

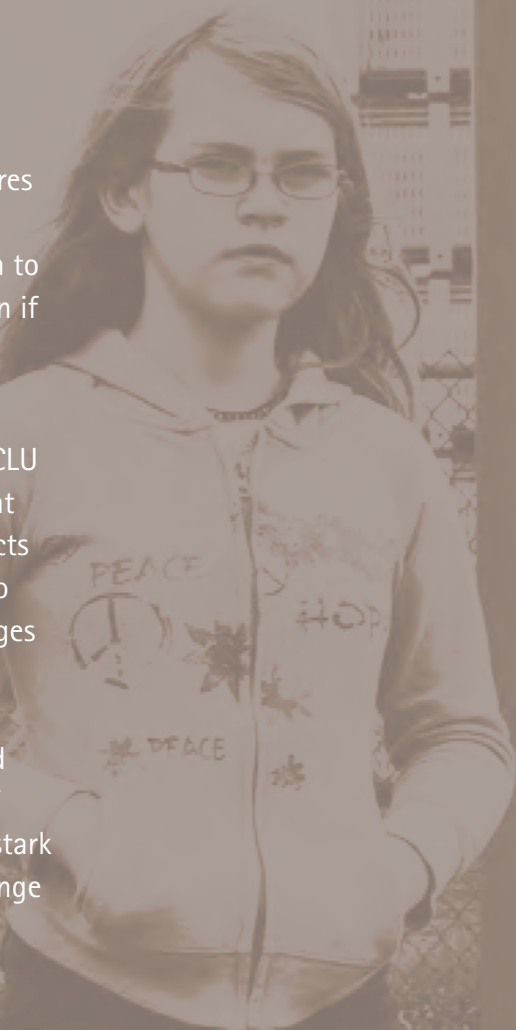
A GOOD EDUCATION FOR ALL

Once a standard-bearer for public education nationwide, Michigan has seen a dramatic decline in everything from the conditions of its schools to the resources so essential to teaching and serving students and maintaining successful districts. In big cities and small towns alike, literacy education is suffering; school facilities are crumbling; and many of the leaders tasked with fixing the problem seem torn between bad ideas for education reform and no ideas at all.

Meanwhile, many of our students—especially those in financially strapped districts—find themselves inundated with a growing host of problems that stem from the state's educational shortcomings. In many

districts, children read far below grade level. Standardized test scores suffer. Fewer Michigan public-school students are finding a path to college—or the means to stay even if they do manage to enroll.

As bleak as the landscape may sometimes appear, though, the ACLU of Michigan has continued to fight for the change many of our districts so desperately need. Our efforts to work with legislators, our challenges in court, our timely research—the ACLU of Michigan presses on for positive school change in assorted ways, driven both by our vision of quality education for all and the stark realization that reform is a challenge we cannot afford to ignore.



A ROADMAP TO READING

As part of its efforts to bolster literacy education around the state, the ACLU of Michigan released in September its first-ever assessment of reading programs in Michigan public schools, offering an unflinching look at current problems among at-risk students and providing recommendations for more successful outcomes.

Titled *Raising Readers: Improving Literacy Education for Michigan's Most Vulnerable Students*, the 63-page report—assembled by a team of literacy experts empaneled by the ACLU—offers up an in-depth examination of how and why literacy efforts in Michigan too often fail the students who need those efforts the most. Drawing on anecdotes, hard stats and analyses of failed policies, the report makes clear that the reasons for Michigan's struggles are manifold—but mostly the byproduct of uneven planning and execution.

"Although Michigan's Constitution recognizes the obligation of the state to provide free education, and the Michigan legislature enacted a law to ensure that struggling young readers receive literacy intervention needed to put them on the path of reading a grade level," the report reads, "thousands of Michigan children are denied the resources that we know can put them on the path to achievement and prosperity...Michigan has yet to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to improve and sustain literacy education in schools with high rates of poverty."

Assembled by a working group that included parents, childhood-development professionals, teachers and activists, *Raising Readers* comes on the heels of the ACLU's hard-fought legal battles to safeguard and guarantee students' right to read.

In a case that earned national notice, the ACLU of Michigan filed a class action in 2012 on behalf of students in the Highland Park School District victimized by poor oversight, mismanagement and teaching

controls on both the state and local levels. As a result of these woes, children were reading as many as five grade levels below the point to which they should have progressed.

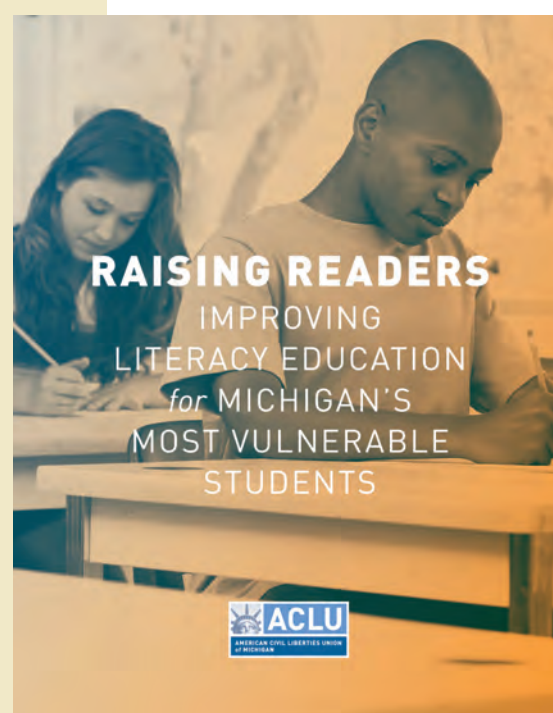
The ACLU argued that the State of Michigan and the Highland Park School District were violating state law and the Michigan Constitution by allowing students to fall far behind in basic literacy skills and reading proficiency.

