Philanthropy to the rescue? Detroit’s schools and urban policymaking under austerity

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Abstract
As municipal governments in the US struggle under austerity, philanthropic elites have seemingly come to the rescue. Their money has not come without strings attached, however. By leveraging political contributions and donations to non-profits, philanthropists have moved beyond funding services and into the promotion of their preferred policies to cash-strapped municipalities. This has meant that the super-wealthy can now set the terrain of urban policy debates in cities struggling under austerity, ignoring democratic processes and often working to actively co-opt or stifle dissent. Through a study of the politics surrounding an impending bankruptcy of the Detroit public school system in the mid-2010s, this article provides crucial insights into the nature of elite-led urban policymaking under conditions of racialized austerity. Specifically, it focuses on how competing coalitions of liberal and conservative philanthropists used their wealth and influence to define the parameters of the policy debate over the future of Detroit’s schools. In doing so, these coalitions constrained the ability of residents with alternative visions to participate in decision-making processes and promoted a market-based system of schooling that served Detroit students poorly. This result must be understood as facilitated by the city’s context of racialized austerity, as manifested both through the financial crisis facing Detroit’s schools and through the system of emergency management used to take over Michigan’s majority-Black municipal institutions. These findings highlight that as philanthropic funding and influence have grown under conditions of racialized austerity, we must critically examine their effects on policymaking and on systems of democratic accountability.

Keywords
Philanthropy, austerity urbanism, urban politics, Detroit, geographies of education

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As the City of Detroit exited from bankruptcy in late 2014, the state of the city’s school district took center stage in public debate. While the fiscal condition of the municipal government was now considered stable, the city’s school district needed an immediate infusion of funds to remain solvent. At the same time, a number of high profile charter school closures raised questions regarding the unregulated growth of marketized forms of education in the city. The timing of these events resulted in a wave of editorials, including one by Michigan’s Governor Rick Snyder, arguing that the reform of Detroit’s schools, public and charter, was a necessary proposition for the ‘revival’ of Detroit (Snyder, 2015). This perception of the fiscal crisis facing Detroit’s schools as an opportunity to reshape policy was shared by competing groups of elite philanthropists who used their wealth and influence to promote their own visions for the future of schooling in the city. In doing so, they were part of a global trend of philanthropists wielding influence over policymaking processes in ways that bypass systems of democratic accountability and use fiscal pressure as both opportunity and justification for their (often disastrous) interventions (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018; Harman, 2016; Mitchell and Sparke, 2016; Reckhow et al., 2020; Thompson, 2018).

Indeed, as debates around the future of Detroit’s school system grew in intensity, it became clear that wealthy philanthropists were defining the terms of debate in ways that fit their ideological visions as opposed to the demands of local residents. While many public education activists viewed the attention brought by the financial crisis as an opportunity to democratize control over schooling after years of state management, philanthropic funding instead flowed into two competing visions for the city’s schools that functioned within a broadly pro-market orientation. The first, backed by the Skillman Foundation, pushed for a more tightly-regulated schooling market to be overseen by a proposed new technocratic body. The second, backed by the DeVos-funded Great Lakes Education Project, pushed for a dissolution of the public system altogether and its replacement by an unregulated schooling market. The contours of this debate, and the role of these wealthy philanthropic organizations in shaping its ultimate market-oriented outcome, highlights the important role of elite philanthropy in shaping urban politics under austerity. With the Detroit Public School (DPS) district reeling after decades of underfunding and state management, wealthy ‘super-philanthropists’ (Hay and Muller, 2014) and large foundations did more than fund educational programs – they used their influence to promote policy agendas that defined the legislative debates over the future of Detroit’s school system with little regard for the wishes of its majority-Black population and with negative effects for the city’s school system.

The influence of these philanthropists, and the debates between them, are analyzed in this paper as a means of examining the realities of policymaking under ‘austerity urbanism,’ defined as the functioning of cities under severe fiscal constraints (Peck, 2014; Phinney, 2020; Soederberg, 2019). A key aspect of urban policymaking under austerity has been a shift in power from democratic systems towards networks of private actors, with philanthropists playing a central role in this process. This case provides an in-depth analysis of how these networks operate and their interactions with wider systems that serve to devalue the lives of the racialized communities that often live under austerity (Phinney, 2020; Pulido, 2016). Further, through exploring a case with multiple active philanthropic groups, this case highlights that philanthropists cannot be understood as uniform in their goals but, instead, may actively compete to set policy directions in ways that blur the lines between political donations and philanthropic giving. With growing attention to the power of foundations (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018; Thomson, 2019) and wealthy individuals (Harman, 2016; Hay and Muller, 2014) in setting policy, it is important for those studying the governance of schooling and other important urban services to be attuned to fissures and tensions in elite philanthropy. This is especially the case as struggles between philanthropists can serve to actively disempower
citizens and activist groups who are pushed outside of a policy process now dominated by competing elites, amplifying the disempowerment of those living under austerity.

Following a brief description of methods, the rest of this article is laid out in five sections: (1) a review of literature on austerity urbanism focused specifically on the role of philanthropy; (2) a description of the context of austerity, marketization, and autocratic rule facing DPS in the lead up to its financial crisis; (3) an analysis of the political struggle that ultimately resulted in a continuation of the market-based status quo; (4) a brief description of the most recent events since 2014-2015; and, (5) a discussion of what this case can tell us about policymaking under austerity urbanism and the role of philanthropic organizations in shaping urban governance more broadly.

Methods

The research for this project involved a mix of semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and attendance at public events. This included four months of fieldwork in Detroit in 2014–2015, including 29 key informant interviews and attendance at public events where political debates occurred such as protests, press conferences, and school board meetings. Interviews were conducted with participants from across the political spectrum in the lead up to, and alongside, the debates described below. This included interviews with local and state politicians, members of parental and activist groups, employees of philanthropic foundations, school district officials, and lobbyists. Documentary analysis included a review of legislative records, policy documents, news media coverage, and, most importantly, e-mails between philanthropic organizations and state officials (obtained by Progress Michigan via the US Freedom of Information Act). My presence in Detroit was as an outsider conducting a larger study on the politics of charter schools across the United States which framed how I was viewed by interview participants, although I formed relationships with public education activists during my stay in the city.

