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Should Georgia Have an Opportunity School District in 2017?

On the 2016 ballot in Georgia, voters will have the option to vote for the Georgia Authorization of the State Government to intervene in failing local schools in Georgia. According to the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), in this authorization the state will be able to form an Opportunity School District (OSD) that will govern qualified elementary and secondary schools that are considered to be continuously failing. The amendment was modeled after the Recovery School District (RSD) in Louisiana and the Achievement School District (ASD) in Tennessee whose schools have been controlled under the state government for more than a year (Georgia Governor's Office). Through careful observations and studies regarding the performance of the students in the school systems under the government, Georgia has decided to propose the same opportunity to the failing school systems within the state. The approval of the amendment proposal may seem beneficial to the school systems, but after carefully observing the overall outcome of the school systems of Tennessee and Louisiana, it's safe to say this amendment would cause more trouble than benefits.

The Opportunity School District is an organization set up by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) that would be established and managed by a superintendent whose job is to operate and manage failing schools assigned to OSD. The governor will assign a superintendent who will manage the schools OSD categorizes as failing. According to GOSA for a school to be categorized as failing, the school would have to earn a rating of "F" by the state

and must be approved by the State Board of Education (SBOE) based on the state accountability system. The eligible school will enter the OSD program if it fails three consecutive years, with the first year being a warning and the second year getting put on probation. The GOSA states that 139 of 2184 schools in the state of Georgia would currently qualify for the OSD program due to constantly failing for three consecutive years. With such a high number of schools that would qualify for the program, “the state decided to place a maximum of twenty schools that can enter a school year with a maximum of 100 schools so schools will have an equal amount of resources needed” (Georgia Governor's Office).

According to Better Outcomes for Our Kids in Atlanta, there will be four school reform models available to the superintendent of the OSD. One option is a direct management, where the superintendent will directly run the school. The second option is a shared governance, where the superintendent will join with the local school board, who will help operate the school. The third option is that the OSD will collaborate with the State Charter School Commission and convert the schools into charter schools. Lastly, the OSD may close the failing school if it's not enrolled at a full capacity and transfer the students to another school within the district that's stable (Better Outcomes for Our Kids). The state government will gain more power by taking over the schools, which should be left at the local level. The government can make all these decisions without consulting parents, teachers, and the local school board. The fact that the government will have the choice to shut down a school and transfer the students who may be less advanced to random schools within the district without a consult is astounding.

The programs in Louisiana and Tennessee on which OSD is based do not have the amount of successes you may think they have. The Opportunity School District is a similar academic program to Louisiana's Recovery School District and Tennessee's Achievement School District,

whose purpose is to improve the performance of failing schools within their state. Tennessee's and Louisiana's school districts show some success, but they haven't improved the overall performance in their programs. Louisiana, being one of the first states to undergo this process in 2003, has received numerous reports of success while in the program. Based on information Aditi Sen in the Center for Popular Democracy observed, Recovery School District successes include higher graduation rates, improved test results, and fewer failing schools within the state. Also, between 2011 and 2015 the number of failing Recovery School District schools decreased from 36% to 19% and there was an increase in the number of RSD schools that received a grade letter of C and above using the state's grading system (Sen). Although it has its accomplishments, there have also been some adversities. For example, as of February 2016, Sen observed that Louisiana's testing standards are still the lowest in the country. Also, even though 60% of the elementary and middle schools in the state passed the state test, the high schools continued to fail (Sen). Likewise, Tennessee also underwent the same process, with the introduction of the Achievement School District in 2011. The ASD also has its accomplishments, but in 2012 six schools in Memphis showed that the program wasn't all positive. Three of the schools were converted into charter schools, while the other three remained under direct state supervision. In all the schools the teachers were replaced and the schools' name were changed. The reading scores at all six schools declined. The math scores at the state controlled schools improved, while the charter schools score declined. It wasn't until the 2013-2014 school year that six out of seventeen schools moved from the bottom of the school performance category (Sen). The accomplishments of the programs in Tennessee and Louisiana do make the programs sound like they have helped, but these examinations reveal that the program is still not living up to its promises.

The biggest problem is that the OSD has the option of turning Georgia schools into charter schools, which is a horrible possible effect based on the results of converted charter schools in Tennessee and Louisiana. Like Tennessee, the charter schools in Louisiana are a big problem. Although charter schools are known for performing better than public schools, being very adaptive to change, and being a source for academic improvements, Tennessee and Louisiana proved these claims to be false. After Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, Louisiana, RSD restarted its education system with charter schools. According to Aditi Sen in the Center for Popular Democracy, by 2014, there were 136 charter schools operating in Louisiana, with over 65,000 students attending. 41% of the school's students received a letter grade of D or below, with a school performance score of 69 or below. Only 9% of the students attending the charter schools received an A (Sen). The charter schools became known for discouraging struggling students from continuing their education in these two states. These programs are supposed to be encouraging students to succeed in their school-work and achieve a higher education. Considering that the Georgia's OSD has the chance to convert the failing schools to charter schools and that the first two states have already undergone the process show that this change to schools has not helped this program most likely will also not help.

The state's purpose of running failing schools is supposed to improve them not make them worst and make no change at all. Based on all the evaluations and studies, state intervention has its helpful tactics, but overall there's simply no positive effect. It is true that the intervention has helped some schools by improving their state scores over the years and by moving them from the top failing schools list, but the students are not necessarily benefiting if they continue to fail or barely pass. I agree we need to do something about the failing schools in Georgia, but this is

not the answer. The Opportunity School District would harm the school systems' performance rather than improve it.

Works Cited

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