

Detroit school restructuring plan attacks workers and students

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Citing a projected budget deficit of \$72 million by the 2001-2002 school year, Detroit Public Schools District CEO Kenneth Burnley announced a massive reorganization plan in early April for the city's public school system. The 700-page *Efficiency and Effectiveness Plan* calls for eliminating thousands of school jobs through cutbacks and outsourcing, closing schools, and reshuffling students throughout the district.

Schools CEO Burnley, who was selected by a newly-appointed school board last year, is carrying out the dictates of business leaders who are demanding better test scores and other "results," while demanding "fiscal discipline." A new state law eliminated Detroit's elected Board of Education in early 1999 and Democratic Mayor Dennis Archer, working in conjunction with Republican Governor John Engler, picked a new six-member Detroit School Reform Board. Among the representatives of big business on the board is a vice president from DaimlerChrysler.

Hundreds of job cuts are planned along with plans to privatize school services such as maintenance, food service and transportation, which could affect more than 3,000 workers. School officials cite \$21 million in 2 percent raises negotiated in the last round of contracts as contributing to the deficit. This is used to justify privatization plans that will result in job losses and wage and benefit reductions for support staff.

There will be 479 jobs eliminated immediately among staff at the district's central administration building. Many of the workers targeted for layoffs are women who formerly received public assistance and are the main breadwinners in their families.

In addition, four of Detroit's elementary schools will be closed and nine elementary, middle and high schools transformed into pre-schools or alternative schools.

Students in 26 of 263 buildings in the district will be affected.

While the plan calls for a few new schools to create 3,000 elementary school seats and offset the 2,500 lost in the closings, whether additional schools will ever be constructed is called into question by the district's financial and enrollment problems. According to last year's report to the Reform Board by Interim CEO David Adamany, Detroit needed to replace 69 school buildings and renovate another 50 in the next seven years. The report noted that the average age of school building in Detroit was just under 65 years, and that no new schools had been built in the district since 1981. Many of the existing schools are in dire need of repair.

Teachers are not included in the layoff figures because state law prohibits hiring uncertified teachers unless no regular teachers can be found. The district remains short 1,000 certified teachers, despite hiring 700 new teachers last year. The district is expected to employ hundreds of uncertified teachers again next year. The biggest difficulty in attracting qualified teachers is Detroit's pay rates, which remain lower than surrounding suburban districts. Burnley proposes, among other things, recruiting overseas teachers to fill teaching gaps.

For the time being Burnley has apparently delayed a plan to bring in Edison Schools, a for-profit school management company, to run 13 schools now designated as low performing. He is first allowing the teachers union to prove it can provide the cost savings and productivity increases the board is demanding. Private management companies, however, already run some of the eight district charter schools.

In 1999 the Detroit Federation of Teachers and other school unions paved the way for the current attack by endorsing the Reform School Board legislation. In the

fall of 1999 the teachers launched a strike in defiance of the DFT leadership, and its accommodation to the board's "reform" policies. But the strike was isolated and defeated by the DFT leadership working in conjunction with Mayor Archer.

Commenting on the new school plan, Janna Garrison, president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers, remarked, "I would say the district is moving forward." The other unions are currently negotiating with the board to use buyouts and early retirement packages to eliminate older higher paid workers, and possibly working out a deal to collect union dues from lower paid workers moved over to private food service or student transportation companies.

The Detroit public schools have suffered decades of school closings, mass layoffs and budget cutbacks. A major factor has been the actions of the Big Three automakers, who have shut down scores of factories in the city and extorted tens of millions of dollars in tax abatements and other subsidies, which directly affected school funding. It is telling that just a few days after the latest round of school budget cuts was announced, it was revealed that Ford's CEO Jacques Nasser pocketed \$16 million in income last year.

Although the state and the city boast of budget surpluses, school funding continues to stagnate or decline. Much of the deficit is caused by the loss of enrollment produced by the city's falling population and the loss of students to charter and private schools in neighboring cities. In addition, increases in utility prices and the cost of heating old, antiquated schools contributed about \$40 million to this year's deficit.

Over the last decade a series of reactionary laws and rules concerning school funding, student testing, charter schools, school accreditation and special education have been passed or are being considered at the state level. Detroit and other districts educating large numbers of low-income students have been especially hard hit. Enrollment in the Detroit Public Schools has dropped to 163,000 children, a decline of 19,000 students in the past two years.

Under Michigan's "School of Choice" program, students may attend schools outside their school district. When a student moves to another district, to a private school, or to a charter school that is not run directly by that district, their per-pupil allocation of \$6,500 is cut from the home district. The two-year

decline in enrollment has led to a loss of \$80 million in revenue for the Detroit district.

Charter schools have been a central part of the strategy designed by opponents of public education to bleed funds from school districts. Exploiting the legitimate concerns of parents over the collapse of the public school system, these forces have hoped to use charter schools as the first step toward school vouchers and the privatization of public schools. In the unsuccessful Michigan voucher initiative last fall, right-wing backers of the plan designated Detroit, home to one in ten of Michigan elementary and secondary students, as their chief target.

Another change affecting students is the planned elimination of the city's special education schools for physically and developmentally disabled students. These students will be transferred to neighborhood schools and 38 special education teachers will be eliminated. Buildings that now house special education students will become "alternative" middle and high schools, where strict discipline will be implemented for "chronically disruptive students." Schools CEO Burnley says this will help retain some of the eighth through tenth graders who drop out before graduation. Detroit has one of the highest dropout rates in the country.



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