# State takeover of Detroit schools imminent

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A bill awaiting approval by the Michigan state legislature would empower Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer to take over the running of the city's public schools. This would involve the removal of current school superintendent, Dr. Eddie Green, as well as the elected 11-member school board, to be replaced by a chief executive and a 7-member commission appointed by the mayor. The commission would consist of individuals representing education, law and either business or the military. If passed, the initiative would allow for the election of a new school board in five years.

The bill's chief sponsor, Republican Governor John Engler, outlined the plan at a recent meeting of the Detroit Economic Club. Engler has been touting the results of state control of Chicago's public schools as the model for the impending takeover in Detroit. The bill is expected to pass once it comes before the state Senate.

On Tuesday the proposal was sweetened with a bipartisan agreement by state lawmakers to give the school district $15 million for classroom improvements. That this agreement is a sop designed to win over local Democratic Party support was clearly indicated by Senate Majority Leader Dan DeGrow, who declared: "We'll give them some money. It's not a lot. It sends a signal of cooperation, and it's not so large that it will offend some people."

The Detroit public school system is in an advanced state of decay. A 1997 report cites a 26.4 percent dropout rate. Of those students who enter high school, only 29.7 percent graduate. Standardized test scores, which have become virtually the sole criterion for measuring student performance, show little or no progress. Chronic teacher shortages in core subjects remain unfilled and will be further exacerbated by the retirement of a significant section of older teachers.

The 1998-99 school year began with a shortage of 500 teachers and 300 substitute teachers. Badly needed repairs to many schools' infrastructures continue to lag. Three weeks ago students from White Elementary School, on Detroit's impoverished east side, were forced to evacuate the building because of carbon monoxide leaking from an old coal burning furnace.

The planned state takeover of the schools has prompted accusations of racism by some opponents of the bill, and various organizations have lined up on different sides of the controversy. The NAACP and New Detroit have come out in opposition to Engler's plan, while the Urban League supports it. Meanwhile, the current school board has countered with a plan of its own for improving the school system.

Mayor Dennis Archer, who came under intense criticism for the snow removal debacle following the record snowfall in January, has made modifications to the governor's plan, which calls for authority to order mandatory summer school, after-school classes, teacher training and community policing around schools. In addition, he is proposing to hire 1,200 new teachers, and is calling upon the state to set clearly defined standards for the school system.

In recent years Governor Engler has established himself as an opponent of public education by cutting funds to municipal adult education programs, cutting money from Highland Park Community College, resulting in its closure, and passing legislation permitting the setting up of charter schools.

While the factor of racism in the Republican-dominated legislature cannot be discounted, such accusations ignore the fundamental drive within capitalism to subordinate all aspects of life to the vicissitudes of the market. Moreover, the fact remains that there is a severe crisis in education. Many businessmen in the area have decried the lack of reading and math skills of prospective employees who have graduated from Detroit public schools. One such

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businessman, who attended one of the meetings on the takeover, related how he had to interview 1,000 applicants to fill 108 positions.

Detroit remains the poorest city in America. In a school district of 180,000 children, 108,000 are living in poverty. Meanwhile, the Archer administration has been preoccupied with the building of gambling casinos, ballparks, and the gentrification of certain neighborhoods. Tens of millions of dollars are being spent on these projects.

So while the debate over who's to control public education in Detroit rages on, none of the plans presented take into account that the quality of education can only improve as the result of basic changes in the social and economic life of the masses of working people in Detroit.

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