These sources of information were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis to read texts such as interviews, documents, and the observation of events within their social context. This approach allows for reading across multiple texts to understand how they relate to each other and wider systems of power, rather than focusing on a lone text or interview in isolation (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The findings below are therefore informed by the combination of research methods (interviews, documentary analysis, attendance at events) described above. Although much of the evidence presented comes from documentary analysis, interview materials provided a method of triangulation by providing context for public documents and their further analysis.

Philanthropy and policymaking under racialized austerity

Austerity urbanism, a process characterized by the roll back of state programs and social services in the name of fiscal restraint, has been an important factor shaping urban policy in the Global North following the 2008 financial crisis (Donald et al., 2014; Peck, 2014; Phinney, 2020; Ponder and Omstedt, 2019; Soederberg, 2019). This context of austerity has not only resulted in a reduction in the capacity of municipal governments but also a shift in how in urban policy is made. Donald et al. (2014), for example, argue that there are two related political dynamics that characterize policymaking under austerity: (1) the abandonment of democratic processes to put in place technocratic policy solutions; and, (2) the growth of new, informal networks, termed ‘austerity machines’, that set the terrain of policy debates and promote these fixes. Indeed, the removal of decision-making power from
democratic systems and its transfer to private actors is widely described as a central feature of austerity urbanism (see Peck, 2014; Ponder and Omstedt, 2019; Soederberg, 2019). Yet, as Phinney (2020: 6) describes, the precise mechanisms through which these informal networks shape policy remains an area in need of research that can “examine how the current post-crisis moment allowed for the development of new discourses and policy practices that reinforce and justify processes of exclusion via state restructuring and austerity cuts.” By drawing on the work of Pulido (2016) and Ranganathan (2016) on the Flint water crisis, Phinney (2020: 1) further argues that we need to pay particular attention to how austerity regimes are not uniform but rather “operate on historically and geographically distinctive terrains of racial domination and empire.”

The influence of philanthropy has been an important aspect of this shift towards informal networks, or austerity regimes, that guide the creation of urban policy under austerity. While the influence of philanthropists over urban social policy in areas such as schooling is not new, over the past several decades scholars have documented the increased importance of philanthropic funding to local governments. As explained further below, this has been the result of the combination of growing philanthropic activism with reductions to municipal government capacity following years of service cuts and layoffs under austerity (Harman, 2016; Reckhow et al., 2020; Thomson, 2019). This combination has meant that the direct influence of philanthropic organizations over the policy priorities of municipal governments and other municipal institutions like school boards has expanded since the 2008 financial crisis (Baker and McGuirk, 2019; Thomson, 2019).

Indeed, over the past decade social scientists have highlighted the increased importance of the philanthropic funding to policymaking as well as the connection between philanthropic giving and growing wealth inequality (Cohen and Rosenman, 2020; Hay and Muller, 2014; Mitchell and Sparke, 2016). As Hay and Muller (2014) document, on one side of the ledger, tax deductions for philanthropic giving have served to promote the growth of elite philanthropy – while on the other side these same deductions have reduced the amount of funds available for governments. In the United States, for example, $52.9 billion in taxes were deducted for philanthropic donations in 2012 resulting in $52.9 billion less in capital available for state investment. Philanthropic foundations5 illustrate this dynamic in technicolour, with the endowments of American foundations valued at over $865 billion (Thomson, 2019). The increased power of philanthropic giving must therefore be understood within the context of both an increased concentration of wealth and the reduction of state capacity, where the hoarding of money by the super wealthy enabled by public policy helps to fund the influence of philanthropic foundations as well as create the conditions for austerity.

Importantly, the capital concentrated in philanthropic foundations has increasingly been used to set policy directions – directions that most often fit within a market-based, neoliberal framework (Harman, 2016; Harman, 2016; Hay and Muller, 2014; Reckhow et al., 2020). This ‘paradigm shift’ in philanthropy (Hay and Muller, 2014; Mitchell and Sparke, 2016) includes a move away from arms-length funder/fundee relationships and towards the active management of programs in ways that are better understood as an investment targeted at a problem, not an (non-profit) organization, with the ambition of supporting specific solutions” (Hay and Muller, 2014: 638). For example, Harman (2016) and Mitchell and Sparke (2016) have highlighted how the Gates Foundation has used its substantial wealth ($46.8 billion [USD]) to influence health and educational agendas across the world rather than fund existing programs or non-profit organizations. Following the ideological disposition of the Gates Foundation’s funders, this has resulted in the adoption of technological and market-based policies that are promoted without democratic input or accountability.
To accomplish this task, many philanthropic organizations such as the Gates Foundation use a ‘vertical approach’ or ‘hub and spoke model’ to fund multiple groups active at different stages of the policymaking process from research to program delivery as a means of shaping the policy debate (Cohen and Lizotte, 2015; Harman, 2016; Scott and Jabbar, 2014). In this respect, groups like the Gates Foundation achieve their policy goals and public legitimacy through mobilizing their wealth to bypass democratic systems and “engage in a process of self-legitimation that reproduces elite structures of power… and buys conformity and consent” (Harman, 2016: 351). This is hardly limited to the Gates Foundation but rather central to modern-day ‘philanthrocapitalism’ where philanthropic funding is twinned with a belief in the technocratic superiority of (often market-based) elite institutions (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018; Thompson, 2018).

As described in the case below, this belief in technocracy has provided justification for the blurring of lines between philanthropic giving and political donations, as elites use both philanthropy and political influence to advance their policy agendas. Indeed, this orientation towards the superiority of elites in setting policy directions has helped justify the use of philanthropic funds to undercut democratic decision-making in areas like education where the centralization of power is justified under the logic of being ‘what works’ (Cohen and Lizotte, 2015; Lipman, 2015).

