**Headline:** The Hijacking of Police Reform by Wealthy Opportunists Resembles the Harm Done to Public Schools

**Teaser:** In Minneapolis, an overhaul of police conduct after the killing of George Floyd is inciting controversy among some activists.

By Sarah Lahm

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**[Article Body:]**

The Minneapolis City Council [voted](https://www.thecentersquare.com/minnesota/minneapolis-city-council-advances-measure-to-end-police-department/article_e39674a8-b7dd-11ea-aef8-67e7f875e2ec.html) to disband the city’s police department on June 26, a little more than a month after George Floyd died after a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes. Chauvin, along with three other officers who were there when Floyd was killed, has since been fired from the force and is now awaiting trial for Floyd’s death.

The city council vote does not automatically mean Minneapolis will no longer have a police department, of course. After a series of steps, the public will be asked to vote in November on an amendment regarding whether or not this course of action is the right one.

In June, a competing vision of police reform had been on the table in Minneapolis. Just as community-led initiatives were gaining traction, Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo [announced](https://www.inverse.com/innovation/minneapolis-police-automation-real-time-data) in June that his department would be using “real-time data” to overhaul its operations.

The work would be driven not by local grassroots groups, but [instead](https://www.inverse.com/innovation/minneapolis-police-automation-real-time-data) by a Chicago-based company called Benchmark Analytics. Chief Arradondo announced on June 10 that the Minneapolis Police Department “would contract with Benchmark Analytics to identify problematic behavior early,” according to [local NBC affiliate KARE 11](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/george-floyd/funding-for-minneapolis-police-department-benchmark-analytics-falls-through/89-ed85a741-b8b2-4f4e-844e-a2da7c463b3c).

Red flags flew up instantly, however, when this arrangement was made public.

For one thing, Benchmark Analytics is a private firm that [promises](https://www.benchmarkanalytics.com/ourstory/) to deliver an “all-in-one solution to advance police force management,” according to the company’s website, primarily through the use of algorithms that supposedly [predict](https://www.benchmarkanalytics.com/press-media/minneapolis-police-department-announcement-to-integrate-citys-first-research-based-early-warning-and-intervention-police-management-system/) which officers may end up behaving “problematic[ally]” on the job.

This approach was at odds with the reallocation of resources from the police department to social services that many [community leaders](https://www.reclaimtheblock.org/home) in Minneapolis and [other cities](https://inequality.org/research/3-things-protesters-racist-policing/) are pushing for.

Another bone of contention involved funding, as it was reported that Benchmark Analytics’ reform model [would be paid for](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/george-floyd/funding-for-minneapolis-police-department-benchmark-analytics-falls-through/89-ed85a741-b8b2-4f4e-844e-a2da7c463b3c) by the Minneapolis Foundation, a [philanthropic group](https://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=search.summary&orgid=4100) led by a former mayor of the city, R.T. Rybak.

Activists, however, quickly [seized](https://www.change.org/p/the-general-public-tell-r-t-ryback-and-the-minneapolis-foundation-to-step-away-from-police-reform-efforts?recruiter=221171431&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=tap_basic_share&fbclid=IwAR1PFcIxuFwQ7lu_2fyUe8BVVx8AlnlvwJMx4jndkPYvFI8bjJ63mSB5GyU) upon the fact that not only did the proposed contract with Benchmark Analytics appear to have materialized without any public oversight, but Rybak himself is a [founding](https://twitter.com/BenchmarkLLC/status/1267919127097860096) board member of the firm. This prompted the Racial Justice Network to launch a [petition](https://www.change.org/p/the-general-public-tell-r-t-ryback-and-the-minneapolis-foundation-to-step-away-from-police-reform-efforts?recruiter=221171431&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=tap_basic_share&fbclid=IwAR1PFcIxuFwQ7lu_2fyUe8BVVx8AlnlvwJMx4jndkPYvFI8bjJ63mSB5GyU) criticizing “conflicts of interest” in the Minneapolis Foundation’s involvement in police reform.

