

The assault on public education in the US

Right-wing organizations push school vouchers in Michigan

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The strike by Detroit teachers earlier this month exposed the ongoing attack on public education taking place throughout the US. Behind the guise of school "reform" and "choice" some of the most bitter enemies of public education are pressing ahead with their campaign to siphon funding from the public schools in order to subsidize parochial and private education, and further lower tax rates on big business.

A number of states, including Florida, Ohio and Wisconsin, have implemented "school voucher" plans. The states provide cash grants to parents to remove their children from the public school system and send them to private schools.

To clear the way for implementation of school vouchers in Michigan, a coalition of conservative groups has begun organizing to overturn a 1970 Michigan constitutional amendment prohibiting government support for private or religious schools. The group needs to get 300,000 voter signatures to put a referendum on the November 2000 ballot in the Midwestern US state. Calling itself Kids First! Yes!, representatives at a Lansing, Michigan press conference last month said they also aim to include teacher testing legislation as part of their effort.

According to the coalition, the Michigan ballot initiative has been endorsed by the Michigan Chamber of Commerce, the Michigan Catholic Conference, and Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida. School ChoiceYes!, a Midland, Michigan group that has promoted charter schools in the state, announced they would drop their plans for a tuition tax credit ballot measure in order to work for the referendum campaign. The TEACH Michigan Education Fund, an organization that has been actively promoting vouchers for the last 10 years, is also supporting the ballot initiative.

Under the plan outlined at the August 26 press conference, vouchers would be made available to parents in districts that fail to graduate at least two out of three pupils. According to the coalition, this includes 38 state school districts with a combined total enrollment of nearly 300,000. The Detroit Public Schools made up more than half the total with 176,000 students enrolled. A large number of the rest of the students live in Saginaw, Flint and Pontiac, cities with a combined student enrollment of 51,500. The schools in these industrial cities are in state of general decay due to two decades of budget cutbacks.

The promoters hope to attract support by claiming that providing parents with vouchers would give poor children the same opportunities as affluent children to attend better schools. They want the plan to provide parents with children in private schools a voucher valued at half the state's average per-pupil expenditure, or about \$3,000.

But only those parents who can afford the considerable additional tuition required at private schools would benefit, while the vast majority of children would be forced to attend public schools more deeply starved for funds than ever before. At the same time the vouchers will provide a

windfall for churches, private organizations and anyone else out to enrich themselves through the dismantling of public education.

Early on, voucher advocates designated Detroit, the largest state school district, as "ground zero" for their efforts. There they found help from the clergy, black entrepreneurs and black nationalists. They also have found powerful allies in major state corporations looking for more tax cuts to be underwritten by reduced funding for education.

The push for school vouchers has been financed by some of the wealthiest and most reactionary figures in Michigan. Playing a prominent role is Dick DeVos, the multimillionaire president of the Grand Rapids-based Amway Corporation and son of the company's cofounder. DeVos, whose wife is the chairwoman of the state Republican Party, has said the coalition would raise \$5 million for the 2000 referendum. A former state board of education member, DeVos currently chairs the Michigan Education Freedom Fund, which pays tuition for 3,700 students to attend private school in an attempt to promote publicly funded vouchers.

In 1996 the *Metro Times*, a weekly Detroit newspaper, identified the TEACH Michigan Education Fund as "at the forefront of the push to radically change the state's education system." TEACH Michigan's largest corporate contributor between 1990 and 1994 was Michigan National Bank, which donated \$105,000. During that same period, both the late Edgar Prince and Jay Van Andel, the cofounder of Amway with Richard DeVos, were on the bank's board of directors.

TEACH Michigan is run by Paul DeWeese, a Republican elected to the state legislature in 1998. DeWeese has vowed to continue the petition drive while simultaneously introducing legislation in the state house to strengthen a 1994 law prohibiting teacher strikes. While campaigning for election last year DeWeese denounced unionized teachers during a cable television broadcast, saying, "MEA [Michigan Education Association] people are Nazis."

Along with TEACH Michigan, the *Metro Times* named the Michigan-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy and the Michigan Family Forum as the two other major supporters of so-called education reform. According to the Internal Revenue Service these organizations were given more than \$2 million over five years by individuals and foundations connected to four right-wing foundations—the Amway Corporation, the Prince Foundation, Cook Foundation and Merillat Foundation.

Amway founder Richard DeVos also contributes millions to fundamentalist churches, conservative political causes, anti-abortion groups, English-only proponents, term limit advocates and groups that support the use of the Bible as a basis for government.

The Mackinac Center, a right-wing think tank, reported \$1,325,948 in operating revenues in 1996. According to the *Metro Times*, Republican Governor John Engler cofounded the center with two other individuals in a Lansing law office in 1987 while still speaker of the Michigan house.

