

Analysis: Private group's report on possible takeover of JCPS leaves out key details

[Mandy McLaren](#) Updated 8:20 a.m. ET March 3, 2018

Louisville business leader David Jones Sr. released a list of the 69 members of a private group whose aim he said is to seek community improvements such as education and public safety. Courier Journal

A report funded by a private group about the future of Jefferson County Public Schools fails to give a full picture of what an overhaul of the district might look like.

The [report commissioned by the Steering Committee for Action on Louisville's Agenda](#) highlights four school districts that it says have achieved success through dramatic restructuring.

But a Courier Journal analysis found that, among other things, the report glosses over community resistance, teacher fallout and persistent achievement gaps in the school districts.

Members of the steering committee, an [invitation-only group](#) that includes CEOs and other community leaders, say they commissioned the \$50,000 report last summer to learn how the district — which is [under an unprecedented management audit](#) — could benefit from a state takeover.

Background: [SCALA releases list of individuals who are in private group](#)

The four school districts highlighted in the 16-page report from the consulting firm Bellwether Education Partners are: Washington, D.C., Denver, and

Lawrence and Springfield, Massachusetts.

All four have seen growth in student achievement since instituting reforms, which have included changing the way teachers are paid and weakening the authority of democratically elected school boards. But the report appears to downplay community backlash.

For example, though the report mentions tensions that arose during the takeover of public schools in Washington, D.C., it does so only briefly.

And when citing Denver, the report spends little space acknowledging lingering resentment from activists who argue that the reforms have marginalized low-income communities.

"These examples reveal a broader problem with the Bellwether report – it is based on other reports that are one-sided policy advocacy documents, rather than objective research," said Brent McKim, head of the Jefferson County teachers union.

From February: [JCPS working on some big fixes as it awaits audit results](#)

He and other critics say the report is fundamentally flawed because it is based on faulty research, and they said it should not be considered when making decisions about the district.

Jim Lancaster, who chairs the education subcommittee of the private group and helped commission the report, said the group stands by its findings.

"The reason (we) contracted with Bellwether is that we didn't see any work or discussion happening in the community about what we actually do if the state does take over the schools," he said. "It's absolutely critical that some research was done to know what was done in other districts."

“(The report) is based on other reports that are one-sided policy advocacy documents, rather than objective research”

Brent McKim, Jefferson County teachers union head

Bellwether is nonpartisan and has a stated mission of "dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children." It has worked with public school agencies, but [many of its clients](#) are friendly to school-choice policies, including charter schools.

Lancaster said he and other members of the steering committee are especially concerned that JCPS is not preparing all of its students for success.

State data appear to bolster those concerns.

In 2016-17, less than half of all JCPS students were proficient in math and reading, [according to standardized test results](#).

And for certain student subgroups, the numbers were even more troubling. For example, on third-grade reading tests — a common benchmark for future success in school — only 30 percent of black students scored proficient or above, compared to nearly 60 percent of their white peers.

Lancaster said the Bellwether report shows that there is no "quick fix" to turning around low-performing urban schools.

"It's not easy and it takes many things," he said. "One of the commonalities is empowered leadership at the system level and at the school level."

Here's what the report says — and what it leaves out — about each district. The full report can be seen at the bottom of this story.

1. WASHINGTON, D.C.

The report cites D.C. Public Schools as an example of a district that has an "empowered executive." Under that model, a superintendent or other authority figure has increased power to make significant changes to how the district is run. The executive in charge is typically appointed by the mayor or governor, with the local school board merely serving an advisory role.

What the report says: "2007 was a pivotal year for D.C. Public Schools (DCPS). Chronically struggling schools and low student performance — only 12 percent of eighth-graders were proficient in reading — spurred D.C. into action. At the urging of newly elected Mayor Adrian Fenty, the D.C. Council passed the Public Education Reform Amendment Act, which placed D.C. schools under mayoral control, spurring a series of reforms in the district, including the renegotiation of the collective bargaining agreement with teachers, introduction of a new teacher evaluation and performance-based compensation system, and the fast growth of a high-quality charter school sector. After a decade of sustained school reforms, DC is the fastest improving city in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress."