At the urban scale, the connection between austerity and the influence of philanthropists is well documented. For instance, in examining 15 years of local government employment data across the US, Reckhow et al. (2020) highlight that in cities like Detroit, municipal governments are operating at under half of their original capacity. In this context, Reckhow et al. state, the power dynamics of government partnerships with non-profits and philanthropists have shifted, with philanthropic organizations holding increasing power (see also Lipman, 2015; Thomson, 2019). Indeed, as Thomson (2019: 522) argues, under austerity, philanthropic organizations have assumed “leadership responsibilities—planning, development, funding, and coordination—formerly attributed to the city government.”

This shift can have severe consequences for marginalized groups, especially given the racialized nature of lived experiences of austerity (Phinney, 2020). As municipal governments in majority Black cities like Detroit face financial crises, citizens are less able to assert pressure on their local governments as power shifts away from democratically-elected officials and into a philanthropic ‘shadow state’ (Lipman, 2015: 1; see also Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018). Even when democratic decision making is preserved, in many cases elite funding is channelled towards electing candidates that fit the visions of elites, with philanthropists shifting into political kingmakers as a means of pushing their agendas. School board elections in the United States, for example, have received an unprecedented influx of outside money from wealthy philanthropists as they have become a local front in the nationwide political struggle over charter schools (Cohen and Lizotte, 2015; Reckhow et al., 2017).

Urban school systems in the United States, a favoured area of intervention for philanthropists, are an especially telling example of the dynamic interplay between urban policymaking, racialized austerity, and philanthropy. Years of local district underfunding of majority-Black and Latinx communities, combined with competition from charter schools, have led to a decline of district revenues; a decline that has been coupled with waves of investment by some of the world’s largest foundations including the Broad Foundation, Gates Foundation, and Walton Foundation (Cohen and Lizotte, 2015; Lipman, 2015; Scott, 2009). As Scott (2009) highlights, while education has been a longstanding area of focus of foundations run by (white) elites who have sought to influence the education of racialized students, the past two decades have seen a shift in their focus to market-based interventions. These interventions spend less money directly funding school programs and instead use a
‘vertical approach’ to fund the policy infrastructure around schools such as ‘astroturf’
parent organizations, think tanks, and “alternative leadership preparation programs” that
seek to train administrators that believe in the ideology of big funders (Lipman, 2015; Scott,
2009; Scott and Jabbar, 2014).

Importantly however, while many studies have highlighted the increased influence of
single philanthropists/philanthropic foundations under austerity urbanism, less understood
is what happens when these organizations are in conflict over competing policy agendas.
This is understandable given the outsized influence of large funders and the propensity of
many philanthropists to focus on specific cities or subject matters (Hay and Muller, 2014).
Nevertheless, as philanthropic influence has grown, such conflicts are inevitable, especially
in areas like education where there are networks of elites with conflicting visions for reform
(Reckhow et al., 2017).

Indeed, it is not an accident that much of the work described above has focused specif-
cically on education. Schools are not only a popular site of intervention for philanthropists
but also central to the production of urban dynamics such as racial segregation (Lipman,
2015; Yoon, 2011), serving in many ways as a canary in the coal mine of the influence of
philanthropists. This is in part related to the role education has in supporting other urban
processes from gentrification to urban labour market dynamics (Nguyen et al., 2017).
Lipman (2015), for instance, has highlighted how education reform projects in Chicago
designed to provide the types of schools desired by middle-class residents emerged hand-
in-hand with an agenda to gentrify the city’s downtown.

In this respect, the struggles over the future of Detroit’s school system can be instructive
in understanding how elite philanthropists are exerting their influence on urban policy under
conditions of racialized austerity. In the same way that the marketization of New Orleans’
schools following Hurricane Katrina foreshadowed the austerity urbanism that followed the
2008 financial crisis (Buras, 2015; Huff, 2013), the dynamics of philanthropy, austerity and
urban governance described below signal what may be an increasingly large role of philan-
thropists in shaping urban policymaking processes; especially if the fallout of the COVID-19
pandemic results in a new wave of austerity and an acceleration of wealth inequality.

State of emergency: State and philanthropic experimentation with
Detroit schools
The debate around the fate of Detroit’s schools that accelerated in 2014 was a culmination
of decades of political struggle over, and experimentation with, Detroit’s school system. This
section reviews this history to establish the context of racialized austerity within which later
debates over the future of the Detroit school system occurred. During the time period
covered in this section, the Detroit Public School (DPS) district was frequently used by
both the State of Michigan and elite philanthropists to test out their preferred policies.
Rather than separate processes, philanthropic and state actors worked together to set the
agenda for Detroit’s schools without the input of city residents.

Key to understanding this context is how emergency management laws were used by
Michigan’s government to take over the DPS on two separate occasions. This was justified
first through allegations of financial mismanagement (1999 to 2005) and then based on the
district’s financial strain (2009 to 2016) (Kang, 2015). In this, the treatment of DPS mirrored
the wider disempowerment of majority-Black municipalities in Michigan through emergen-
cy management laws as enabled by a state politics of anti-Blackness (Pulido, 2016;
Ranganathan, 2016; Seamster, 2018). While financial crisis is common across Michigan
municipalities, only 2% of the state’s white population has been placed under emergency management compared to half of its Black population (Seamster, 2018). In particular, the second state takeover was used to advance the policy preferences of elite philanthropists. While initially described by the state government as focusing on a financial crisis in the district, this period of emergency management was in reality used to advance wide-ranging policy changes to the DPS under the complete authority of a state-appointed emergency manager. This included the closure of over 100 public schools and their replacement by charter schools as well as the creation of a state body, the Education Achievement Authority (EAA), which took over 15 DPS schools (Cohen, 2020).

