

Michigan, California school voucher initiatives threaten public education

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On November 7 voters in California and Michigan will cast ballots on state-wide initiatives to provide parents with publicly funded school vouchers to send their children to private or parochial schools.

California's Proposition 38 (the National Average School Funding Guarantee and Parental Right to Choose Quality Education Amendment) would make a \$4,000 voucher available to the parents of all school-age children.

Proposal 1 in Michigan is targeted at 200,000 students in seven school districts, including Detroit, that have been deemed "failing" because less than two-thirds of all ninth graders graduate from high school. If enacted, however, any local school board could voluntarily join the voucher program, and entire districts could enter if the proposal were approved in local elections. Michigan's ballot initiative, which would overturn a 1970 amendment to the state constitution that bars public aid to private and parochial schools, would provide a \$3,500 voucher per student.

Polls indicate that the voucher proposals may be headed for defeat in both states. But the right-wing forces behind the voucher campaigns have demonstrated their determination to press ahead. Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush has injected the issue into the national election with his proposal to penalize "failing schools" by cutting Federal Title I supplementary money earmarked for low-income students and replacing it with a \$1,500 voucher.

The official anti-voucher coalitions are largely made up of the teachers unions and other AFL-CIO affiliates and sections of the Democratic Party. But these forces offer no serious program or strategy for addressing the crisis in public education, and the danger consequently exists that growing numbers of parents, desperate to find better conditions for their children, may be susceptible to pro-voucher arguments, if not now, then at some point in the future.

Right-wing Republican businessmen are spearheading the campaign for vouchers in both states. Silicon Valley billionaire Tim Draper, who denounces the public schools as "socialistic," has donated the bulk of the \$30 million allocated for a massive advertising campaign in California.

In Michigan the initiative is being funded by the family of Richard DeVos, the multimillionaire cofounder of the Grand Rapids-based Amway Corporation. DeVos is a long-time supporter of Religious Right causes. The Catholic Church is campaigning for the initiative, along with a veritable "Who's Who" of right-wing opponents of public education, including Republicans Gary Bauer, Lamar Alexander and Steve Forbes, and former Education Secretary (under Ronald Reagan) William Bennett.

These forces have sought to exploit the widespread anxiety felt by working class and middle class families over deteriorating conditions in the public school system. The voucher proponents, however, conceal the fact that the crisis in the schools is the product of decades of federal, state and local spending cuts, tax breaks to big business and attacks on teachers' and other school employees' wages and working conditions.

In California, for instance, the schools, once among the best funded in the country, are now ranked near the bottom in per-pupil spending and

spending for teachers' salaries. The state is also ranked second worst in the nation in class sizes.

Advocates for school vouchers say they want to help working class, minority and poor children they claim are "trapped" in the public schools. They assert that their proposals would not destroy public education, but actually improve it. By ending the public school "monopoly" and forcing public schools to compete with private schools for tax dollars, they claim, the public schools will be compelled to improve.

In reality, the most immediate beneficiaries of vouchers would not be parents who take their children out of public schools, but those who already have children in private schools. In both states the proposals would allow a direct cash subsidy to defray the cost of private education for families that are generally more privileged. In California, less than 10 percent of students attend private schools.

As for working class and low-income families, the amount provided in the form of vouchers, set at approximately half the sum spent by the states for each public school student, would not come close to paying the full cost of a private education.

Moreover, privately-run schools would continue to screen applicants and reject any student they deemed inappropriate. While the language of the proposals prohibits discrimination based on race or national origin, these schools could reject students based on gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, ability to pay, behavioral issues or academic or physical ability. Moreover, they would be under financial pressure to do so, since it is more costly to provide care for special needs children, and most private schools are not staffed to handle them.

Rather than having access to elite private schools, the parents who opted for vouchers would likely be forced to send their children to parochial schools, where they would be subjected to religious instruction, or to so-called voucher schools that are expected to spring up to handle the demand for lower-cost private education. The owners of these latter schools would have a financial incentive to reduce costs by cutting corners.

California's Proposition 38 is specifically designed to severely limit public accountability or regulation over schools that receive voucher money. School boards would first be required to have a two-thirds majority vote and win a popular referendum in a school district, or obtain a three-quarters majority vote by the state legislature, before a new regulation could be imposed on a school receiving voucher money.

The impact of draining tax dollars from the public schools would be devastating. With state aid determined by per-pupil enrollment, the public schools stand to lose thousands of dollars in revenue for each public school student who leaves to use a voucher at a private school. In Michigan, one estimate puts the first year revenue loss due to vouchers at about \$80 million.

Moreover, if large numbers of parents are coaxed to send their children to private schools, a large percentage of those left in the public schools would be special needs children, including those rejected by private

facilities. The public schools, already desperately under-funded, would be compelled to care for children who require more individualized education, special attention and resources, under conditions in which they are losing funding due to vouchers.

Inequality between poorer and richer school districts is already great. In Michigan, for instance, per-pupil spending in poor districts like Benton Harbor and Detroit is \$5,389 and \$6,046 respectively, while schools in Bloomfield Hills in suburban Detroit—where many auto executives reside—receive nearly \$11,000 per student.

