problems to various degrees. How did Detroit schools fail so badly?

It was not lack of spending. The video shows that from 1999 to 2012 more than a \$100 million was spent upgrading schools that were closed just a few years later. But was money perhaps part of the problem in a different way?

There is a persistent belief that problems in education stem from a lack of funding; this mindset persists despite [evidence showing that increased spending on public education since 1970](#) has had virtually no measurable impact on academic performance.

Is it possible that administrators were seeking a relatively easy solution (more money) to a complex social problem that required new and creative thinking?

Whatever the case, it's clear that the system failed students like Carla Underwood. A sophomore at Detroit Western International School, Underwood rides a bus two hours each day just to get to her school.

"I wake up at 5:30 a.m. every morning," Underwood said. "When you tell people you go to a Detroit public school, they always pity you."

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Jon Miltimore is the Senior Editor of Intellectual Takeout. He is the former Senior Editor of The History Channel Magazine and a former Managing Editor at Scout Media. Follow him on Facebook.

[Image credit: [The Atlantic](#)]