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ROY ROBERTS REVELS IN ACCOLADES WHILE DETROIT'S CHILDREN FALL FURTHER BEHIND

By Dr. Thomas C. Pedroni
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Detroit Public Schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts had some fabulous (see video at left) to share on NBC's Education Nation Detroit Summit

this past Friday morning. DPS had surpassed the Michigan state average in 14 of 18 categories measured by the state's student proficiency test, the MEAP. Applause and accolades followed Roberts' pronouncement. Chelsea Clinton divulged that she would entrust her own children to the Emergency Manager's schools.

Notably, the jubilant mood at the summit was not dampened by any of the usual naysaying. There were none of the niggling challenges to Roberts' assertions. The day's take-home message was clear—Roberts and his staff were finally turning the corner with Detroit's long-suffering schools. Education Nation, take note.

Given all the recent bad news in Detroit, Roberts might be forgiven if his facts were a bit off the mark. It turns out, according to the Michigan Department of Education, that DPS did not outshine the state in 14 of 18 MEAP categories. The actual number was somewhat lower—zero. DPS trailed the Michigan average in proficiency in all 18 categories. And not just by a bit—by more than 10 percentage points in the two science categories, and by 20 or more in the other 16. But it was a happy moment at the summit. No one—not one

panelist, not one moderator, not one preselected member of the audience—raised an eyebrow over Roberts’ innovative facts.

Perhaps Roberts had merely stumbled over his own words. Maybe he really meant to say that DPS schools were gaining ground on the Michigan averages—that yes, DPS was still behind, but was steadfastly narrowing the achievement gap in 14 of the 18 categories.

Unfortunately, that’s not the story the MEAP numbers tell either. Instead they show that the Detroit Public Schools have fallen even further behind the state average since gaining an Emergency Manager in 2009. The picture the numbers paint is particularly bleak when the 15 schools handed to the EAA just before the fall MEAP administration are factored in. They show that Detroit’s third through eighth graders continue to lose ground in reading and math proficiency in most categories.

The hardest hit have been our youngest test takers—those who have spent most of their school years under emergency management—our third, fourth, and fifth graders. Although Detroit students scored among the worst in the nation in 2009, Detroit’s third graders have since fallen 5.3 percentage points farther behind the state average in reading proficiency. In math, they have fallen another 5.1 percentage points below the state average.

Our fourth graders are now 2.9 percentage points farther behind the state average in reading proficiency, and 6.2 in math. Fifth grade students have closed the achievement gap by 1 percentage point in reading (and are now only 27.5 percentage points behind their state peers), but have fallen 6.8 percentage points further behind in math.

In sixth through eighth grade reading, the proficiency gaps increased by 0.6 points, 1.8 points, and 0.5 points respectively, while progress was made in math—by 0.2, 2.8, and 0.5 points respectively.

We hear again and again that Detroit’s children must be prepared to compete in the 21st century global economy. If the proficiency gap between Detroit’s children and the Michigan average is any indication, our children have only fallen further behind these past four years. Just don’t tell Chelsea Clinton—enrollment is also down sharply, and the Emergency Manager could desperately use a few more bodies.

Important Editorial Note:

This column was submitted for consideration to the *Detroit Free Press* on Monday, March 25. The column was accepted, and slated to run online beginning Tuesday morning. However, on Tuesday afternoon I received a call from the paper's editorial desk that more time was needed to go over the column. I had already emailed the editorial office links to the Education Nation Detroit Summit video with the times at which the pronouncements by Roberts and Clinton were made. I emailed a link to the MDE site where the relevant MEAP data is stored, and shared my Excel Worksheets on which I had done the calculations underlying the analysis. The *Free Press* staffer and I carefully went over on the phone all the numbers and how they were derived. She thanked me for my time and care. The column was again cleared for publication, this time for Wednesday at noon. Just before noon I received another communication from the *Free Press*— that if they ran a piece accusing Roberts of lying, then the paper at least needed to check with him on what he intended to say. I pointed out that the column did not accuse Roberts of lying, but merely used data to analyze his claim. Later Wednesday afternoon I received a final email, that based on Roberts' response, there was too much that would need to be changed in the article, and that I was welcome to take it elsewhere.

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