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## *This Building Is for Sale (but Not to a Charter School)*

Education officials try to stem the school-choice movement by holding on to vacant properties.

Declining enrollment has contributed to a growing inventory of vacant and half-empty school buildings in cities across the U.S. Private and charter schools often want to purchase or lease space in these facilities. But school districts and union-backed politicians frequently balk.

The Milwaukee Public Schools currently have at least 11 vacant school buildings and 41 schools operating below 70% capacity—and, according to a report by a consulting group hired by MPS, empty seats are expected to increase by 63% over the next 10 years. Many parents have turned to the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, passed in 1990, which provides low-income children with vouchers for private schools. Over the past decade, enrollment has increased 45% at MPCP schools and by 47% at the city's charter schools. Many charter and MPCP administrators would like to expand by acquiring vacant public-school buildings.

St. Marcus Lutheran, which has a student body of around 900 and ranks in the top 1% statewide among schools with a majority of low-income and minority students, offered \$1 million in 2013 to buy Malcolm X Academy, a large public-school campus that had been closed since 2008. The Milwaukee Board of School Directors said no and instead chose to sell the site to 2760 Holdings LLC, a newly formed corporation registered to a pair of construction-business operators. That deal fell through, and in 2016 the school district opted instead to spend \$10 million relocating the struggling Rufus King Middle School and its roughly 400 students to the Malcolm X campus.

St. Marcus then tried to purchase the vacant Lee School for the appraised value plus property taxes. Mayor Tom Barrett blocked the deal by demanding that St. Marcus pay an additional \$1.3 million—because, he said, the school was in the choice program. “Holding on to underutilized buildings makes financial sense for the district, because it inhibits the growth of high-performing charter and voucher schools,” said Henry Tyson, St. Marcus's superintendent. “In terms of educational policy and what's best for the kids, it's complete madness.”

In 2015, the Wisconsin Legislature had seen enough. It enacted the Surplus Property Law, which was supposed to force the sale of vacant MPS buildings to choice and charter schools. The law requires the city to list vacant buildings online and give choice and charter schools priority. But our organization found that MPS and Milwaukee have been flouting the law. So far, 13 charter and private schools have tried to purchase vacant public schools, but none have succeeded.

In November 2016 Rocketship, a charter school that performs in the top 5% statewide, attempted to buy an MPS building. In the final stage of the negotiation, MPS demanded that Rocketship, which is chartered by the city, obtain a charter from MPS instead. This would allow the district more control over the school. In 2017, because of the ultimatum and protests by the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association, the deal fell through. (MPS declined to comment.)

Milwaukee is not alone. In 2017 Detroit ranked last in proficiency out of 27 large urban school districts with a measly 5% of fourth-graders proficient in math and 7% in reading. The Motor City is home to one of the largest charter systems in the country; more Detroit students are enrolled in charters than in traditional public schools. The Detroit Public Schools have 22 vacant buildings, but as in Milwaukee, the education establishment isn't eager to sell.

In 2017 DPS did everything it could, even manipulating deed restrictions, to block charter school Detroit Prep from buying an abandoned building. "It seemed that Detroit Public Schools' perspective was that they could use their size and power to wait us out and, ultimately, put us out of business," said Kyle Smitley, Detroit Prep's co-founder and executive director. The sale was completed only this summer, after litigation, public outrage and the enactment of legislation to prevent deed restrictions on schools.

In Indianapolis, only 1 in 4 students passed the state proficiency test last year. From 2006 to 2016, Indianapolis Public Schools' overall test scores declined 22%. The district announced in June that it would close seven schools. Purdue Polytechnic High School, which is chartered by Purdue University, tried to buy the vacant Broad Ripple High School building but received pushback from Indianapolis Public Schools. Elected officials convinced the district to consider Purdue's offer, but the school's leadership announced in August that they were no longer interested.

By trying their hardest to prevent alternative schools from expanding, urban public-school districts and union-backed officials are preventing poor kids from realizing their academic potential. Public schools could show that they actually care about public education by selling their vacant buildings.

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