If vouchers were enacted these class and social distinctions would be intensified. The top schools would be reserved for the wealthiest layers of society, who could pay to send their children to elite private schools and academies. Well below them would be various private and for-profit schools for middle-class and working class children, whose parents would be forced to work longer hours and go further into debt to scrape up thousands of dollars to pay tuition costs.

At the very bottom would be the public schools, left for the poorest and most disadvantaged working class students. These schools could do little to develop the intellectual and cultural level of working class youth. Their role would be little more than disciplining youth and preparing them for low-paying jobs.

The voucher proposals are the culmination of a decades-long attack on the right to public education and the very principle that all children be guaranteed government-paid, quality education, regardless of economic or social status, race, religion or ethnic background. This conception dates back to the American Revolution. The most farsighted and enlightened revolutionary leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, believed that only a literate and educated citizenry could safeguard the new republic against a return to despotic rule. Jefferson favored the establishment of government-funded “free schools” in opposition to the aristocratic setup in Europe, where education was limited to the wealthiest layers of society and largely overseen by the Church.

This democratic conception was taken forward by middle class reformers in the nineteenth century such as Horace Mann, who wrote in 1848, “If one class possesses all the wealth and the education, while the residue of society is ignorant and poor, it matters not by what name the relation between them may be called; the latter, in fact and in truth, will be the servile dependents and subjects of the former.”

The fight for public education was also inseparable from the campaign against child labor, which was taken up by the early working class movement. However it was not until the massive social upheavals of the 1930s, followed by the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, that universal access to the public schools was fully achieved.

The last quarter century has seen a systematic attack on these democratic gains of the working class. The continued right to public education has come into collision with a society whose ruling institutions are consumed with building up the stock portfolios and financial assets of a very small, economic elite. The resulting growth of social inequality has produced a state of affairs that is fundamentally incompatible with egalitarian and democratic principles.

It is impossible to secure decent education for all children within a social atmosphere of unrelenting attacks on the working class, growing social inequality and the erosion of democratic rights. Far from being immune to these conditions, the problems that plague the public schools have their source in poverty, the lack of affordable housing and health care, the decay of the social infrastructure and other ills produced by a society whose priorities are skewed to the interest of the financial oligarchy.

Just as the fight of the working class to attain public education was bound up with great social upheavals and the most progressive and democratic ideology, so too will a struggle to reverse the deterioration of public education and defend it.

But the AFL-CIO trade unions, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), do not evince the slightest capability or willingness to wage such a struggle. The record of the unions is one of systematic retreats, concessions and conciliation before the enemies of public education, including accepting in principle the expansion of private and semi-private charter schools. The teachers unions have also recently betrayed a series of strikes, including those in Detroit, Philadelphia and Buffalo, New York, against reactionary demands made in the name of so-called school reform.

The record of the unions, which has been wholly detrimental to teachers, school employees and students alike, is the direct result of the politics of the AFL-CIO. First of all, the unions defend the profit system and accept in principle that the needs of the working class must be subordinated to the demands of the capitalist market. Secondly, the AFL-CIO is politically allied with the Democratic Party.

The idea that the Democrats can be relied upon to defend public education is delusional. Far from opposing the assault on the public schools, the Democrats have joined in cutting funding and scapegoating teachers. This has been particularly true during the Clinton-Gore administration, which sought to dispense with the social reformist policies with which the Democrats were associated in the past. So-called New Democrats, Clinton and Gore explicitly opposed any measures that might reduce social inequality, redistribute wealth downward or restrict corporate power in the interests of the general population.

But the concept of public education is premised upon the subordination of the immediate appetites of individuals to the greater good of society. Such a notion, based on social solidarity rather than dog-eat-dog competition, has been anathema to the supporters of laissez-faire capitalism in the White House over the last eight years.

Gore has promoted his opposition to school vouchers as proof of his commitment to public education. But his education plan mimics much of the free-market rhetoric of the school voucher proponents, while offering only meager increases in federal funding. Gore's running mate, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, is a well-known supporter of vouchers.

Gore proposes tripling the number of charter schools over the next 10 years and using federal funds to force state governments to compete for higher test scores, with states that fail facing a cutoff of federal funding.

Under conditions of the largest budget surplus in history, Gore is proposing just \$115 billion over 10 years in additional federal aid to schools, one-thirtieth of the amount allocated for debt reduction. Only \$1.3 billion is earmarked for the repair of school buildings, far less than what would be needed to repair schools in Detroit or Los Angeles, let alone the entire US.

A defeat of the California and Michigan voucher initiatives would reflect popular support for public education and opposition to the efforts of right-wing forces to destroy it. However, a struggle to defend education cannot be based on defending the status quo.

Hundreds of billions of dollars are required for school construction, raising teachers' salaries, reducing classroom sizes, providing up-to-date equipment and teaching materials and other measures to guarantee the best possible education for all children. The provision of these resources requires a political struggle by working people against the economic and political monopoly of big business, maintained jointly by the Republican and Democratic parties.



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