Although the Wayne County Circuit Court refused to dismiss the case, the Michigan Court of Appeals reversed that decision. In dissent, Judge Douglas Shapiro rejected as "miserly" the majority's view of the education constitutionally due Michigan's children, writing that the state is required "to provide some baseline level of adequacy of education."

Unsurprisingly, *Raising Readers* spotlights the struggles in Highland Park as part of its anecdotal observations about faulty literacy efforts aimed at poor and at-risk students, noting that the district isn't alone in its troubles.

"The plight of Highland Park students is hardly unique within Michigan," the report points out. "As a state, we continue to, at best, 'tread water' in national academic rankings and, at worst, slide back."

The report can be downloaded at www.aclumich.org/MPowerED.



A newly released ACLU of Michigan report explores the problems confronting literacy education for poor and at-risk students.

KEEPING PUBLIC MONEY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In a state where numerous public-school districts are reeling from lack of sufficient resources, the ACLU of Michigan is working to keep the problem from growing worse in the wake of a troubling new education financing scheme that would funnel tax dollars into private and parochial schools.

The scheme became reality after Gov. Rick Snyder signed off on the 2016–2017 School Aid Budget, which contained a measure to allow \$2.5 billion in public money to be diverted to parochial and private schools. The Michigan Constitution prohibits public resources from being appropriated directly or indirectly to aid or maintain any private, denominational or other nonpublic school.

The ACLU is planning to file an amicus brief on the issue with the Michigan Supreme Court, which has the authority to overturn the law.

"Private schools have no business receiving public money," said Shelli Weisberg, Legislative Director for the ACLU of Michigan. "And to do this at a time when so many public schools around the state are neglected and struggling is not just unconstitutional, it's unconscionable. This state has an

obligation to uphold public education, not undermine it by giving tax dollars to private schools and religious academies."

The Legislature passed the budget and Gov. Rick Snyder signed it into law despite huge public outcry. Historically in Michigan, the public has overwhelmingly defeated initiatives that would divert public dollars to parochial and private schools.

The ACLU of Michigan urged Gov. Snyder to remove the private-school measure before signing the budget. Snyder acknowledged the constitutional concerns even as he ratified the budget.

The Michigan Supreme Court has invited those concerned over the budget to submit briefs before deciding whether it will take up the issue.



The ACLU of Michigan is working to ensure that cash-strapped public schools, such as this one in Sodus Township, don't lose taxpayer funding to private and parochial schools.

THE SLOW DISAPPEARANCE OF HIGHLAND PARK SCHOOLS

Once upon a time, Highland Park resident Michelle Belton was able to enjoy all the advantages that come with living across the street from a public school, from the proximity of the facilities to the safety that the school building offered her children.

But these days, Belton, whose home sits across from the former Cortland Middle School, looks out on the old school and sees only another reason for her and her three school-age children to leave Highland Park.

For her, the building, which was converted into a Head Start program in 2014 after Highland Park School District officials closed Cortland, illustrates just how far HPSD has tumbled under state control.

"It is just horrible, horrible what they are doing to these kids in Highland Park," Belton says. "The people in charge are not thinking at all about what's good for our kids."

Belton's plight was profiled recently by ACLU of Michigan investigative reporter Curt Guyette as part of his look at how the district—the focal point of a landmark ACLU right-to-read lawsuit two years ago—has spiraled down so far that it's on the verge of non-existence.

According to Guyette's story, which made the cover of the Detroit-based alternative newspaper the *Metro Times*, the Highland Park School District has lost nearly 70 percent of its students since being taken over by the state four-and-a-half years ago. (The state turned the entire district over to a for-profit charter operation, the Leona Group.)

Since the state takeover, all of the district's school buildings have been shuttered except for one—which, as the last remaining school in Highland Park, serves both elementary- and middle-school students. The district no longer serves high-school students at all.

Belton, who has three school-aged children, plans to soon join the ranks of those fleeing the district.

Guyette's look at Highland Park also underscores how the ACLU of Michigan in recent years has worked there and in other troubled districts around the state to address the dismal educational plight facing Michigan's most disadvantaged children.

"What has happened in school districts like Highland Park is a shameful testament to our state's neglect of our neediest children and communities," said ACLU of Michigan Executive Director Kary Moss. "At just the time when we should be investing more resources into public education in at-risk neighborhoods, our government leaders are instead shuttering schools, siphoning public money to give to private institutions and turning their backs on those who need their help the most."

The ACLU of Michigan has been fighting to stave off the dissolution of the Highland Park district for years, filing a landmark "right to read" lawsuit in 2012 as part of its efforts to ensure that children in the district were getting the quality education the state constitution promises.

Although the suit was dismissed, the ACLU continues to work with parent groups and education experts to devise recommendations to boost funding, shore up facilities and improve literacy programs in poor districts.

Because parents like Michelle Belton and shouldn't have to choose between staying in their communities and getting a good education for their children.



A student peers at the remains of the shuttered Highland Park Community High School building. Declining enrollment, which accelerated under state control, has left the district without a high school.



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