The oversight of emergency managers has meant that much of the political struggle over Detroit schools over the past decade has occurred at the state level where the influence of two camps of elite philanthropic actors has held sway. One the one hand, the DeVos family have used their donations and influence to promote conservative, market-oriented policies that would allow for public money to flow to private schools. On the other, liberal philanthropists and philanthropic organizations such as the Broad and Skillman foundations have pushed their preferred market-oriented policy, charter schools, which moderates the market shift sought by DeVos with a technocratic orientation that connects markets to accountability regimes such as standardized testing. Over the decade leading up to the debate over DPS’s bankruptcy, both groups successfully advocated for policies that helped create both the financial struggles of the district and the contentious political climate around it.

As part of the religious and conservative right, the DeVos family, particularly Dick and Betsy DeVos, have long supported the voucher movement which seeks to use public money for private schooling (including religious schools). This has included charitable donations from their foundation to educational non-profits/schools that have been paired with millions in political donations to the state and national Republican parties. After the failure of a public referendum on vouchers in 2001, Dick and Betsy DeVos founded and heavily funded the non-profit Great Lakes Education Project (GLEP) to promote voucher policies (Phillips, 2011). They have also directly supported charter schools and market-oriented educational advocacy groups such as The 74, exhibiting a vertical approach to promoting policy changes through funding a network of non-profit organizations and lobbying groups (Stratford, 2016).

Notably, the DeVos’ monetary and political capital was essential to a successful campaign to lift the cap on charter schools in 2011, a policy that helped contribute to a reduction of students attending DPS schools and therefore hurt the district’s funding level (Cohen, 2020). In doing so the DeVos family blended their philanthropic funding and political donations, with GLEP lobbying for policy changes and the DeVos family financing the electoral campaigns of Republicans who voted to lift the charter school cap. These donations proved to be crucial in promoting this policy change, with the Detroit Free Press reporting that 66 of the 78 legislators who voted for lifting the cap were directly funded by DeVos or by J.C. Huizenga, the founder of a for-profit charter school chain (Jesse, 2014). Furthermore, in subsequent primaries DeVos targeted Republican legislators who voted against removing the cap, pouring money into what one targeted legislator referred to as ‘the dirtiest campaign’ he had ever been involved in (Jesse, 2014). In this manner the DeVos family was able to use its funding power and web of non-profits to assert control over the Republicans in the state legislature and enact policies that heightened DPS’ fiscal challenges. In order to achieve their political goals then, the DeVos family paired their philanthropy with political donations, blurring the lines between the two and hurting the finances of the school district at the same time.
Similarly, liberal groups have worked through both philanthropic and political donations to promote their chosen policies, specifically using their influence with former Michigan Governor Rick Snyder. Leading these efforts were the Broad and Skillman foundations. In keeping with the more technocratic vision of these groups, their advocacy focused on setting up a state body, the Education Achievement Authority (EAA), to take over ‘failing’ schools and either convert them to charter schools or to implement experimental educational technologies. These groups were also supportive of the use of state power to take over the district through emergency management as a means of advancing this project (Inside the EAA, 2013). Broad has been unapologetic about his use of political power to shape education policy, telling Philanthropy magazine that he views criticism of his influence as proof he is shaking up the system and with the magazine’s friendly profile detailing that “given the public-school bureaucracy’s resistance to reform, the Broads are also active at the political level. They have funded a number of policy groups and political action committees [to advance their agenda]” (Gell, 2013: para 37).

These liberal philanthropic organizations have been particularly powerful in setting the agenda for Detroit schools in ways that have proved harmful, with the actions of emergency managers and the creation of the EAA directly linked to the advocacy of the Broad and Skillman foundations. Notably, the Broad Foundation paid part of the salary of DPS’ first emergency manager (Robert Bobb) who was also a graduate of the Broad Foundation’s ‘Superintendent’s Academy’ (Philanthropy News Digest, 2009) and who oversaw a project of mass school closures and the direct transfer of schools to the EAA (Cohen, 2020). Using an umbrella group, Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD), to coordinate their actions, these actors sought to build a “powerful coalition of the city’s strongest leaders” and aimed to move away from grants based-funding and, instead, promote system-wide change at the policy level (McDonald, 2011). ESD quickly published its plan for Detroit’s school system, a document which guided the actions of DPS emergency managers (to the chagrin of some DPS employees10) in calling for the closure of public schools and the opening of new, ‘high-quality’ schools (i.e. charter schools).

The creation of the EAA, a state body which took over and managed 15 DPS schools without any democratic debate over its formation, most clearly highlights the influence of this coalition. The EAA, ostensibly a state institution, was heavily funded by the Broad Foundation and long-time Skillman president Carol Goss served as the first chairperson of its board (Mason and Arsen, 2014). This included providing over $10 million in start-up funds from the Broad Foundation that were essential to the EAA’s existence (Mason and Arsen, 2014).11 FOIA documents highlight how closely these foundations worked with state politicians and bureaucrats with e-mails chains about the EAA often including a mix of state and local bureaucrats, Governor Snyder’s political staff, and employees of the Broad and Skillman foundations (Inside the EAA, 2013; Progress Michigan, 2014). Indeed, Eli Broad himself kept a close eye on the actions of the EAA; FOIA records include multiple instances of Eli Broad (a Snyder donor) directly writing or calling EAA chancellor John Covington and/or Governor Snyder asking for updates on the EAA, offering to lend Broad Foundation staff time to the EAA, and providing policy feedback (Inside the EAA, 2013).