On June 25, Rybak [announced](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/george-floyd/funding-for-minneapolis-police-department-benchmark-analytics-falls-through/89-ed85a741-b8b2-4f4e-844e-a2da7c463b3c) that the Minneapolis Foundation “has dropped its involvement.” A Minneapolis Police Department spokesman also [said](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/george-floyd/funding-for-minneapolis-police-department-benchmark-analytics-falls-through/89-ed85a741-b8b2-4f4e-844e-a2da7c463b3c) that “the department is trying to find alternative funding” for the Benchmark Analytics program; Mayor Jacob “Frey said if the city doesn’t find other funders, it will see if the program can be done with existing money.”

It seems unclear so far whether or not another funding source for Benchmark Analytics has been found. But in a July 14 [interview](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/07/14/minneapolis-cops-required-to-report-deescalation-efforts) with Minnesota Public Radio, while Mayor Frey did not mention Benchmark Analytics by name, he did tell radio host Cathy Wurzer that his plans for police reform will center on an “early intervention system that… uses evidence and data gathered by the University of Chicago.” (This description seems to align with the work of Benchmark Analytics, which is [owned](https://www.benchmarkanalytics.com/partners/) in part by the University of Chicago.)

Frey told Wurzer that the data gathered is intended to help the Minneapolis Police Department “weed… bad apples out” by predicting “which officers are more likely to have some sort of critical incident in the future.”

The push to bring in Benchmark Analytics was not the first time either Rybak or the Minneapolis Foundation has attempted to use power and wealth to push privatization plans on city residents—even though they often claim they are acting on [behalf](https://artfulliving.com/rt-rybak-interview-minneapolis/) of marginalized people of color.

For evidence of how this approach can fail the public, look no further than the Minneapolis Public Schools, where a similar cast of characters and strategies have already been used to shake up the district’s schools. These “reform” efforts took Minneapolis schools down a failed path, and they stand as a warning sign of how attempts to rehabilitate police forces, in Minneapolis and elsewhere, can be subject to the same sort of misguided thinking and exploitation by opportunists.

**Top-Down Reform for the Minneapolis Public Schools**

For years, the Minneapolis school district has been subject to education reform tactics pushed by both [right-wing and neoliberal groups](https://progressive.org/public-school-shakedown/privatize-education-in-minnesota/), purportedly on behalf of the city’s most vulnerable students and families.

These tactics have included school choice schemes; a flawed, data-centric makeover of the district [led by](https://www.brightlightsmallcity.com/mckinsey-co-in-minneapolis-strategery-sinks-in/) the global consulting group McKinsey & Company; and attempts to [populate](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/out-of-state-money-pouring-into-mpls-school-board-race/89-105722430) the local school board with market-based reform acolytes.

These local reform efforts are part of a national and ongoing trend, with representatives from [both](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/10/21/obamas-real-education-legacy-common-core-testing-charter-schools/) major political parties pursuing austerity and accountability reforms for public schools with the help of billionaire philanthropic [outfits](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BfoWt1LeBg) such as the [Walton Family Foundation](https://dianeravitch.net/2017/04/13/who-is-the-walton-family-foundation-funding/) and the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/06/29/bill-gates-spent-hundreds-of-millions-of-dollars-to-improve-teaching-new-report-says-it-was-a-bust/).

The focus of these efforts usually involves using data (primarily from high-stakes standardized tests) to push a [crisis narrative](https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/etd/ucb/text/Jani_berkeley_0028E_17367.pdf) around public education.

The crisis justifies the takeover of public entities, often for the exclusive benefit of plutocrats. Recent examples of this include [New Orleans](https://truthout.org/articles/how-the-large-scale-privatization-of-new-orleans-schools-upholds-inequality/) and [Puerto Rico](https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/02/08/puerto-rico-braces-wave-school-privatization), where the disasters wrought by hurricanes Katrina and Maria, respectively, helped pave the way for privatization within the [multibillion-dollar](https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/venture-capitalists-are-poised-disrupt-everything-about-education-market/) K-12 education market.

