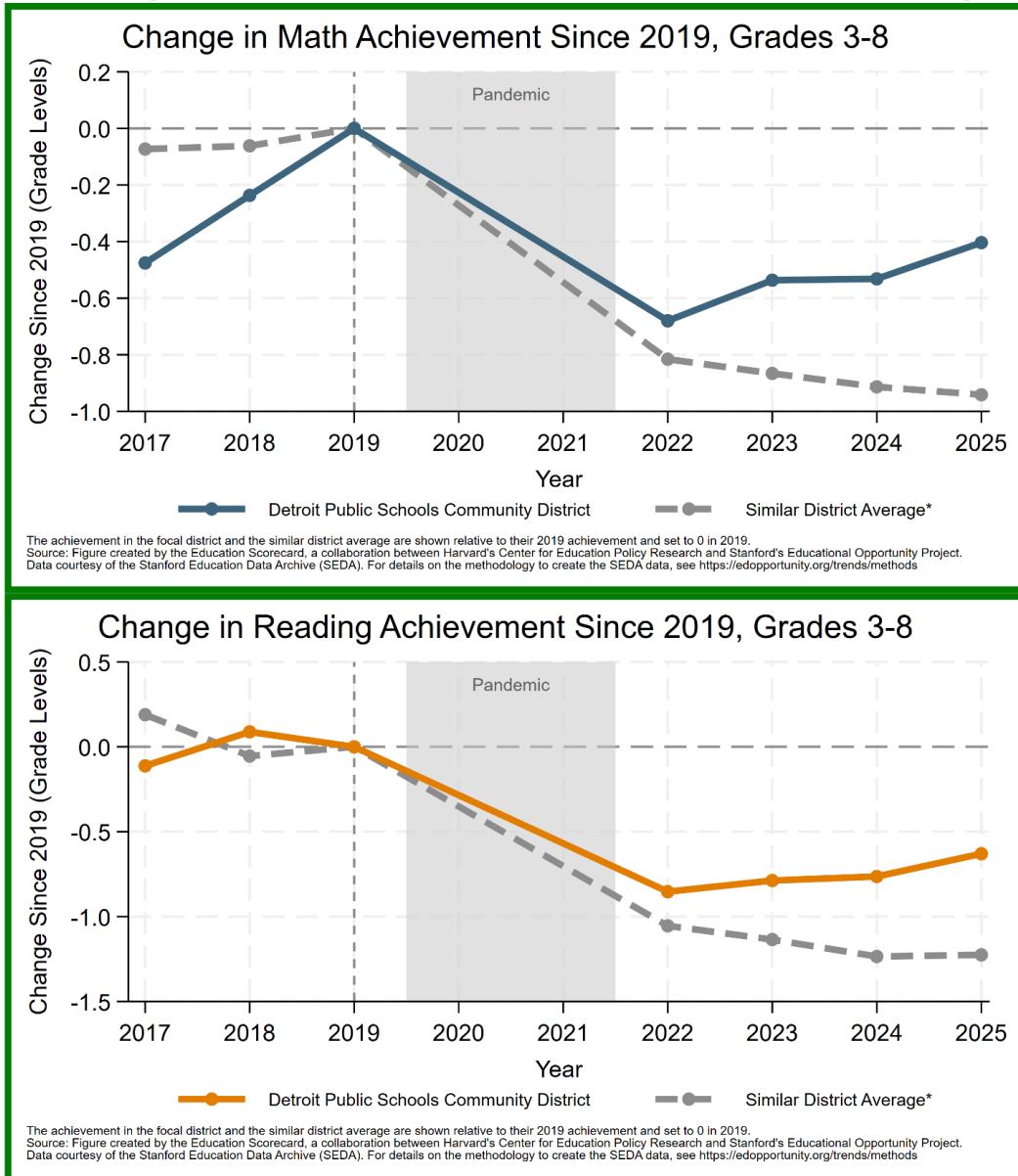


Detroit Public Schools Community District
 Detroit, MI

Detroit Public Schools Community District, MI
 Rising Faster than Similar Districts in Math & Reading



*Similar Districts: Saginaw School District of the City of, Flint School District of the City of, Van Dyke Public Schools, Muskegon Public Schools of the City of, Pontiac City School District



