

The attack on public education: letter from a Philadelphia teacher

15 May 2000

Dear WSWWS,

As a public school teacher, I experience daily the crisis in the lives of children from working class and poor families in an educational system denied the tools to cope with their problems. The response of both the political and educational establishment to the consequences of their profit oriented, free market approach to education is to further victimize the children who are the victims of their policies.

In the last few weeks, the Pennsylvania government, Philadelphia mayor and School Board have taken these attacks to new levels. On May 8, the School Board adopted the most sweeping policy on school uniforms of any major school district in the country. In September, the city's 212,000 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade will be required to wear a uniform selected by each school. By September 2001, any student not wearing a uniform to school will be disciplined. The ostensible reason for this policy is to cut down on fights and bullying by students brought on by the consumer ethos promoted by clothing companies in advertising targeted at young people.

Students testifying at the Board hearings said the policy would stifle creativity and individuality, drive students to turn to other forms of self-expression such as body-piercing and tattoos, and make schools, many of whose students must enter the building through metal detectors, seem like a prison. Nevertheless, the Board adopted the policy unanimously without discussion. The school employees' union took no position on student uniforms, but our union president Ted Kirsch said he favors exploring uniform dress standards for staff, even though his position "may not be popular."

Just days before the Board announced this, the Pennsylvania state legislature passed the Academic Empowerment Act. It authorizes the state to take over

11 school districts, including Philadelphia, if student test scores in reading and math do not improve. To prevent the take-over, the school districts must work with state Education Department to create an "improvement plan." This includes laying off and dismissing staff without adhering to seniority, permits the hiring of uncertified teachers and privatization of services, and gives districts the power to close or reorganize schools. Districts would be given up to three years to make the changes.

The current conditions in Philadelphia public schools are, by anyone's measure, deplorable due to decades of underfunding of public education. In spite of this, test scores have gone up slightly in each of the last few years. As is standard practice in our punitive society, however, test scores are used to punish, not to measure where help is needed. School Superintendent David Hornbeck rewards schools whose tests scores improve with cash incentives. This punishes school employees and students at schools where there is severe poverty and its consequences by denying them needed funds to make improvements.

Philadelphia schools have a class size of 33 students. At my school we have one counselor and one nurse for 975 students. While our 95- year-old building is being wired for the Internet, our computer lab experiences frequent power failures because the building's electrical supply cannot handle the demand.

The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers is currently in negotiations for a new contract in September. Not only does the new act make all past contract provisions obsolete, but last year the legislature passed legislation making it illegal for Pennsylvania public school teachers to strike longer than seven days. The School Board has not revealed their terms for a settlement, stating all of its terms will adhere to "good business practices." Currently, the school district has a projected

deficit of \$204.7 million for next year.

To add insult to injury, the day after the legislature passed the Academic Empowerment Act, Democratic Mayor John Street announced his proposal to spend \$1 billion dollars for two new sports stadiums. He proposed putting a new stadium for the Philadelphia Phillies in the heart of the city's business and tourism district, and another stadium, to be used for 10 games per year, in South Philadelphia for the Philadelphia Eagles. Currently, both teams use Veteran's Stadium, which opened in 1971, and for which taxpayers still owe \$3 million dollars.

If the stadium proposal goes through, past experience shows the low-paying jobs which the children of Philadelphia are being prepared for will be taxed for the rest of their lives to pay for these new stadiums.

A Philadelphia public school teacher



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