

School Austerity Measures Come to the Suburbs



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On a recent Thursday night, in a darkened middle-school auditorium in suburban Stillwater, Minnesota, a showdown between agitated parents and reticent school administrators took place. On the auditorium stage stood two long tables draped in black cloth, with microphones positioned for Stillwater school district personnel and board members.

Also attending this school board meeting were legions of parents and community members—many armed with notepads and dressed in bright red or yellow T-shirts. The shirts were emblazoned with slogans opposing the district's hastily announced plans to close three Stillwater-area elementary schools.

As board members and Stillwater Area Public Schools Superintendent Denise Pontrelli sat nearly motionless, parent after parent approached the stage. One woman, Dee Dee Armstrong, handed out cans of Coke to the assembled school officials. "Golly!" she called out loudly, "It's been a stressful fifty-seven days, hasn't it?" The soda, she explained, was a peace offering, in anticipation of a trying night.

It had been fifty-seven tense days since Pontrelli announced plans to shutter three district schools. The community responded with alarm and disbelief, while Pontrelli defended the move as necessary to conserve limited district resources.

It also drove home a point: The market-based education reform movement has come to the suburbs.

This movement—which has led to the shuttering of public schools based on the advice of outside business consultants and an insistence that schools must do more with less—has to date been largely directed at urban school districts. Cities including Chicago, Philadelphia, and New Orleans have borne the brunt of massive school closings (Chicago shut down nearly fifty neighborhood schools in 2013 alone) and increased competition from school choice and charter schools, in exchange for the promise of a more “equitable” education landscape.

Now this movement has extended its reach beyond the city and into areas once thought to have better schools—or, at least, wealthier parents and better protection from invasive, outside education reform groups. And, as parents and community members are figuring out, one group in particular seems to be leading this invasion: the Boston-based District Management Council.

The Council is a for-profit education reform consulting group, staffed primarily by MBAs with no perceivable K-12 classroom experience. This includes Council CEO John Jong-Hyun Kim, a former McKinsey & Company business consultant with deep roots in the market-based reform movement. In the mid-1990s, he started a private investment firm, Ibis Holdings, that focused on “educational opportunities.”

It’s a lucrative market. The Council gets contracts, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, from public school districts for such services as doing a “time study,” in order to analyze how efficiently district staff get work done. It also specializes in telling districts how to revamp their costly special education departments, often by cutting staff and reducing the number of kids who get services. And, while some districts certainly have found the Council’s input valuable, it all seems to lead to the Council’s stated bottom line of “cost-effective performance.”

An October 2015 *Progressive* article, “[Cashing In on Special Needs Kids](#),” highlighted the impact of a Council special education audit on families and staff in the Minneapolis schools. But the Council has a reach that goes far beyond one single district—Minneapolis—or one simple function—auditing public school special education departments. The Council’s website lists 126 school district members, spread across the country from Arizona to Massachusetts, and a range of services offered, including technology products and “executive retreats.” The Council exists in a crowded education reform consultant playing field, among big names like

McKinsey & Company and the Boston Consulting Group, as well as smaller, local outfits.

Most of these for-profit groups sell managerial-level advice similar to the Council’s, with an emphasis on cost-cutting and downsizing. Consulting groups that recommend belt-tightening strategies have commanded an expanding foothold in public education over the last decade, according to the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank that tends to favor such efforts.

The Council’s website highlights the “tight budgets” many public school districts face and touts the solutions the Council has for sale. These include becoming a member district under the Council’s banner—at a cost of around \$25,000 per year—as well as purchasing “Academic Return on Investment” plans for thousands of dollars. Then there are the annual Council leadership meetings and “strategy summits,” held in hotels in places like Chicago’s pricey Magnificent Mile and Times Square in New York.

Public tax dollars send school officials to these summits, but the ideas they pick up there are not easily accessed by the public. That’s because the Council puts a price tag on every bit of information and advice it dispenses. For example, parents or teachers who want a glimpse of what district leadership is learning at Council sessions are charged \$10 per PowerPoint presentation.

The suburban school district in Stillwater, Minnesota, is long and narrow, and includes rural areas as well as dense, highly developed pockets, with mixed-income families. In recent years, the district has been through a handful of superintendents, and also passed a 2013 tax levy increase. Residents say the tax increase came with a promise that no schools would be closed, which the district disputes.

