

# State takeover of Philadelphia schools paves way for privatization

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The state of Pennsylvania has taken over the management of the Philadelphia School District, the seventh largest in the United States. The takeover, the largest of its kind in the US, includes turning over management of 45 so-called failing schools to a private, for-profit company, Edison Schools Inc. The move affects 210,000 students and 27,000 public school employees in the district.

The takeover was announced on December 21 by Pennsylvania's Republican governor, Mark Schweiker, and Philadelphia's Democratic mayor, John Street, hours after the schools had closed for the winter holidays. They announced that the school board would be abolished and the operation of the school district taken over by a five-member School Reform Commission (SRC).

Students, school employees and parents held protests in the days before the state takeover. Wearing stickers saying, "I am not for sale; Say no to privatization," over 1,000 students walked out of class to go on foot, on buses, and by subway to rally at City Hall on December 18. Student speakers vowed to fight the state takeover. Students staged daily protests, blocking traffic at the site of negotiations, and staged a sit-in at the school administration building in the hours before the takeover. On December 20, hundreds of school employees and parents rallied at the school administration building.

The takeover agreement followed months of bitter disputes between city and state officials on the terms of the arrangement. Neither side was chiefly concerned with the interests of the district's predominately working class students or the jobs and living standards of the school employees. Instead the conflict centered on control of the district's \$1.7 billion budget and who would have the power to appoint officials and issue

contracts. Under terms of the agreement, the state will appoint three members to the SRC and the city two. All major decisions, including contracts with private firms, will be made by the SRC. Some decisions, such as appointment of a new chief executive officer for the district, will require a 4-1 vote.

The school district currently has a deficit of over \$200 million. In order to deal with the fiscal crisis, the governor agreed to increase state funding by \$75 million annually and the mayor agreed to increase city funding by \$45 million. However, this increase—which must be approved by the state legislature and the City Council—is to be paid for by the working class. Street proposes funding the city's portion by floating a \$25 million bond issue and making \$20 million in unspecified cuts in city services. The remainder of the school deficit would be made up by unspecified privatization of school services, such as busing or maintenance, and cuts in programs.

The negotiations between the city and state had been contentious since the three-week postponement of the November 30 takeover of the schools by the state. On December 8, Schweiker informed the school district that state money would not be forthcoming to meet the December 21 payroll if the city did not come up with \$45 million for the schools.

Prior to the final agreement the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported the state was privately negotiating a deal in which it would pay Edison Schools Inc. \$101 million over six years for salaries, principal and teacher recruitment, and consulting. The money would not cover the planned management of the district's 45 lowest-performing schools by Edison, the cost of which has yet to be determined. At least \$40 million of the state funds would be for intellectual property such as new software, curricula and "expertise."

The *Inquirer* report gave a glimpse of the attack on Pennsylvania, who for several years have been promoting vouchers and charter schools as the solution to the problems of urban schools. students and school employees being prepared. According to a \$2.7 million study commissioned by former Governor Tom Ridge in August, Edison recommends reducing the 12,500-teacher workforce by 500 through attrition, saving \$39 million by 2005. The report also recommends eliminating most non-instructional positions. How reducing the number of teachers and other school employees would improve education—the ostensible reason for the state takeover—is not addressed, particularly since this would result in class sizes beyond the limit of 33 students.

On December 18, leaders of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers met privately with Governor Schweiker. Far from opposing the assault on his members' jobs and, more broadly, the threat to public education, PFT President Ted Kirsch asked Schweiker to give the union "a place at the table" as the takeover plan was implemented. The PFT and other unions have offered no progressive alternative to the attack on public education being spearheaded by the Republican Party. Long allied with the Democrats the unions have refused to wage any serious struggle against the years-long decline of Philadelphia's schools, which has now been seized upon by proponents of privatization to advance their reactionary agenda.

In the weeks leading up to the takeover, Edison ran a \$430,000 media blitz on Philadelphia television, radio and newspapers to push its privatization plans. The ads were produced in the state capital of Harrisburg by the Neiman Group, whose public relations head is Tim Reeves, Schweiker's former communications director.

On December 4, the civil liberties watchdog group People for the American Way released a report that examines some of the right-wing forces behind the drive for privatization of public education. "Community Voice or Captive of the Right" examines the Black Alliance for Educational Options. BAEO was founded in August 2000 by former Milwaukee Schools Superintendent Dr. Howard Fuller to promote school vouchers in African-American communities. BAEO currently has more than 1,000 members and chapters in 20 cities. Members of BAEO's board of directors include a number of officials from Edison and former public school administrators from several urban school districts. Several members of its board of directors are Democratic state legislators, including from

Pennsylvania, who for several years have been promoting vouchers and charter schools as the solution to the problems of urban schools.

The organization's financial backers include the Bradley Foundation, which provides grants to right-wing opponents of affirmative action and provided nearly \$1 million to researcher Charles Murray, the co-author of the infamous book *The Bell Curve*, which argues that blacks have a lower capacity for learning because of genetic inferiority. Another supporter of BAEO is economist Milton Friedman, the champion of free market capitalism who was one of the first to promote educational vouchers in the 1950s.

The PFAW report concludes: "BAEO is the latest step in the Right's effort to portray school vouchers as the new civil rights fight.... BAEO promotes itself as a parent-led grassroots organization devoted to increasing educational opportunity for poor children. In fact, as this report shows, BAEO was organized by and is funded by the same small collection of wealthy right-wing individuals and foundations that have been for years primary backers of pro-voucher, anti-public education efforts."



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