The influence of both groups of philanthropists clearly highlights how the policy choices that shaped Detroit schools were influenced by the preferences of elite philanthropists and served to advance austerity and limit democratic accountability, often with negative impacts. The lifting of the cap on charter schools, the policy of public school closures, and the takeover of schools by the EAA all reduced the fiscal and bureaucratic capacity of the DPS in the period leading up to its financial crisis. Beyond fiscal pressures, these policies had disastrous results for students. Numerous interviewees recounted a chaotic
educational environment with public school closures threatening established school/community ties as well as a series of mid-year charter school closures which left students without a school and at risk of dropping out of the system entirely. The EAA in particular resulted in poor outcomes for students as the experimental educational technology it used, Buzz, relying on untrained teachers overseeing large classes while using a program that lacked the promised curricular offerings and where student work often disappeared (Guyette, 2014). These policies and results can all be directly linked to the influence of the philanthropic and political donations made by both conservative and liberal elites. This is not to say, of course, that they were the only relevant actors, but it is undeniable that the preferences of the DeVos, Broad, and Skillman foundations shaped the policy and fiscal environment of the DPS. This was not only enabled through their philanthropy, but through the active use of state power to take over DPS and bypass local opposition to creation of agencies like the EAA.

Despite their overall success in influencing policy, both libertarian and liberal philanthropic groups did have limits to how far they could push their agendas. As recounted by multiple interview participants, the 2012 legislative session resulted in setbacks for both groups as parental activism resisted market-based schooling policies and as the EAA became increasingly controversial. Importantly, highlighting the racial basis of the austerity that the DPS faced, attempts to move policy experimentations like the EAA to Detroit’s white suburbs were particularly toxic in the state legislature where there was no emergency management system to override dissent (Cohen, 2020). Further, while prior to 2012 libertarian and liberal groups sometimes worked together, interviewees described this tenuous connection breaking apart following the 2012 session. As described in the next section, this conflict came to define the contours of the debate over the financial future of the DPS when its financial struggles came to public attention in 2014.

Never let a crisis go to waste: Philanthropic struggles over the remaking of Detroit’s schools

While the relationship between conservative and liberal philanthropic coalitions has previously showed some tensions, conflict between these groups ultimately came to a head as it became apparent that the DPS would need an infusion of money in order to remain solvent. The timing of this crisis alongside the city’s emergence from bankruptcy proceedings led to increased public focus on schools, with Detroit’s schools often described as the next challenge needing to be met in order to allow an influx of capital and white residents into this majority-Black city and signalling the close connection between the debate over the schools and wider urban politics in the city. Indeed, the impending bankruptcy was widely viewed as an opportunity to assert control over the future of the DPS through shaping the legislation that would accompany any state ‘bailout’ of Detroit’s schools.

Despite the financial struggles of the district being the cause of the initial debate around the future of schooling in the city, the politics that unfolded following this revelation centred around the state of all schools in the city (including charters). As it became clear that new legislation and perhaps the end of emergency management was on Governor Snyder’s agenda, groups began jockeying for position as they sought to define the future of schooling in Detroit. These groups included a new iteration of liberal philanthropic groups led by the Skillman Foundation (the Broad Foundation remained largely in the background following
the EAA’s scandals), libertarian reformers led by the DeVos family, and local education activists seeking the return of democratic control over all city schools including charters.

Most prominent in terms of media coverage was the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren (CFDS), a group brought together under the leadership of the Skillman Foundation and with the participation of not just those involved in education but also prominent corporations and landowners in the city. Through public discussions and a report the CFDS sought to advance a new model for the governance of schools that incorporated criticisms of the ‘uncoordinated hodgepodge’ that had resulted from the lifting of the charter cap (Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, 2015: 10). This was to be accomplished through the creation of a mayorally-appointed ‘Detroit Education Commission’ (DEC), to be given oversight over the opening and closing of all publicly-funded schools in the city. While they did advocate for a return of the DPS’ elected school board, the CFDS’s proposals placed this board under the control of the mayorally-appointed DEC rather than re-establishing an elected body as the final decision-making authority.

This technocratic (as opposed to democratic) orientation was reflected in the structure of the system proposed by the CFDS. Notably, the CFDS report outlined that the mayor’s appointed committee should be nonpartisan and use a ‘data-driven’ approach to determine which schools should be closed, who should be allowed to open new schools, and when public schools should be converted to charters, writing: “New schools will be selected on merit... [the DEC] will conduct an annual analysis of demographic trends and school performance to identify where better schools are needed” (Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, 2015: 13). This system would have kept control of schools out of the hands of an elected body and put schooling under the aegis of mayoral appointees who were to govern through ostensibly-neutral, data-oriented approaches. In doing so the CFDS’ plan constituted an attempt to depoliticize the difficult decisions made under conditions of austerity such as deciding which schools to close by placing them outside of the public eye and minimizing the ability of community members to provide input. Despite this technocratic approach, the CFDS presented an image to the public as representatives of Detroit rooted in the community. This was certainly the view portrayed in the media and the one held by Governor Snyder who told the *Detroit Free Press*: “One of the things I like in particular [about the CFDS]: it’s a community conversation. ... In fact, I’m actually not coming forward with ideas that we might have because I really want to give that lead to that group” (Dixon and Zaniewski, 2014: para 16).

Despite this public persona, the CFDS was criticized by public education activists as an unelected body without legitimacy. This view gained momentum when Simone Lightfoot, a member of the CFDS and of the Ann Arbor school board, resigned midway through its deliberation process. Lightfoot alleged that the CFDS’s leadership had already formulated their plan for Detroit’s schools when they invited members such as elected school board officials and teacher’s union representatives who would add to their legitimacy. As she wrote:

> it has become impossible for me to escape the conclusion, that the fervent political and profit centered policy pursuits of the Skillman Foundation, the United Way Foundation, the Governor and others on behalf of the EAA, charter schools and unproven educational experiments are not compatible with the interests I represent. The systematic manipulation of the subcommittee’s expertise intelligence is unacceptable (Lightfoot, 2015: para. 18).

This criticism that the Skillman Foundation had formed the group with a solution already in mind was further bolstered when Governor Snyder appointed Paul Pastorek, the state
superintendent who oversaw the creation of New Orleans system of charter schools and a paid employee of the Broad Foundation, as his liaison to the group (Marshall, 2015).

