

The SLPS State Audit

The Findings. The Progress.
The Full Picture.



When Missouri State Auditor Scott Fitzpatrick recently assessed another Missouri school district that had received his office's lowest audit rating, he offered an important standard for what should happen after serious problems are identified.

In July, following up on the "poor" rating his office issued to the Francis Howell R-III School District in 2024, Auditor Fitzpatrick said:

"I'm pleased to see the progress the district has made as it has clearly taken our recommendations seriously and has worked, or is working, to put all of them into effect."

He added that while work remained, he was "encouraged by the progress."

Saint Louis Public Schools does not disagree.

An audit should identify problems. Leadership should acknowledge them. Systems should be corrected. Recommendations should be implemented. And progress should be measured.

That is the standard SLPS accepts.

It is also the standard by which SLPS asks to be judged.

The findings released on August 27 are serious. They describe failures of governance, financial oversight, operational controls and accountability that occurred over a period encompassing previous district leadership and, in some instances, previous Board leadership.

SLPS does not seek to excuse those failures because they were inherited.

New leadership has been working to correct them because they were inherited.

That distinction is essential to understanding where Saint Louis Public Schools stands today.

Superintendent Dr. Myra M. Berry and the Board of Education have not waited for the final audit report to begin acting. As Dr. Berry said following its release:

“When the district received the initial findings, we did not wait for the report to begin taking action.”

The complete record should therefore include not only what auditors found, but when it occurred, who was leading the district at the time, and what current SLPS leadership has done and is doing about it.

Current leadership should be held accountable for its response, its progress and its results. It should not be treated as though it made decisions it did not make, created systems it did not create, or ignored problems it has actively been working to correct.

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

WHAT THE AUDIT FOUND

The Auditor concluded that the Board had not functioned as an effective governing body and cited failures involving oversight, communication, ethical leadership and accountability.

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

These findings span an audit period involving previous district leadership and changing Board leadership and composition.

That history matters.

It does not make the findings less serious. It makes it essential to distinguish between the leadership responsible for decisions and practices identified by the audit and the leadership now responsible for correcting them.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

The current Board has undertaken work specifically intended to strengthen governance and ensure audit recommendations become operational practice.

The Board engaged the Missouri School Boards' Association to assist in identifying support and strategies for strengthening governance, implementing audit recommendations and ensuring Board policies are carried out throughout the district.

The Board publicly committed to building stronger foundational policies and systems, increasing transparency and strengthening administrative leadership capacity.

Superintendent Dr. Myra M. Berry and her administration are now responsible for carrying that work forward.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS NOW

The question is not whether those past deficiencies occurred. The audit establishes that they did.

The question is:

Are Superintendent Dr. Myra M. Berry and the current Board correcting the governance deficiencies they inherited, and what objective measures will be used to determine whether those corrections are working?

That is the accountability standard current SLPS leadership accepts.

FINANCIAL CONTROLS AND OVERSIGHT

WHAT THE AUDIT FOUND

The audits identified significant deficiencies involving financial management, procurement, contracting, recordkeeping and internal controls.

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

The financial and operational deficiencies identified by the Auditor arose from systems, practices and decisions that no longer exist.

The District has the responsibility of correcting the inherited challenges.

Rather than conceal those challenges, SLPS has publicly acknowledged that its financial trajectory was unsustainable and that significant structural change is necessary.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

SLPS has been creating stronger internal financial controls, addressing finance staffing needs, reconciling inherited financial records and improving procedures intended to ensure accurate and timely financial reporting. Board Policies have been adopted and training on those policies have been implemented. It must be noted that the District has a strong and healthy fund balance with over \$189 million

The district is also confronting a larger structural problem: operating a school system designed for significantly more students than it now serves.

That work is central to Future Ready SLPS, which identifies financial stability and operational effectiveness as two of the district's four immediate priorities.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS NOW

The question is not whether current leadership created the financial and operational systems criticized by the audit.

It did not.

The question is:

Is current SLPS leadership correcting the inherited financial and operational systems that allowed these deficiencies to occur, and is there measurable evidence that stronger controls are now in place?

That progress should be documented, measured and reported publicly. The district has a healthy fund balance, one of highest in the state of Missouri.

BOARD TRAVEL

WHAT THE AUDIT FOUND

The Auditor found approximately \$75,000 was spent over 13 months for Board members to attend nine conferences, including five for which required approval was not obtained.

SLPS' POSITION

Required policies should have been followed.

That should be stated plainly.

But accountability should also be distinguished between identifying past noncompliance and determining whether the conditions that permitted it continue today.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS NOW

The travel expenditures and approval deficiencies cited by the Auditor concerning Board practices and decisions occurring during the audit period should not be presented as evidence of the current practices or current district leadership.

The appropriate question is:

Have the current Board and administration established and enforced the authorization, documentation, review and reimbursement controls necessary to prevent those past deficiencies from recurring?

Accountability should include both examination of what happened previously and verification that current leadership has corrected the systems that permitted it.

TRANSPORTATION AND THE \$3.1 MILLION PERFORMANCE BOND

WHAT THE AUDIT FOUND

The Auditor found that SLPS did not pursue a potential approximately \$3.1 million recovery under the performance bond associated with its former transportation provider.

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

The performance-bond issue arose from decisions and actions involving the district's previous transportation provider and previous district leadership.

Superintendent Dr. Myra M. Berry has stated that the issue had not previously been brought to her attention.

The current administration is investigating what occurred and whether recovery remains possible.

The public should also understand that the transportation system criticized in the audit is not the transportation system operating today.

SLPS replaced its previous transportation model.