In 2014, Stillwater asked for—and got—another \$97 million in a taxpayer bond to help fund upgrades, including new athletic facilities. That same year, the school district became one of the District Management Council's new members.

Stillwater parent Lance Cunningham, who moved to the district from nearby Minneapolis when his children were old enough to attend the area's well-regarded schools, says school closings were never part of the picture until Superintendent Pontrelli was hired. Pontrelli brought in a whole new administrative team and produced new research—which community members allege was flawed—that showed the district would be losing children and money over time, and that schools had to be closed to stave off a financial crisis.

Pontrelli unveiled this plan—called BOLD, for "Building Opportunities to Learn and Discover"—at a school board meeting last December. Parents responded with their own plan, calling it STOP BOLD COLD. They organized quickly to try to save the three schools on the chopping block, and to push back against Pontrelli's actions.

In January, the website Alpha News reported that twenty Minnesota school districts, including Stillwater, were sending superintendents to New York City for a summit called "Shifting Resources to Support Strategic Priorities," spending tens of thousands of taxpayer dollars for the required memberships.

Meanwhile, Cunningham and his fellow Stillwater parents found that closing the three schools as planned would save the district around \$1.2 million per year, or just over 1 percent of its annual \$97 million budget. The district's money-saving logic did not seem to hold water.

Pontrelli also claimed that closing the schools and shuttling students across the district to other schools would bring more equity to a rapidly diversifying district. Cunningham says the parents he met with are sensitive to this, but would like to work together with the district on solutions, not have a disruptive school closure plan foisted upon them. Pontrelli conceded at a school board meeting that no community engagement sessions had been held where interpreters were present, although non-English-speaking parents are a fast-growing demographic in Stillwater.

At a January town hall meeting, which state law requires before a school can be closed, Cunningham says more than 100 people spoke against the district's BOLD plan, compared to just twelve in favor. And two of those twelve, it was later discovered, were Superintendent Pontrelli's adult children who have no ties of their own to the school district.

Perhaps Pontrelli's children were deployed in one of the Council's "persuasive communications strategies." At its January 2016 summit, participants including Pontrelli were schooled in how to win the public over to unpopular ideas. A PowerPoint recap of this (yep, it costs \$10) advises superintendents to use "informal and trusted spokespersons" to sell the community on dramatic changes.

Another tip: Couch everything in terms of its promised impact on students: "From the beginning, framing all resource shifts as a way to impact student achievement is an effective support-building measure."

The reality of the changes the District Management Council is pushing recently became brutally clear in Elmhurst, Illinois. The Chicago suburb, described by a website touting the "ten happiest cities" in Illinois as "fairly affluent," hired a superintendent, David Moyer, last July, who immediately began pushing for the district to enter into a contract with the Council, says lifelong Elmhurst resident Katie Marsico. An executive for BWP & Associates, the search firm that brought Moyer to Elmhurst, also works as a "special advisor" for the Council. (The district denies that there is any connection between the search firm and the Council.)

By September, the Council had secured a no-bid \$225,000 contract and was fully embedded in Elmhurst's public school affairs. The Council, true to form, promised to evaluate the "cost-

effectiveness of Elmhurst's staffing patterns and practices." It also vowed to take a close look at Elmhurst's middle school programming and special education department, with an eye toward "best practices."

Here's how that has played out on the ground. Marsico, who helped form a group called PAGE, or Parent Advocacy Group for Elmhurst, says a Council-rigged middle school "time study" was conducted on a day when students were taking a standardized test. "That is not going to be indicative of how time is being used," Marsico notes with frustration. Marsico and her fellow activists say they never learned who, exactly, was on a task force set up to study changes to local middle schools, or what its mission was. Parents did, however, obtain a copy of an internal email from Superintendent Moyer, in which he indicated the task force would be studying the work of John Hattie, an education researcher famous for saying smaller class sizes do not improve student achievement.

"I feel like we are being sold snake oil," says Marsico, who has six children. "Our superintendent came in really hot and heavy, trying to make a lot of changes, really fast. And every time we raise an objection, we are told we've got it wrong." One change, borne out of the Council's time study of the middle school, was a suddenly announced decision to move a group of children—many of them special education students—out of one school and into another.