These events supported the assertions of local activists that the CFDS was a group of elites who were falsely presenting themselves as representatives of Detroit to Michigan’s governor. Activist groups like Keep the Vote – No Takeover protested the general disenfranchisement of Detroiters and publicly criticized the CFDS for ignoring community input (see Guyette, 2015). In part to address this criticism, the president of the Skillman Foundation and CFDS co-founder, Tonya Skillman, agreed to meet with the elected school board. Upon arrival, Allen signalled that she was upset that there was a public audience (a requirement of board meetings), telling the board “if we are having a media-facing conversation, I’m going to be giving you a media-facing response.” As city residents pressed her about the legitimacy of the CFDS (one asking “the real question [here] is why can’t democracy function in Detroit? Period!”), Allen ultimately responded that: “[the CFDS] is not a public coalition, it is a private coalition of people who have decided they are going to set forth recommendations… you should do the same.”15 The tension of that moment revealed the distance between the CFDS’ philanthropic-led approach and a true democratic decision-making process. When faced with hostility, the CFDS leadership retreated to their process as a private one, even when that description clashed with its public presentation.

Similar rhetoric was used to keep actors pushing for a return to public control out of the debate over the future of DPS. For example, a panel discussion on the ‘Future of education in Detroit’ at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor brought together “key Detroit education leaders” without including any public school advocates, trained educators, or elected officials. At the event, the CEO of Excellent Schools Detroit and a CFDS member, Dan Varner, foreclosed any question of a return to public oversight over schooling. When asked how a system like the DEC differed from the functioning of a traditional school district and why the city could not return to a district model, Varner stated:

I would just argue that the cat is out of the bag like the genie is out of the bottle, right? The notion of going back to DPS is so, I don’t even know how you would do that at this point... politically and practically that doesn’t make any sense.16

In this manner, and through the disenfranchisement of Detroit voters, attempts to restore local school district control were forestalled as politically impossible by unelected philanthropic leaders. This set up the CFDS as the only legitimate voice of Detroit in the education debate, a status that was later enhanced by their close allegiance with Detroit’s mayor, Mike Duggan, who lent his public support to the group (Hawkins, 2017).

Ultimately, however, the political group that was most successful in contesting the CFDS’s plans were the DeVos-affiliated non-profits who viewed the proposal for the DEC as an attack on their agenda. In a tongue-in-cheek move, the DeVos-funded Great Lakes Education Project formed its own coalition, the Coalition Opposed to the Detroit Education Commission, which included libertarian and conservative non-profits such as Americans for Prosperity (Michigan) and the Michigan Freedom Fund. This group set themselves up in opposition to the CFDS, stating that:

We strongly oppose the creation of a Detroit Education Commission that will hamper educational choice and create an additional educational bureaucracy ripe for political capture. Parents, not politicians, should be empowered to make choices for their children (Naeyaert, 2016: para. 3).
For this coalition, any local, democratically accountable control over schooling was a non-starter. Members of this group went so far as to publicly call for the end of DPS with Betsy DeVos herself penning an editorial that stated “we need to retire DPS” and that:

Rather than create a new traditional school district to replace the failed DPS, we should liberate all students from this woefully under-performing district model and provide in its place a system of schools where performance and competition create high-quality opportunities for kids (DeVos, 2016: para. 2).

Thus, while the CFDS called for a technocratic fix to the budget crisis, libertarian groups instead called for the dissolution of the city’s school district and its complete replacement by a market system. The influence and lines of debate of these groups set the terms of the policy discussion in such a way that the supporters of the traditional school district who issued a call for democratic control were left out of the picture entirely.

While the debate waged for several more months, the final legislative ‘fix’ for DPS was determined during a marathon legislative session that lasted until 4:30 am (Gray, 2016). As Armen Hratchian (2016) of Excellent Schools Detroit recounts in a blog post revealing the inside machinations behind the vote, the Democrats in the legislature aligned with the CFDS repeatedly pushed for the DEC and offered compromise bills to Republicans. While this resulted in a bill that passed in the State Senate, these proposals were ultimately non-starters in the DeVos-aligned State House. In the end, the version of the bill that made it through both the House and Senate did so with entirely Republican votes and with every Detroit legislator voting against it. The legislation did not include any provisions for the DEC, any limits on the opening and closing of charters as envisioned by the CFDS, or any system for coordinating the delivery of services. Furthermore, while a return to an elected school board was included in the legislation, the actions of this school board, including the hiring and firing of key bureaucrats, remained subject to state control via the oversight of a gubernatorially-appointed financial review commission (Gray, 2016; Pratt-Dawsey, 2016). This preserved both the status quo of market rule in the city and of the disempowerment of city residents.

This result has been largely attributed to the power of the DeVos family and its associated non-profits. The Detroit Free Press reported that, in the wake of the DPS vote, the DeVos family contributed $1.45 million to the Republican party and individual Republican candidates; this included $655,000 in the week immediately following the vote (Henderson, 2016). Inside accounts from members of the CFDS also point towards the influence of the DeVos family in shaping the final legislation (Barnum, 2017; Harris, 2017; Hratchian, 2016). As Hratchian (2016) describes:

The reality is this came down to a clash of ideology that is worthy of honest debate. My opinion, some are fighting for an inequitable and destabilizing form of choice long ago discredited and abandoned in other cities and states around the country (MAPSA, GLEP and the DeVos family). The rest of us are fighting for higher quality, fiscal and neighborhood stability, and equitable choice for Detroit’s families.

While the unrestricted operation of charters was met with a backlash from many in the city, and while the Skillman Foundation and others attempted to put in place a technocratic system, ultimately the DeVos family was able to use its wealth as mobilized through its philanthropic foundation and political donations to determine the future of Detroit’s schools. This conclusion was ultimately the result of how competing philanthropic elites,
empowered by the lack of democratic accountability under austerity-minded emergency managers, used both their non-profit and political influence to shape policy in ways that fit their visions for Detroit’s schools. On the other hand, those outside of elite networks that sought to restore democratic control over schooling were pushed to the side and actively disempowered, with no means of redress given the city’s conditions of racialized austerity.