**Elites Driving Change**

In Minneapolis, initial attempts to push privatization schemes, primarily through the proliferation of [highly segregated](https://www.twincities.com/2019/06/13/racial-integration-laws-exempting-charter-schools-might-be-unconstitutional-mn-judge-rules/), privately run charter schools, took root during former mayor Rybak’s tenure.

Rybak was mayor of Minneapolis from [2002 to 2013](https://tinyurl.com/y5ec9b6n), during which time he established himself as a press-ready politician who could both crowd-surf and whip city budgets into shape. At one point, he was [dubbed](https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/pothole-confidential) a “leader of the American Progressive Movement” by fellow Democratic National Committee insider Howard Dean.

Rybak has a longstanding track record of aligning himself with neoliberal and pro-privatization forces. When he first became mayor in 2002, for example, he immediately opened the city’s doors to the [controversial](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/14/sunday-review/mckinsey-ice-buttigieg.html) global consulting firm McKinsey & Company, whose operatives crafted a developer-friendly [revamp](https://bit.ly/38RMCqU) for Minneapolis’s municipal structure.

As mayor, he had little direct control over the Minneapolis schools but still helped [promulgate](https://www.startribune.com/rybak-moves-on-to-tackle-achievement-gap/230132631/) the idea that the achievement gap between white students and students of color—a concept that has been deemed racist by observers such as [Ibram X. Kendi](https://www.aaihs.org/why-the-academic-achievement-gap-is-a-racist-idea/)—is best solved through top-down [initiatives](https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/RESETEducationSummaryReport.pdf) funded by elites.

In 2007, he was the [only person](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2007/04/13/schoolclose) to publicly speak before the Minneapolis school board in favor of closing a handful of schools on the city’s historically Black north side, for example, even as scores of community members rallied on behalf of keeping them open.

Then, a few years later, he [signed off on](https://progressive.org/public-school-shakedown/support-emerges-community-schools-Minneapolis-180919/) a document known as the [District-Charter Collaboration Compact](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Minneapolis_Compact_Dec10_0.pdf), which came to Minneapolis through the [Center on Reinventing Public Education](https://progressive.org/public-school-shakedown/secret-group-wants-take-school/)—a nonprofit based in Washington state that has been a leading force in the privatization of public education across the country, from [Indianapolis](https://www.crpe.org/news/education-exchange-working-together-charter-schools-indianapolis) to [New Orleans](https://www.crpe.org/publications/re-creating-public-education-new-orleans) and many points in between.

The [compact](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/Minneapolis_Compact_Dec10_0.pdf) was signed in 2010 by Rybak and a list of other local school and civic leaders, who all promised to tackle the test score-based achievement gap by “working to close, reconstitute, or by other means immediately address persistently low-performing schools, whether district or charter.”

**Churn, Churn, Churn**

This embodies the churn approach to school reform, with constant streams of student and teacher data being used to declare winners and losers in the education marketplace. Any innovation, disruption, or deregulation is worth a try in this scenario, if it can be used to boost numbers and tell a [“beat the odds”](https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-2010-10-27-os-mike-thomas-waiting-for-superman-120101027-story.html) story of success.

So far, there has been little to show for the get-tough promises spelled out in the District-Charter Collaboration Compact as the metrics the plan was intended to address continue to reflect a [statewide problem](https://www.startribune.com/despite-targeted-funding-struggling-students-still-experience-an-achievement-gap/510160142/) with serving high-needs students, as reported by the Minneapolis Star Tribune in 2019.

Instead, the [crisis narrative continues](https://www.southwestjournal.com/news/schools/2020/05/district-restructuring-plan-is-approved/) to dog the Minneapolis Public Schools. In fact, it is still being used to justify extreme measures, including the district’s [current restructuring plan](https://truthout.org/articles/communities-forced-to-fight-planned-school-closures-privatization-amid-covid-19/), which was voted in just as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold—[against](https://truthout.org/articles/communities-forced-to-fight-planned-school-closures-privatization-amid-covid-19/) the wishes of many grassroots community groups.