Engler has made "school choice" a centerpiece of his political agenda since coming to office in 1990. Chrysler Corporation Foundation, along with the Dow Chemical Foundation, donated \$75,000 for operating funds to the Mackinac Center in 1996. DaimlerChrysler also has a representative on the Reform School Board in Detroit that spearheaded the recent attack on the city's teachers.

Michigan Family Forum is the local affiliate of Focus on the Family, a national conservative Christian organization run by James Dobson.

An extensive joint report from the National Education Association (NEA) and California Teachers Association (CTA) uncovered similar right-wing forces behind the 1993 school voucher referendum in California. The report, entitled *The Real Story Behind "Paycheck Protection," The Hidden Link Between Anti-Worker and Anti-Public Education Initiatives: An Anatomy of the Far Right*, provides a glimpse of the right-wing organizations and their strategy to introduce school vouchers through a systematic state-by-state campaign.

Following the 1993 defeat of Proposition 174, the California school voucher initiative, its supporters set out to put a referendum on the ballot to prohibit unions from using dues money for political purposes without yearly written approval from each dues payer. Among those who supported the 1998 "paycheck protection" referendum were the Council for National Policy (CNP) and billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife, the right-wing publisher who bankrolled the Rutherford Institute and played a key role in the impeachment campaign against Clinton. Scaife funneled a \$100,000 contribution through Governor Pete Wilson's "Californians for Paycheck Protection" PAC.

The NEA report also provides details about the State Policy Network. This is a system of statewide organizations modeled after the Heritage Foundation, the national conservative think tank set up by Joseph Coors in 1973. The Mackinac Center is identified as the best funded of 36 State Policy Network members.

The Madison Group, which played a key role in the creation of the State Policy Network in 1992, is now housed in the Heartland Institute in Chicago. One of Heartland's publications is *School Reform News*, a monthly newspaper reporting on market-based school reforms. Heartland Institute received \$30,000 from General Motors Corporation and \$20,000 from Ford Motor Company in 1995. Sheldon Rose of the Ed Rose Company is a consistent contributor to the institute, and he is also a substantial supporter of the Mackinac Center.

The various political and economic interests backing school vouchers have also supported state campaigns for charter schools, seeing them as the first step towards dismantling the public school system. These schools operate chiefly outside of the control of school districts and are not bound by such requirements as existing contracts with teacher unions. Teachers' salaries in charter schools are, on the average, less than half that of teachers in the host districts.

Charter schools began officially in Michigan in 1994 with eight schools and an enrollment of 1,200 children. By 1998 there were 138 charter schools with 34,000 students enrolled in the state. Michigan is home to one of every nine charter schools in the US today.

In 1993 Governor Engler helped secure the necessary waivers to open the first "pilot" charter school on the campus of Wayne State University. Engler worked with David Adamany, who was then president of the university. Now serving as Interim CEO of the Detroit Public Schools, Adamany led the attack on the district's teachers this fall. He plans to use his position to close "failing" public schools and replace them with charter schools.

A January 1999 report by Western Michigan University found that the biggest supporters of charter schools are for-profit education companies such as the Edison Project and the Leona group, which runs schools for profit in Arizona. In the 1997-98 school year, 50 percent of the charter schools in Michigan were contracting out services to education

management organizations. In 1998-99 this figure jumped to approximately 70 percent.

Not surprisingly, these schools have not improved educational opportunities. They experience a high turnover rate of mostly low-paid, inexperienced teachers, and in most areas test scores and dropout rates are worse than in the districts' public schools.

Following a gathering of national Republican leaders and presidential candidates held in Michigan in early September, Governor Engler announced he would not endorse the voucher ballot initiative, despite unanimous support by the state Republican Party's Issues Committee. Far from opposing school vouchers, however, Engler expressed concern that the referendum—which polls show has less than 50 percent support—may fail. Moreover, he is concerned that if it gets on the ballot there will be a high turnout of Democratic voters, which would undermine Republican candidates for statewide and national office.

Engler reportedly played a key role, along with former Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed, in crafting Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush's education policy. Bush is proposing to use Title 1 funding—federal dollars earmarked for poor school districts—to provide \$1,500 vouchers to parents in "failing" public schools.

While the impetus for many of the attacks on public education has come from the Republican Party and their supporters from the Religious Right, the Democrats have aided and abetted this assault. President Clinton recently announced plans to increase federal funding for charter schools and virtually every Democratic politician has embraced the introduction of "market competition" into the school system. In Michigan, state and local Democrats have been complicit in slashing funding for public education and other social programs in order to finance corporate tax breaks and other handouts to big business.

The recent attack on Detroit teachers demonstrated the true character of the type of school "reform" being supported by the corporate and political establishment. The teachers' demands for smaller class sizes, more supplies and better wages were rejected out of hand. Instead the school authorities, backed by Democratic Mayor Dennis Archer, Governor Engler and the news media, demanded that the teachers pay for the crisis of the school system. In the end, the teachers' own union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, conspired with Archer to end the strike and impose the school board's major demands.



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