**A failed legacy: Philanthropy’s exit and state responsibility**

In April 2020, the State of Michigan settled a lawsuit that had been working its way through the legal system since 2016. The lawsuit, filed by seven Detroit students, argued that the state had denied them their right to an education. As part of this settlement the state agreed to provide at least $94.4 million (USD) to the Detroit public school system (Eggert, 2020). The lawsuit’s allegations specifically touched on how the State of Michigan had experimented with DPS schools and oversaw the creation of the EAA, arguing that “[by] placing the Detroit schools largely in the hands of administrators with no backgrounds in education the state only made the problem worse” (Gary B. v. Whitmer, 2020: 4). In fact, despite the tens of millions of dollars that the Broad Foundation donated to the EAA, it was ultimately shut down in 2017 after only five years of operation. After its closure, EAA schools were returned to the DPS after its mismanagement had resulted in dropping enrollment levels.

This ruling and the failure of the EAA highlight that, despite the millions spent by philanthropists, the material conditions of Detroit’s school were not improved but, in fact, disintegrated further based on the interventions they promoted. That the settlement required the State of Michigan to pay restitution and directly invest in public schools while its philanthropic partners were largely erased from the public narrative is just the latest twist in a story of philanthropists pursuing their own agendas without input from, and accountability to, local citizens. For all the lobbying, grant-making, and political donations used to advance philanthropic interests, the ultimate responsibility for funding Detroit’s schools and ensuring their quality remains the purview of government. While elite philanthropists may have positioned themselves as saviours, the policies and institutions they promoted ultimately helped continue the existing status quo while disempowering city residents and negatively impacting their public school system.

**Democracy accountability, philanthropic conflict, and lessons from Detroit’s austerity machine**

The lead-up and resolution to the debate over the future of Detroit’s school system was, like many political struggles, characterized by conflict between competing groups with different policy agendas. However, the terrain of this conflict was built upon an environment of racialized austerity and democratic disempowerment that allowed for philanthropic elites to dominate the policymaking process and set limits upon debate. This meant that those elites were able to mobilize both philanthropic giving and political donations to promote the continued marketization of Detroit’s schools and the disempowerment of its residents. For Detroit students, parents, and teachers, the end result of these machinations were an ongoing fragmentation of the city’s school system and the maintenance of a system of state oversight that undermined local control.

This both supports and complicates our understanding of the growing importance of elite philanthropists in setting political agendas at the urban scale and beyond, especially in the context of the fiscal restraint and autocratic rule imposed by austerity (Hay and Muller,
There is no doubt that the Detroit Public School system has been remade to suit the whims of philanthropic elites. From the creation of the EAA to the DPS ‘bailout’, philanthropic foundations have used their wealth and influence to take advantage of austerity conditions and advance their preferred policies. This fits with the descriptions of elite philanthropists as important to the advancement of neoliberal policies noted by scholars like Harman (2016) and Mitchell and Sparke (2016). It also helps us understand the connections between philanthropic actors and the limiting of democratic accountability that characterizes austerity urbanism (Peck, 2014; Reckhow et al., 2020). Rather than work through democratic systems, both elite coalitions blended their political and philanthropic influence to fund research, parental groups, and lobbyists that advanced their agenda while bypassing democratic systems. This highlights both the influence of philanthropists and how they interact with what Phinney (2020: 1) calls “historically and geographically distinctive terrains of racial domination.” Both sets of philanthropists were able to advance their chosen market-based policies in ways that may not have been possible without racialized system of emergency management imposed on this majority-Black community.

This reality starkly highlights the connections between philanthropic influence, racialized austerity, and a decline in democratic accountability (Reckhow et al., 2020). The financial stress on the local school district (itself partially produced through philanthropist-supported policies like lifting the charter cap) was used as a justification for the state takeover of the local school system, but such takeovers were targeted at majority-Black school districts and municipal governments despite financial crises throughout the state (Seamster, 2018). The technocratic system enabled by emergency management, in turn, provided the opportunity for philanthropists to experiment with new methods of delivering education like the EAA without facing local resistance. The Broad and Skillman foundations in particular stepped into this void, working directly with Michigan’s governor to help design the EAA and its curricular offerings, to recruit charter schools to the city, and to close DPS schools. While the wealth of these foundations certainly played a role in their influence, it was the combination of this wealth with the racialized imposition of emergency management that allowed the Broad Foundation, for example, to pay John Covington and Paul Pastorek to work for the EAA and influence its operations. This cannot be understood outside of the context of racialized austerity which allowed Broad to influence what was happening in Detroit in ways that was not possible in majority-white suburban districts. Here philanthropic capital and racialized austerity combined to create the conditions which allowed for a policymaking process without democratic input or accountability and which advanced a technocratic view of what constitutes good policy.

Further, as highlighted by the 2020 court case which found the State of Michigan liable for failing to provide Detroit students with an adequate education, these philanthropist-led experiments had a negative impact on Detroiters. The scandals and eventual closure of the EAA are a stark example of this where, over the course of five years, 15 schools were transferred from the DPS, handed over to untrained teachers using a failing technology system, and then returned to the public school system after enrollment had collapsed. For the communities that depended on these schools, the millions provided by the Broad Foundation supported their disenfranchisement through an unelected power structure, provided an inadequate education, and broke apart school/community relations to test out new technologies and school management techniques.

This combination of technocratic management and philanthropic influence, and its negative impact on Detroit’s school system, reveals much about the mechanisms of austerity urbanism (Phinney, 2020) and how philanthropists, as part of what Donald et al. (2014) call
‘austerity regimes’, exert their influence. Through tracking the power of philanthropists in setting the policy debate around Detroit schools, we can trace how vertical approaches to philanthropy are mobilized to shape policy and bypass democratic accountability. More than that, this case highlights how the combination of philanthropic influence and austerity urbanism is not always a straightforward affair but rather can be a conflict-ridden, geographically-specific, process. Neither the liberal nor conservative coalitions were able to assert their authority but, instead, their influence depended on how effectively they were able to mobilize their resources and influence. For example, the Broad and Skillman foundations were able to, at times, set school district policy through their connections to Michigan’s Governor, their direct funding of the EAA, and through the formation of advocacy groups like Excellent Schools Detroit. However, in the case of the DEC, their proposed policy changes relied on the authority of the State Legislature – an environment where the DeVos family was better suited to marshal their influence.