Rybak left the mayor’s office in 2013. On his way out, he [told](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2013/09/17/minneapolis-mayoral-candidates-debate-citys-education-challenges) reporters that he “wishes he’d spent more of his 12 years in office trying to improve the city’s schools.”

**Data-Driven Police Reform**

What he did do, however, was walk out of the mayor’s office and into a [position](https://www.startribune.com/rybak-s-next-challenge-improving-education/229870441/) as head of a local [data-driven](https://www.startribune.com/generation-next-pushes-ambitious-plan-to-reduce-achievement-gap/271720461/) education reform initiative, Generation Next, before taking over as head of the Minneapolis Foundation in 2016 and, according to 2017 tax records, nabbing an annual [salary](https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/display_990/416029402/04_2019_prefixes_39-45%2F416029402_201803_990_2019040316206117) of around $340,000.

That salary, by the way, is nearly [10 times](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/05/30/minneapolis-racial-inequality/) what the average Black family in Minneapolis earns each year, according to a May 2020 Washington Post analysis of 2018 Census Bureau data.

The Minneapolis Foundation, both before and during Rybak’s leadership, has pumped [millions of dollars](https://www.edhivemn.com/recipientsoffunder.php?funderID=1) into school choice models in the Twin Cities. This includes support for some charter schools whose enrollment data appear to support racial segregation, such as (as of 2017) [KIPP Minnesota](https://www.edhivemn.com/recipientgrants.php?recipientID=31), where nearly 96 percent of students are Black, according to 2019-2020 [state data](https://rc.education.mn.gov/#demographics/orgId--74191000000__groupType--district__p--9). (The Minneapolis Foundation’s number one [grant recipient](https://www.edhivemn.com/recipientsoffunder.php?funderID=1) in education as of 2018 was the elite Blake School, where [tuition](https://www.blakeschool.org/admissions/tuition-affordability) runs as high as $34,000 per student annually.)

While Rybak has held high-profile positions in education, it seems he has emerged unscathed from the misguided market-based, data-dependent education reform initiatives he has [backed](https://www.law.umn.edu/sites/law.umn.edu/files/why-are-the-twin-cities-so-segregated-2-26-15.pdf).

Instead, it was his recent attempt to insert himself and the Minneapolis Foundation into police reform efforts that amounted to a day of reckoning for Rybak. When it became known that the Minneapolis Foundation, with Rybak at the helm, was attempting to drive police reform efforts, local activists quickly pushed back.

They had ample reason to do so.

**Communities Thwart Privatized Police Reform**

Much in the same way that privatizers and opportunists applied accountability measures to teachers and schools as a way to [“improve outcomes,”](https://www.minnpost.com/education/2016/03/autonomous-schools-gain-ground-minneapolis-and-across-nation/) while sidestepping broader conversations about wealth inequality and structural racism, supporters of data-driven reform are targeting police departments and police officers for a similar makeover, thanks to outfits like [Benchmark Analytics](https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/smoke-fire-early-intervention-effective-police-reform/story?id=71180022).

There has been “increasing use of surveillance technologies by local police across America,” according to the [ACLU](https://www.aclu.org/issues/privacy-technology/surveillance-technologies/community-control-over-police-surveillance). But from body cameras worn by police officers to predictive crime software, all the data and technology in the world has done little to improve policing, many experts [say](https://www.aclu.org/issues/privacy-technology/surveillance-technologies/community-control-over-police-surveillance), and has in fact been more of a boon to police departments who often use it [against](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/01/14/body-cameras-may-not-be-the-easy-answer-everyone-was-looking-for) the very communities they are supposed to be protecting.

And that raises another key point: a data-driven approach funded by elites is not the same thing as allowing community members to guide police reform in their own neighborhoods. Activists said as much at a [June 22 press conference](https://www.facebook.com/events/288281689221251/), held to call out Rybak and the Minneapolis Foundation on their record of failing to curb police brutality and to cooperate with the community on the issue.