2017 KPREP results: [Look back at last year's Kentucky school testing scores](#)

What the report leaves out:

- The data is from 2015; the National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly referred to as “the nation’s report card,” will not release new data on math and reading proficiency until April.
- The report is accurate in saying that when the 2015 scores were released, [the district posted faster growth than any other big city](#). But it does not mention that wide achievement gaps remained.
- According to more recent data from a test aligned to Common Core

standards, [fewer than a third of the district's students are considered college and career ready](#).

What the report says: "Washington, DC has pursued an empowered executive model since the Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007 reduced the role of the Board of Education and gave the mayor the authority to appoint the DCPS Chancellor as well as the members of the independent Public Charter School Board, which serves as the sole charter authorizer and primary oversight body over all DC charter schools. The DC State Board of Education still exists and remains locally elected, with eight ward-based members and one at-large member, but is primarily advisory except in the case of very specific policy areas, such as approving grade-level standards. Under mayoral control, former DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee during her tenure (2007- 2010) closed low-performing and chronically under-enrolled schools and reached a new collective bargaining agreement for performance-based evaluation and pay (a system known as IMPACT). Studies show IMPACT improved student achievement over the long term by retaining high-performing teachers and exiting low performers."

What the report leaves out:

- The reform law actually eliminated the local school board and created a state-level board. (Since the District of Columbia is not a state, this fact may have been glossed over for sake of simplicity.)
- Under Rhee, 23 schools were closed, leading to community outcry. "What we have here is a takeover. It is not reform; it is dictatorship," said one protester, [according to a news report from that time](#).
- A 2012 report from an auditor found that the school closures cost the city \$40 million — [far more than had been reported](#).
- The report uses the plural "studies," though it only cites a single study. That study, authored by professors from Stanford University and the

University of Virginia, did find that the evaluation system increased the voluntary attrition of low-performing teachers and improved the performance of teachers who remained.

- A growing body of research has shown that tying teacher pay to student test scores alone has not led to increases in achievement; the school district, in fact, [has broadened its evaluation metrics](#), now including student surveys in teacher ratings.

What the report says: "Rhee's successor, Kaya Henderson, sustained most of Rhee's strategies, focusing on recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers, expanding pre-K access and quality, and increasing the rigor of curriculum. On a parallel track, the charter sector expanded rapidly. Today charters serve about half of DC students and are well-regarded as one of the highest performing city charter sectors nationally."

What the report leaves out:

- Henderson was criticized toward the end of her tenure for [allowing the kids of certain officials to skip the line in the city's student transfer process](#). (A similar issue just led to the [resignation of Henderson's successor, Antwan Wilson](#).)
- The rapid expansion of the charter school sector was not without controversy. Before widespread reforms began, a group of parents sued the city in 2004 to stop a charter school from opening on Capitol Hill. The parents argued the charter would divert money from traditional public schools. They lost the suit, but protests and [lawsuits](#) over charters continued under Rhee and her successors.
- The National Association of Public Charter Schools, which advocates for charters, ranked the District of Columbia number one on its [2016 overview of the "health of the charter public school movement"](#). It received that ranking based on multiple factors, including high academic

achievement but also because of its high market share.

What the report says: "In DC Public Schools (except charters), the central office primarily manages the principal selection process. In order to be pre-qualified as a principal, candidates go through a multi-step application process that culminates with an interview with the Chancellor. If approved by the central office, candidates may apply for vacancies at specific schools. A community panel at the school interviews interested candidates and provides feedback to the Chancellor, who makes the final hiring decision.