The competition between these groups illustrates that the influence of philanthropists cannot be understood in isolation, either from their geographic context or from the actions of other philanthropic blocs. This is of interest beyond the literature on austerity urbanism including debates over the power of philanthropy at a variety of scales (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018; Harman, 2016; Hay and Muller, 2014; Mitchell and Sparke, 2016; Thompson, 2018). The growing literature on how philanthropists shape policymaking processes has often focused on charting how particular philanthropic organizations like the Gates Foundation have shaped areas such as global health policy (Harman, 2016; Mitchell and Sparke, 2016). However, this case highlights that there are also cases where groups of philanthropists compete over policy directions. Rather than simply asserting their influence over non-profits, philanthropic elites and foundations funnelled money and energy into the political process in ways that further disempowered city residents. In seeking to maximize their influence, DeVos, Broad, and others blurred the lines between their philanthropic donations and political contributions, using both to advance their agendas. In addition to focusing on the power of individual philanthropic organizations then, we must also be aware that there are important schisms between philanthropists that can affect their actions and funding choices.

The influence of their interventions on the on-the-ground practices of schooling in Detroit also highlights the importance of understanding the role of philanthropy in shaping the outcomes of urban policy in schooling and beyond. Proposed visions for the future of schooling in Detroit, and their outcome, were connected to power relations that went well beyond local educational actors into local real estate interests, national-level philanthropic foundations, and their connections to state-level politics. As Buendia (2011: 13) argues, it is important to “document the nexus between educational and broader city-national and global processes in constructing city subjects and spaces”. The profound influence of national-level philanthropists over schooling in Detroit is central to understanding the current reality of schooling in Detroit and the chaotic environment that followed multiple philanthropist-influenced policy decisions that linked struggles over the future of American education with localized conflicts over urban space. This highlights that studying urban policy outcomes requires a close attention to the growing power of philanthropic capital and the ways in which clashes between philanthropists can touch down in places like Detroit.

In reading through the case of conflict over the Detroit school system then, it is clear that philanthropic influence over policymaking manifested in ways that disempowered and disadvantaged city residents, promoted elite agendas, and blurred the line between philanthropy and politics. This was not only due to the actions of these philanthropists, but also how
their influence was made possible by anti-democratic systems of racialized austerity. For scholars of urban policy, philanthropy, and geographies of education this highlights that we must pay attention not only to the influence of elite philanthropists but also the tensions and conflicts that may arise between them, how they manifest in particular sites, and the close connections between philanthropy and other dynamics such as austerity urbanism in order to understand their impacts on important urban systems such as schooling.

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Notes
1. Charter schools are a market-based policy that allow privately-run schools to receive public money.
2. The Skillman Foundation is based in the Detroit area and controls over $400 million in assets with a focus on children’s issues (Thomson, 2019).
3. The DeVos family includes the heirs to the Amway fortune, most notably current U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Her foundation, the Dick and Betsy DeVos foundation, has an endowment of $55 million.
4. This paper uses the term ‘elite’ to denote what Hay and Muller (2014) call the ‘super-rich’ of ultra-high net worth individuals who are the “significant benefactors of global capitalism” (p. 636).
5. Foundations are non-profits with financial endowments used to fund other organizations. Foundations must use a legally-prescribed percentage of their endowment (5% in the US) every year.
6. Two emergency managers of the school district, Darnell Earley and Steven Rhodes, were also connected to the emergency management of majority-Black municipalities.
7. The second takeover occurred despite a successful referendum that limited the power of emergency managers to financial (rather than policy) matters. This result was overturned when Michigan’s legislature used a technicality to pass a referendum-proof law that enshrined the absolute authority of emergency managers.
8. Funded by real estate mogul Eli Broad (originally from Detroit), the Broad Foundation has assets of $1.4 billion (USD).
9. Lobbyist, Michigan, 26 January 2015.
10. Steve Wasko, DPS Executive for Public Relations wrote to Skillman employees and the emergency manager that “receiving [Skillman’s PR plan] afterwards with no discussion or input has me wondering why I or my department would devote any more time or energies to this project. If decisions are being made elsewhere then minimally we need to be given some notification as to what the broader picture is. Without that, I am left to conclude that we have a bunch of public forums for which we want to do everything to keep the public from” (By Any Means Necessary, 2010: 28).

11. This support was delivered through the Michigan Education Excellence Foundation (MEEF), a non-profit designed solely to fund the EAA. Dennis Muchmore, Governor Snyder’s Chief of Staff, was clear in his private correspondence of the influence of Broad, writing to state officials: “[MEEF] was created for the purpose of assisting the EAA... and itself is answerable to those who are raising and providing funds to us for the future... as with all foundation contributions, the donors will demand a somewhat more detailed accounting of the disposition of the donations to MEEF that are forwarded to EAA. In fact, they already have” (Inside the EAA, 2013: 60).

12. Civil Rights Activist, Michigan, 13 January 2015; Teacher, Michigan, 27 January 2015; Philanthropic Foundation Employee, Michigan, 6 February 2015.

13. Charter School Advocate, Michigan, 18 December 2014; Employee, Parent Activist Group, Michigan, 29 January 2015; Director, Philanthropic Foundation, Michigan, 6 February 2015.

14. Lobbyist, Michigan, 26 January 2015; Director, Philanthropic Foundation, Michigan, 6 February 2015.

15. Personal observation. Meeting of Detroit Public School board, Michigan. 2 February 2015.

16. Personal observation. Future of education in Detroit: A panel discussion, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, Michigan. 23 October 2014.

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