

# Los Angeles Board of Education approves expansion of charter schools

Kevin Martinez, Jack Cody  
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On August 25, the Los Angeles Board of Education voted 6 to 1 to turn over more than 250 schools, currently under the jurisdiction of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), to private corporations to become charter schools. In doing so, the board is moving forward with a right-wing attack on public education that is being pushed at the state-wide level by the Schwarzenegger administration and at the national level by President Obama as part of his overall strategy for education “reform.”

The vote by the LAUSD allows Superintendent Ramon C. Cortines to determine the best method for running 200 currently “failing” schools and 50 new schools slated for opening in the coming years. This decision opens the way for charter school companies to bid for oversight of these campuses. A *Los Angeles Times* article published on August 26 described the 50 new schools, whose multimillion-dollar facilities will be built with public money, as “the biggest prize” for the charter school companies.

A rally, attended mostly by supporters of the decision, was held that day after the LAUSD’s vote was announced outside district headquarters. Many of those in attendance came because of the efforts of private charter school corporations, such as Green Dot and the Inner City Education Foundation. They have been working to garner backing for charter schools among parents and students through various groups such as “Families That Can.” These pro-charter groups try to take advantage of the enormous and legitimate frustration among working class families over the inferior quality of the public schools and steer it in a direction that will transform public education into a source of private profit.

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa spoke to the assembled crowd to give his approval to the board’s decision. According to the *LA Times*, the mayor, who hand picked the majority of the seven LAUSD members, also leads a nonprofit corporation that runs 11 charter schools. He “could take advantage of the board action” and thus personally benefit from the decision, the article notes.

There are now close to 700 charter schools in California, of which 163 are in Los Angeles County. Charter schools are run by private entities and have little oversight from the school district. According to a May 21 article in the *Times*, researchers

at the University of Southern California found that only 30 of the 163 charter schools in LA filed the required quarterly financial reports with their local districts.

Charter schools, like public schools, do not charge tuition. In theory, they are open to all students. In actuality, however, these schools try to enroll the most advanced students, as they tend to produce higher test scores for the school, thereby ensuring further funding from the district. Meanwhile, students with greater needs are left to fend for themselves in crumbling public institutions. In essence, charter schools promote educational and social inequality.

Voting in favor of the motion, Board member Yolie Flores Aguilar said, “The premise of the resolution is first and foremost to create choice and competition and to really force and pressure the district to put forth a better educational plan.”

This statement by Flores, as well as the entire claim that the growth of the charter school system will improve the education in Los Angeles, is a fraud. The very people who are forcing through charter schools have just implemented hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts to education and imposed widespread layoffs in the schools.

Just this year alone, the LA School Board voted to eliminate 5,400 teachers’ jobs from the district, including newer teachers, custodians, counselors and other important positions. In June it approved cuts of \$1.6 billion from the LAUSD budget over the next three years. These cuts are creating highly overcrowded schools, where a shrinking teaching staff has to teach more and more students with fewer resources. Physical education, music, the arts, and many other programs are being axed. The city’s public schools are being transformed into holding pens for children, as opposed to an environment that allows for real learning and development.

The only “choice” embraced by Aguilar and others on the school board is to hand what will inevitably be “failing” schools over to private entities. However, it is the decisions of the board—and above all the state and federal government—that have made it impossible for Los Angeles area public schools to succeed in the first place, because the state’s economic crisis is being addressed through massive cuts to public services. In short, those that bear responsibility for the decrepit state of public education are now using it to impose what will

ultimately lead to the effective privatization of the school system.

The vote by the LA School Board coincides with a concerted effort by the state and federal government to expand charter schools as part of a broader push for so-called “education reform.” Governor Schwarzenegger is aggressively backing the passage of a bill, currently under debate in the state legislature, which would radically transform the educational system in California.

The proposed measures under discussion include the introduction of a merit-pay system, abolishing the cap on the number of charter schools introduced in the state every year, and a mandate that would force school districts to shut down the worst-performing schools or hand them over to private operators. Also being considered is a requirement that school districts evaluate teachers based on students’ test performance, and the monitoring of student performance year after year, along a “value-added” model, to check to see if teachers were extracting the necessary “improvement.”

If passed, the proposed measures would bring the state in line with, and even go beyond, the right-wing “Race to the Top” educational standards set by the Obama administration, which is an expansion of the No Child Left Behind policy of the Bush presidency.

In order for the state to receive federal funds to prop up its school system, it must meet these standards. California would then become eligible to compete with other states for Obama’s paltry educational stimulus funds, which would allocate a mere \$4.3 billion in education monies to all states combined. This sum equals approximately half of the \$8.1 billion that California alone cut from education in the current fiscal year.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan voiced his approval of Governor Schwarzenegger’s attack on teachers and public education, calling his right-wing proposals “courageous.” In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* Duncan said, “This is a very significant step that absolutely has national implications.” He added, “The eyes of the country are going to be on California.”

The federal money being used to entice cash-starved schools to implement the “Race to the Top” measures is nothing short of blackmail. The Obama administration, along with Schwarzenegger, are utilizing the state budget crisis in California to effect a fundamental restructuring of the educational system that will transform public education into a cash cow for private educational companies, decimate salaries and job protections for teachers, and create a multi-tiered public school system that caters to the better off sections of society.

A WSWS reporting team spoke with teachers who attended the board meeting at LAUSD headquarters. Elementary school teacher Juan Ramírez commented on the board’s motion: “The agreement for charters takes away the consensus of the community. I see the board members as puppets for the mayor. [Mayor Villaraigosa] has a majority on the board and can do

whatever he wants. If this passes, the richest can go to the best schools, just like they get the best health care.”

Ingrid Villeda, a fifth grade teacher at Stanford Avenue Elementary, spoke to the WSWS about the impact of this year’s budget cuts on her school: “We lost three teachers, and more teachers are liable to lose their jobs. I don’t believe private schools are the answer. We know that they leave kids out, so what does that do to our working parents?”

Floyd Worsham, a retired math/science teacher at the middle school level, said, “Many people have the idea that charter schools are the panacea of education, in other words, that they are the answer to the problems in education. They are not.

“My feeling is that educators have been hamstrung and not been allowed to do what they need to do. They have been instructed to follow the guidelines whether they work or not. It’s a ‘just do it because I said you should do it’ mentality. As a result, teachers are being blamed for the entire mess when they don’t actually have control over the whole thing.

“Charter schools don’t address the needs of all the children, like children who have special needs, such as those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Sometimes the charter schools keep them enrolled just long enough so they can get the ADA [Average Daily] money and then send them back to a regular school.”

Elsa Estrada, a secretary at Nightingale Middle School, said, “Parents are not seeing the whole picture with charter schools. They get promised that their children are going to get a wonderful education, but from what I’ve seen this year, many parents who have been taking their children out of Nightingale to charter schools eventually bring them back because they are not happy with the education they are receiving. Parents have been told that charter schools would help their children in need of special education or even English as a second language, but these courses are geared mostly to gifted students.”

When asked about the Democratic Party’s participation in the general attack on education, Ms. Estrada stated, “What we need is a third party that will fight for working people’s rights.”



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