DC's reform story, however, has not always been a straight path. The mayor who championed these reforms lost re-election in part due to community and union backlash to his education strategy. Big challenges such as persistent racial segregation and wide achievement gaps for low-income students remain, and tensions between charter and traditional schools over funding, students, and facilities are constant."

What the report leaves out:

- A [2017 report from the UCLA Civil Rights Project](#) — a critic of school choice — found that Washington's public schools remain highly segregated. The report also found that segregation, by both race and class, was more intense in charter schools. (Critics of the report argue that its authors used a faulty research method. Additionally, it is in some charter schools' missions to specifically serve low-income students of color.)
- Fewer of Washington's economically disadvantaged students are prepared for college and careers than originally reported in 2017, [due to an error in the city's test data](#).
- In 2017, a federal judge [dismissed a lawsuit brought by the district's charter schools over inequitable student funding](#). The schools

had alleged that the city was spending \$1,250 less per year on charter students than on students at traditional schools.

What the report says: "But, both sectors have grown in enrollment, graduation, and student achievement. By 2014, DCPS enrollment had increased by 5 percent since 2009, when it hit its lowest point following at least a decade of decline. During the same period, enrollment in charter schools increased by 36 percent, reflecting both growth in the number of charter schools and increased enrollment within schools over time. And although student achievement among DCPS students has much room for improvement, the district has posted dramatic gains. In 2007, the year of the takeover, over half of DCPS students scored at the lowest level ("below basic") in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) fourth grade reading exam; by 2015 that percentage had dropped nearly 20 percentage points, to 31 percent. DC's scores have improved across most subject and grades, and the city is now close to national average performance, whereas once it ranked at the bottom."

What the report leaves out:

- According to most recent reports, [enrollment in the district's traditional public schools declined slightly this academic year](#), while enrollment in the city's charter schools continued to climb. Since initial reforms began in 1995, the city's public schools have added about 12,000 students for a current total of 92,000 — still down from a high of 150,000 students in the 1960s.
- The district's public schools have recently been embroiled in a controversy over graduation rates, with the revelation that a third of last year's high school graduates missed so much class time that they should not have earned their diplomas. The [FBI is investigating](#), and the district announced it would no longer allow teachers to be evaluated, in part, [by](#)

[how many students pass their classes.](#)

- In 2015, the district's public schools saw a 2 point drop in eighth-grade math scores; the national average for math scores also dropped that year for [the first time in 25 years.](#)

2. DENVER

The report cites Denver Public Schools as an example of a district with "portfolio management." Under that model, a district enters management contracts with each of its schools. Schools are held accountable to meet certain outcomes, enabling the district to focus less on day-to-day operations and more on long-term improvements.

What the report says: "Following years of academic performance challenges and declining enrollment, around 2005 Denver Public Schools' elected school board and superintendent embraced a portfolio management strategy, and more recently also created a zone within a district. In the years since reform efforts began, student test scores have improved faster than state averages, enrollment is growing, and graduation rates have climbed substantially. Denver shows how governance style and strategy can change significantly without eliminating a traditional governance model."

Column via SCALA leader: [Our group is not the problem. Education in Louisville is](#)

What the report leaves out:

- Though student achievement overall has increased since reforms began, [huge gaps remain between student subgroups.](#) The gap between Denver's white students and their Hispanic peers in seventh-grade math proficiency, for example, is a whopping 50 percentage points.
- [Enrollment actually dropped in 2017](#) after two decades of steady growth.

Low-income families of color have been particularly affected as the cost of living in the city continues to skyrocket.

- The most recent graduation data shows that — after posting consecutively higher rates over the previous six years — [the district's graduation rate dropped slightly last year](#).