At a January 12 meeting, parent Jim Britton, a principle at another Illinois district, spoke out against this proposal. He expressed sympathy for the board of education, saying he knows what it is like to be on the "other side" of controversial decisions. But, with his voice trembling, Britton noted that parents were not "afforded the dignity and respect of communication and collaboration" and that nothing about the timing or purpose of the move made sense. He warned that it would cost the Elmhurst board and administration the "respect and support of the community upon which (they) rely." The board put off making a decision.

Across the country, in the similarly well-off Howard County Public School System in suburban Maryland, parent Barb Krupiarz knows all too well how a District Management Council-influenced administration can cut itself off from the community it serves. Krupiarz has two children in the Howard County schools; one of them, her older son, has an attention deficit disorder and anxiety, and qualifies for special education services.

In June 2014, the Howard County Public School System entered into a no-bid \$300,000 contract with the Council. Krupiarz learned about it several months later, in September, when, as a special education parent, she was asked to complete a Council-generated survey about her experience with the Howard County school's special education department. Krupiarz says the survey was "very leading."

"One of the questions said, 'I prefer that my child get instruction from certified teachers' " Krupiarz says. "Of course, people would agree with this." The survey's goal, she believes, was to arrive at a predetermined outcome.

"We think that our superintendent, Renee Foose, wants to cut support staff from the special education budget, and leave our teachers with more to handle," she says. Having parents state on a survey that they want their kids to have certified teachers could be used to support a move to slash noncertified support positions from the Howard County budget. Krupiarz says that is exactly what happened. In a February 2015 *Baltimore Sun* article, Foose described the cuts as a necessary consequence of declining county-level funding for the district.

Foose is a member of the Council's superintendents' network, and she attended the consulting group's 2016 Superintendent Strategy Summit in New York. She also wrote a glowing blurb for Council executive Nathan Levenson's \$68 textbook, *A Better Way to Budget: Building Support for Bold, Student-Centered Change in Public Schools*, published by Harvard Education Publishing in 2015.

One way to build support, according to Levenson's book, is for superintendents to learn how to "minimize pushback" to the austerity-minded reforms the Council has sold them. In Krupiarz's experience, in Howard County, "minimizing pushback" has meant the Council and the district operate in complete secrecy, keeping their true intentions hidden from parents.

The Council, under Levenson's direction, produced a review of the Howard County special education department, which it presented to Foose and department staff in January 2015. Then something very odd happened: No one from the school district would allow parents or rank-and-file district staff to see the Council report. Instead, Krupiarz says, "Our district took the Council's report, and wrote their own, telling us that they were not allowed to share the Council's report with us."

But at a December 1, 2014, school board meeting, district officials, including Foose and purchasing director Douglas Pindell, told school board members that the Council's "preliminary report was so good, and the Council's methodology was so good, that they asked the school board for another \$100,000 to have the Council also audit the district's custodial and building maintenance services," said Krupiarz.

And still, no one was allowed access to the original Council report for Howard County. Krupiarz says the district's director of psychological services asked for the report and was told she couldn't see it. As a special education parent, Krupiarz tried asking for access to just the results of the survey the Council had done of special education parents. She was denied. The district told her that the Council, and not the Howard County schools, "owned the survey results." Another parent officially requested access to the Council's "preliminary report," which was heavily touted by Foose and her staff, only to be told there was no such report.

"You would think we were in Chicago politics," an exasperated Krupiarz concludes. "It was crazy." Much of the district's response can be seen at a website Krupiarz set up, dedicated to voting in new board members for the Howard County schools.

Krupiarz ended up going to court to try to force her children's public school district to comply with her data requests. More than a year later, she still hasn't seen the Council's report, and feels she is getting the runaround from Foose and her fellow administrators. Krupiarz says there has been little support from local media, and virtually no national media coverage of the District Management Council and its tactics.

"There are also no peer-reviewed articles done to verify the Council's claim of 'best practices,'" Krupiarz says. "We pay them \$300,000, they take our data, tell us our special education caseloads aren't big enough, and tell us to cut staff." She hopes other districts look into this before hiring the Council.

Foose, the superintendent of Krupiarz's district, had her contract renewed in February 2015, despite a parent-generated "Cut Foose Loose" petition that garnered more than 1,500 signatures.

In Minnesota, Stillwater parents were told at a lengthy, contentious March school board meeting that the district will, for now, move ahead with plans to close three schools. In Elmhurst, Illinois, however, the district has yet to make a final decision on the recommendation in the Council's report.

"My fear," Marsico says, "is that the district will push decision-making on this to the summer, when no one is watching."

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