Student Demographics:

Total student population: 49,038
Economically Disadvantaged: 85%
English Learners: 15%

Three largest racial demographics:
African American: 80%
Hispanic/Latino: 16%
White: 2%

Dr. Nikolai Vitti, Superintendent

Chrystal Wilson, Assistant Superintendent of Communications, chrystal.wilson@detroitk12.org

- "I walked into a district that had been under two decades of emergency management and was using curriculum two to three grade levels below where students actually were. We had to establish a new baseline and be unapologetic about improvement—moving away from excuse-making and toward a system where everyone owns the data. We provide a degree of support for every degree of accountability, ensuring our central office is actively solving problems alongside our principals rather than just checking for compliance."
- "If you had asked me ten years ago, I might have been ideologically opposed to paying students to attend school, but our thinking has changed because we were stuck and the numbers weren't moving. By using interest money from our ESSER facilities investments to fund the 'Perfect Attendance Pays' program, we've seen high school students truly begin to own their attendance. It has shifted the dynamic from a compliance measure to one of student agency—we see hundreds of emails from kids now who are monitoring their own records because they recognize the value of being in every class, every day."

Background:

When Superintendent Dr. Vitti was appointed in 2017, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) was navigating a period of profound transition and systemic challenges. The district was just emerging from nearly two decades of state-mandated emergency management, a period characterized by a lack of stable educational leadership, bankruptcy, and the departure of residents and businesses from the city. During this era, the district had also become a battleground for high-stakes litigation, including a landmark lawsuit where students alleged that long-standing funding inequities and unsafe conditions had effectively denied them access to literacy education. Since taking office, Dr. Vitti has focused on rebuilding trust by establishing a new baseline for academic achievement, aggressively stabilizing the teacher workforce and student attendance, and implementing a performance-driven culture that prioritizes student growth.

Strategies for Success:

Instructional leadership and systemic accountability:

- Rather than allowing the pandemic to serve as an excuse for stagnant achievement, Superintendent Dr. Vitti emphasized that the moment was a new baseline from which incremental improvement was unapologetically expected.
- DPSCD maintains a comprehensive, real-time data dashboard for all schools and at the district level called DataCom. This dashboard tracks metrics on the core academic subjects, attendance, and teacher and staff vacancies, among other indicators.



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- Annually, every school leadership team creates a Tactical Improvement Plan (TIP) in which it sets goals on the district's key metrics. Schools not showing improvement receive intensive Instructional Reviews at the start of each school year to monitor the implementation of intervention and improvement strategies.
- The district convenes its principals for DataCom meetings three times per year (after the first, second, and third quarters). During these meetings, principals deliver five-minute presentations to the cabinet and their peers, walking through their dashboard data related to literacy, math, attendance, vacancies, and other metrics. This structure fosters transparency and collective problem-solving as principals identify specific hurdles and share successful strategies.
- The district directly connects student achievement to evaluation systems for the superintendent, principals, and teachers, reinforced by a performance-based bonus structure.
- By overhauling the quality of and expectations for teaching and prioritizing teacher salaries (increasing starting pay from \$38,000 to \$55,000), the district has reduced teacher vacancies from approximately 400 in 2017 to 30 today.

Investments in literacy:

- One of Dr. Vitti's first priorities as Superintendent was to overhaul the district's curriculum, which was outdated and misaligned to the state's academic standards. The district facilitated a teacher-led selection process where teachers were given the choice to pick between highly-rated curriculum from a national clearinghouse based on local student and teacher needs. The district decided on [Expeditionary Learning](#) for ELA.
- In 2018-2019, the first year of implementation of the curriculum for grades K-8, the district saw gains that outpaced the state. Despite declines in reading proficiency during the pandemic, Superintendent Dr. Vitti emphasizes that maintaining the rigor of this curriculum throughout the years impacted by the pandemic without watering down content was essential for the growth the district has seen in recent years.
- In 2020, DPSCD was [awarded](#) a \$94.4 million settlement from a lawsuit filed in 2016 by seven Detroit public school students against the state alleging long-time funding inequities that led to unsafe conditions in Detroit schools and denied access to literacy education. DPSCD's three-year plan to spend this money was approved in June 2024; spending about [\\$30 million](#) a year, the district will finish spending the money by the end of the 2026-2027 school year.
- The district [hired](#) 267 academic interventionists to work with K-2 students one-on-one and in small groups, building on the cadre of interventionists employed by the district using a 2022 [\\$20 million grant](#) from philanthropist MacKenzie Scott. Superintendent Dr. Vitti [states](#) that district data shows that "among students with similar performance on district assessments, students in classrooms with interventionists showed more improvement over time compared to their peers without." Superintendent Dr. Vitti has said that his priority is to retain these interventionists once the settlement money is gone.
- The district implements a 120-minute daily literacy block that moves from core instruction into intensive small-group work, when academic interventionists work with students two or more grade levels behind.
- DPSCD [hired](#) 43 teachers so that teacher leaders could spend time out of their classrooms coaching other educators. According to [Chalkbeat](#), of the 216 teacher leaders in DPSCD in the 2024-2025 school year, 77 led K-8 ELA classes while also coaching other educators. DPSCD states that students taught by teacher leaders were

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somewhat more likely to meet their reading goals compared to their peers.

- DPSCD also hired multilingual academic interventionists to work with students who are not fluent English speakers. In the 2024-2025, the district [employed](#) one interventionist for every 100 English learners; the district's goal is to employ one interventionist for every 42 English learners. On the 2024-2025 ACCESS test, which measures English proficiency, more than 65% of English learners in the district met or exceeded average growth in language acquisition, an 8% increase from 2018-2019.
- Additionally, DPSCD [offered](#) a \$5,000 retention bonus to keep teachers endorsed in English as a second language in schools whose student populations are made up of 50% or more English learners. The district offered \$2,500 bonuses to new teachers with endorsements.

Student and community ownership of attendance:

- To combat chronic absenteeism and stabilize enrollment, DPSCD has implemented a data-driven attendance strategy alongside aggressive community outreach.
- District data indicates that DPSCD students who miss 18 or fewer days of school per year are three to five times more likely to perform at or above grade level on state assessments and to graduate college-ready.
- Attendance is tracked in real-time at the school level through each school's data platform, providing an early warning system to identify students at risk of chronic absenteeism.
- Through the [Perfect Attendance Pays](#) program, high school students can earn a \$100 gift card for every five consecutive days of perfect attendance, with the potential to earn up to \$1,000 in a single school year. The district funds this student incentive program using the interest earned from ESSER investments allocated for school infrastructure and facilities projects. DPSCD has seen a roughly 3 percentage increase in average daily attendance and a 10% decrease in chronic absenteeism year-over-year.
- Using Title I funding, the district has embedded dedicated Attendance Agents at all larger school sites to provide direct support and intervention for families.
- During the summer of 2025, 40 employees [canvassed](#) more than 78,000 homes and hosted 19 community events to encourage families to enroll their child in the district. This outreach was supported by a citywide billboard campaign, which together resulted in approximately 80 new student enrollments.
- DPSCD [created](#) Parent Academy to support families with student achievement, parenting and advocacy, and personal development. Parent Academy sessions are free and hosted in convenient locations throughout the city. In the 2024-2025 school year, sessions helped parents support their child's literacy at home. Parents received \$25 stipends for attending up to 15 sessions, and nearly 900 parents from 89 schools participated.
- The district further strengthens the connection between home and school through its Parent Teacher Home Visit Project (PTHVP), which focuses on building meaningful communication between families and educators.

Accessible summer learning opportunities:

- Since summer 2024, DPSCD has offered Summer Discovery, a robust summer learning program for grades K-8, with [support](#) from the Ballmer Group and United Way for Southeastern Michigan.
- During the 2025 summer session, the district served 5,870 students across nearly 30



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school sites, providing a full seven-and-a-half-hour daily schedule that eliminated barriers to attendance by offering free breakfast, lunch, and bus transportation.

- The K-8 programming utilizes a balanced model where morning sessions are dedicated to intensive academic instruction, while afternoons focus on enrichment opportunities.
- High school programming is focused on credit recovery, offering four-hour daily instruction that operates primarily virtually, though the district offers in-person support at five high school sites for students who require additional teacher interaction or lack technology resources at home.