What the report says: "Beginning around 2005, two successive reform-minded superintendents and a majority of elected board members (two at-large and five district-based) led substantial academic and management reforms to combat chronically low academic performance and falling enrollment as families moved to the suburbs or private schools. The district created performance contracts with each school, closed and replaced low-performing schools, and increased school autonomy. Denver embraced charter and innovation schools, which now serve 20 percent of students. Innovation schools are still district-run, but principals have increased control over curriculum, budgeting, teacher hiring, and school calendars. The district also negotiated a new performance pay contract with teachers and revised funding structures to allocate the majority of funds to schools through a student-based funding formula, tying financial resources more tightly to the needs of students within each school. Most recently, four innovation schools banded together and formed the Denver Luminary Learning Network, a semi-independent zone overseen by a small nonprofit instead of the central office. To accomplish these ambitious reforms successfully, district leaders strengthened relationships with neighborhood and community groups to build public commitment to reforms."

What the report leaves out:

- Denver now has [more innovation and charter schools than it does traditional public schools](#). Those schools serve a higher proportion of low-income students and students of color.

- Innovation schools have been criticized for blocking teachers from rights that would otherwise be afforded to them under a union contract.
- In January 2018, two newly elected school board members [came out strongly against charter schools](#), citing concerns from constituents. Both members' campaigns were backed by the local teachers union.
- Under the new contract, teachers no longer receive automatic pay raises based solely on experience. Instead, they could earn more money based on factors that include choosing to work at a high-needs school or obtaining advanced degrees. Studies about the impact on student achievement have been mixed.
- The district has faced [issues over how much financial freedom](#) to give the schools in its "innovation zone."
- Opposition to reforms remain, with [local activists continually seeking to oust school board members](#) who support the reforms. Activists also have complained about [continued inequities in the district](#).

What the report says: "In Denver, the central office interviews and screens candidates for principal positions in Denver Public Schools (DPS) according to a DPS leadership framework, and if candidates progress to the pool of qualified potential principals, they may then apply for open leadership roles. A school-based advisory committee interviews candidates from that pool of pre-qualified applicants and provides advice to the instructional superintendent for their school, who makes a recommendation to the superintendent. The final decision rests with the superintendent."

What the report leaves out:

- A [2014 analysis of state records by the education news site Chalkbeat](#) found that though principal turnover in the district had slowed overall, it remained stunningly high at high-needs schools where the district had pushed its reform efforts.

What the report says: "Much as in DC, tensions exist between charter schools, innovation schools, and traditional schools in Denver over autonomy, regulation, funding, facilities, and transportation. School closures remain controversial and unpopular in the community. But Denver has seen significant academic progress over the past ten years: enrollment growth outpaces population growth — indicating a “return” to the city’s schools, academic growth outpaces the rest of the state, more students are taking advanced coursework, and the graduation rate has improved by almost 30 percentage points."

What the report leaves out:

- The district recently adopted [strict criteria when it comes to school closures](#) — a process, activists say, that neglects marginalized voices and [ultimately hurts low-income communities](#). But even before the change, the district had been aggressive in closing schools — phasing out, consolidating or closing 48 schools since reforms began.
- Though Denver student achievement is growing from year to year, [the vast majority of the district's students are still not proficient in math or reading](#).
- A former school board member who was supportive of the original reforms said the district is [still failing to support its neediest students](#): “While elements of that sterling national reputation are deserved, and some real gains have occurred, they have been far too slow and inequitable.”

3. LAWRENCE, MA

The report cites Lawrence as an example of a district that has an "empowered executive."

What the report says: "Lawrence provides an example of successful state

management of a struggling school district. While it is significantly smaller than JCPS, it has a very high-need population: three in four students are English language learners, and two in three come from low-income families. The state of Massachusetts took over the district in 2011 under extreme circumstances: a history of academic failure put the district at the bottom of state rankings, and the superintendent was jailed for embezzlement and fraud. The state appointed a receiver with the powers of a superintendent and the school board, with additional powers to suspend collective bargaining agreements; reassign school operators; and replace teachers, principals, or central office leaders. Since takeover, Lawrence outperforms similar districts in test scores, and graduation rates are up."