Groups such as Communities United Against Police Brutality, which used the hashtag [#StepBackRybak](https://www.facebook.com/cuapb.org/posts/10158208044542221) in a Facebook post that shared the [Racial Justice Network petition](https://www.change.org/p/the-general-public-tell-r-t-ryback-and-the-minneapolis-foundation-to-step-away-from-police-reform-efforts?recruiter=221171431&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=tap_basic_share&fbclid=IwAR1UGNvo3_f-tIDn7FzeT8CLtFA0MdBfLCbzjQp-1bREhxjUSOG012rRrg8) and criticized Rybak’s connection with Benchmark Analytics, and the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations [convened](https://www.facebook.com/events/288281689221251/) the media event in front of current Minneapolis mayor Jacob Frey’s office.

As mayor, Rybak [“failed miserably”](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=598441050787768&ref=watch_permalink) where police accountability is concerned, Michelle Gross of Communities United Against Police Brutality said forcefully at the press conference. As chair of a civilian review board tasked with developing recommendations for the police as far back as 2002, Gross [alleged](https://www.facebook.com/CAIR.Minnesota/videos/598441050787768/?v=598441050787768) that Rybak showed disregard for the community’s work and in fact had a “secret plan to gut” their efforts.

Local civil rights attorney, activist, and founder of the [Racial Justice Network](https://racialjusticenetwork.com/about-us/) [Nekima Levy Armstrong](https://nekimalevypounds.com/) [echoed](https://www.facebook.com/CAIR.Minnesota/videos/598441050787768/?v=598441050787768) Gross’s criticism of Rybak. Armstrong, who once sat on the Minneapolis Foundation’s board, called Rybak to task for “allowing the Minneapolis Police Department to get out of control” while racial disparities in the city grew larger.

“He now has the audacity to… [act] as if he is an expert on addressing police accountability,” she [told](https://www.facebook.com/CAIR.Minnesota/videos/598441050787768/?v=598441050787768) the small crowd of reporters gathered at the press conference. “We are calling on the Minneapolis Foundation board, their trustees and their donors… to stop allowing… [Rybak] to gaslight the Black community,” Armstrong stated.

Their strategy worked.

Within a few days, the Minneapolis Foundation [announced](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/local/george-floyd/funding-for-minneapolis-police-department-benchmark-analytics-falls-through/89-ed85a741-b8b2-4f4e-844e-a2da7c463b3c) that it was withdrawing its funding for the Benchmark Analytics program. This was an impressive check on Rybak’s power.

So for now, it looks like police reform efforts in Minneapolis will stay out of the hands of such opportunists, thanks to pressure from local activists and their supporters.

Still, the legacy of supporting neoliberal education reform and privatization for the city’s public school system remains intact. In the coming months, the Minneapolis Public Schools district is set to embark on an ambitious [overhaul](https://www.kare11.com/article/news/education/one-day-later-mps-leaders-families-react-to-cdd-vote/89-2305a489-c995-4571-b99e-68244f9abfd2) designed to [“right-size”](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-schools-chief-gets-graded/564886832/) the district in the face of [steep budget](https://www.twincities.com/2020/02/23/despite-half-a-billion-in-new-money-many-minnesota-school-districts-are-in-the-red/) and enrollment [shortages](https://www.startribune.com/minneapolis-schools-back-in-a-big-budget-hole-with-a-19-6-million-deficit-for-2020-21-year/566112141/).

But these drops in funding and public school enrollment numbers in Minneapolis were catalyzed by the funding and support for school choice and data-driven [accountability](https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/RESETEducationSummaryReport.pdf) schemes at the [expense](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/02/24/minnesota-schools-face-deficits-despite-budget-increase) of the city’s public school system. The kind of grassroots activism seen in Minneapolis in the fight against a misguided police reform program is a useful model and could help end these efforts to undermine and privatize public schools.