St. Louis Mayor Cara Spencer, herself an SLPS parent, said following release of the audit that she is "very pleased" with the district's current transportation contract and that it is serving students and her family well.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS NOW

The question is not whether the current Superintendent failed to pursue the performance bond. The underlying matter predates her leadership.

The questions are:

Can current district leadership determine what occurred, establish whether SLPS can still recover any money to which it may be legally entitled, and ensure that controls now exist so that an issue of this magnitude cannot go unaddressed again?

Accountability should rest with those responsible for past decisions while current leadership should be held accountable for how effectively it responds to the conditions it inherited.

ATTENDANCE, SAFETY, CASH HANDLING, CONTRACTS AND COMPLIANCE

WHAT THE AUDIT FOUND

The Auditor identified deficiencies involving attendance controls, safety drills, cash handling, contracts, Sunshine Law compliance and other administrative procedures.

IMPORTANT CONTEXT

These findings required corrective action.

They are also not, by themselves, evidence that SLPS is incapable of correcting those deficiencies.

Francis Howell's "poor" audit similarly identified deficiencies involving safety drills, attendance procedures, transparency, financial controls and Board oversight.

Two years later, Auditor Fitzpatrick credited that district for progress implementing corrective actions.

SLPS asks for neither a lesser standard nor special treatment.

SLPS' POSITION

The district has adopted a new student information system, provided based on specific staff roles, and provided training to all users regarding guidelines and practices.

The district has a higher set of requirements than the state regarding safety drills.

All schools met the state standards for drills. New safety forms have been established, monthly reviews are being conducted, and site-based training is being conducted with the district safety committee.

- **Apply the same standard.**
- Identify the deficiencies.
- Require corrective action.
- Measure implementation.
- Verify improvement.
- Report the results.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS NOW

The administrative and compliance deficiencies identified by the Auditor concern practices and systems operating during the audit period of 2023-2024.

The question should not be whether Superintendent Dr. Myra M. Berry and the current administration can somehow erase those historical findings.

They cannot.

The appropriate question is:

Has current SLPS leadership identified those inherited deficiencies, implemented the Auditor's recommended corrective actions and established systems capable of preventing their recurrence?

That is precisely the kind of progress the Auditor subsequently recognized at Francis Howell.

SLPS asks to be measured by the same standard.

THE AUDIT ALSO TESTED OTHER SERIOUS ALLEGATIONS

The Auditor performed additional procedures concerning allegations involving enrollment, graduation rates, comprehensive-school qualifications, timekeeping and federal grant oversight covering July 1, 2021, through December 31, 2025, which was added to the State Auditor's review which included current leadership.

The Auditor reported finding "no significant deficiencies in internal controls, policies, or procedures in those areas."

While this finding does not erase deficiencies identified elsewhere, it should not be erased from the public understanding that it was reported out in the audit, and this leadership is moving with transparency.

The complete record matters.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS NOW

If findings concerning previous leadership are relevant to understanding SLPS today, findings that did not substantiate significant deficiencies during that same historical period are relevant as well.

Accountability requires considering the complete record.

WHAT IS DIFFERENT NOW?

The most important distinction between the SLPS described historically in portions of the audit and the SLPS operating today is not rhetoric.

It is action.

Under Superintendent Dr. Myra M. Berry and the current Board of Education, SLPS is:

- Strengthening financial and operational controls.
- Working through audit corrective actions rather than waiting for the final report.
- Strengthening Board governance and policy implementation with outside expertise.
- Addressing inherited financial reporting and reconciliation issues.
- Operating a new transportation model.
- Undertaking long-range financial and operational restructuring through Future Ready SLPS.
- Examining enrollment, facilities, staffing, transportation and resource allocation together rather than as isolated problems.
- Increasing community engagement around difficult decisions about the district's future.
- Focusing Future Ready SLPS around four immediate priorities: improving attendance, strengthening literacy, ensuring financial stability and increasing operational effectiveness.
- Working toward restoration of full accreditation by addressing academic performance, financial stewardship, operational stability and organizational culture.

None of this means the work is finished.

It means the work is underway.

THE GOVERNANCE QUESTION REQUIRES THE SAME CONTEXT

The Auditor raised the question of whether the district's current governance structure remains appropriate.

That is a consequential public-policy question and deserves serious consideration.

But any discussion about changing the governance of Saint Louis Public Schools should begin with an equally important question:

Which SLPS are we evaluating?

The audit substantially evaluates district systems and leadership during a period preceding the current Superintendent and encompassing different Board leadership and composition.

That does not make the findings irrelevant.

It makes the timeline essential.

Before conclusions are reached about the ability of today's Superintendent and Board to govern the district effectively, the public deserves to know:

- What deficiencies inherited from previous leadership remain unresolved today?
- Which have already been corrected by the current administration and Board?
- Which corrective actions are underway?
- What measurable progress has been achieved?
- What objective evidence demonstrates that current leadership is incapable of completing that work?

And before fundamentally changing the governance of Saint Louis Public Schools:

Has current leadership been given a reasonable opportunity to demonstrate whether the reforms already underway are working?

Those are not questions designed to avoid accountability.

They are necessary to ensure accountability is assigned accurately.

THE STANDARD SHOULD BE PROGRESS

There is no disagreement that Saint Louis Public Schools has experienced serious failures.

There should also be no disagreement about what responsible leadership must do when it inherits them:

Own the responsibility for fixing them. Correct them. Build systems that prevent them from happening again. Demonstrate progress.

Current leadership should not be held accountable for what it inherited, but how it responded, what it has corrected, what remains to be done and the results it ultimately produces.

The State Auditor said he was encouraged when another Missouri school district took his recommendations seriously, implemented corrective action and demonstrated progress.

Saint Louis Public Schools agrees with that standard.

We ask only that it be applied to the SLPS district.