Related coverage: [Louisvillians offer their bold ideas on how to improve JCPS](#)

What the report leaves out:

- Whereas Jefferson County Public Schools serves roughly 101,000 students, Lawrence public schools enroll fewer than 14,000 students.

What the report says: "The state-appointed receiver led the creation of a turnaround plan with an appointed committee of local stakeholders. He then focused on central office and leadership, cutting the size of the central office by a third, and replacing most principals while retaining most teachers. He also brought in charter operators to manage several neighborhood schools. All schools then introduced intensive academic supports and longer school days and years and emphasized data-driven instruction."

What the report leaves out:

- After six years of overseeing the city's reform efforts, the receiver will leave at the end of this school year and power will be transferred to an

appointed board — news that angered community activists wishing to see power returned to a locally elected board.

- In 2015, the district [dismissed 59 teachers](#) — a move the district called routine but was criticized by the teachers union.
- When most charter operators were brought in, they did not take over whole schools right away. Instead, they took over one or two grade levels at a time, expanding their management in following years.

What the report says: "An independent evaluation found that Lawrence now outperforms demographically similar districts in the state, and the graduation rate has improved by more than ten percentage points. Lawrence received national attention as a state takeover that has been relatively peaceful and successful. Lawrence recently reinstated collective bargaining and reached a new teacher contract, but only after six years of negotiation. The long-term outlook for the district and whether it will eventually return to local control is unclear."

What the report leaves out:

- Under the [new contract](#), movement up the pay scale is based on multiple measures, including teachers' effectiveness. It removed salary caps, enabling teachers to earn as much as \$100,000 per year.

4. SPRINGFIELD, MA

The report cites Springfield as an example of a district that has a "zone within a district." Under this model, a subset of schools within a district are managed separately and may follow different rules. Schools within the zone often have more flexibility and greater access to resources.

What the report says: "Facing state management similar to Lawrence, the Springfield local school board and the state worked together to create the

“Springfield Empowerment Zone,” a group of eight middle schools. A board of four state and three local appointees oversees the zone separately from other schools in the district. This innovative and collaborative state/local solution and initial evidence of growth in school test scores and other success metrics have resulted in national attention.”

What we know: [Could Kentucky really take control of JCPS?](#)

What the report leaves out:

- Springfield public schools serve roughly 25,000 students — just a quarter of JCPS’ overall enrollment.
- Last year the chair of the innovation zone partnership told a local newspaper that [success of the zone will take time to assess](#).
- According to [a December 2017 progress report to the state](#), the zone has not achieved its initial student achievement growth goals. Eight of the nine zone schools improved their reading scores as compared to the previous year, while math performance remained flat.
- Further, a Progressive Policy Institute study cited by the Bellwether report says “it’s too early to say anything about the results here.”

What the report says: "In part to avoid state takeover, in 2015 Springfield created a zone within a district for eight middle schools under a joint state-local control board. In the Empowerment Zone, teachers have a separate performance pay contract, and schools have increased autonomy over budget, personnel, and curriculum decisions. They also have access to additional resources and intensive instructional supports. If schools fail to meet performance standards, they might become a charter, or leadership and staff might change. The zone will add a high school this year. Long-term results are still unknown, but zone schools saw significant academic improvements in the first years of the initiative, and Springfield received national attention

as an innovative state/local solution that avoided the toxicity and opposition that could have come from a full state takeover."

What the report leaves out:

- Observers say Springfield's adoption of an innovation zone received less push back because the alternative — a full state takeover — was considered worse.
- A move to replicate the innovation model in other areas of the state last year drew strong opposition from the Massachusetts Teachers Association, which faulted the proposal as an attack on local control.

Mandy McLaren: 502-582-4525; mmclaren@courier-journal.com; Twitter: [@mandy_mclaren](https://twitter.com/mandy_mclaren). Support strong local journalism by subscribing today: www.courier-journal.com/mandym