

Massachusetts governor promotes charter schools as districts face budget crisis

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Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick signed into law January 18 a measure that will increase the cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the state and will double the number of charter schools allowed in the poorest performing districts. The law has its roots in an initiative begun in 2007, but its passage this month was hurried so that the state can qualify for a small amount of the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" (RTTT) education funds.

Under Massachusetts law, charter schools are publicly funded but privately run. With an exception for certain special education students, the law stipulates that a charter school be provided as much public funding per student as the student's home district would receive.

Although Massachusetts tax revenues have steadied somewhat since the fall—December 2009 revenues were 1.2 percent better compared to December 2008—its public schools face a looming budget crisis. By the time its 2011 fiscal year begins in July, the state will have burned through most of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) stimulus money it has used to plug its 2010 deficit. The \$250 million it hopes to get from the RTTT program is a pittance compared to the nearly \$800 million in education funds it received through ARRA. Local aid from the state government to school districts is heavily dependent on the state lottery, and for decades the ability of cities and towns to raise property tax revenues has been limited by a referendum passed in the early 1980s.

On January 13, the *Boston Globe* reported on the drastic measures—including layoffs—being taken in the public schools. It quoted the executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents as saying that "over the last couple of years, schools

have tried their best to avoid [layoffs]. They've virtually annihilated everything else: administrators, textbooks, supplies, infrastructure needs. But now there's no place for them to go but into the marrow of the classroom." The *Globe* reports that the working class city of Brockton is expecting "devastating" cuts to its school budget, while the town of Arlington may lay off as many as 21 teachers and the town of Hingham may eliminate as many as 33 teaching positions.

The city of Somerville, home to office and manufacturing workers and their families, lists in an online presentation the following fiscal year 2009 cuts, which are sure to be followed by further cuts: "use of long-term substitute teachers to fill staff vacancies," the elimination of field trips and extracurricular activities, cuts in library purchases, and the "deferral" of vocational equipment purchases.

It is against this backdrop, repeated throughout the cities and towns of the Commonwealth, that the Democratic governor is implementing his plans to increase the number of charter schools. In addition to the measly sum expected from the "Race to the Top" program, Patrick and the state legislature hope to cut costs by weakening the ability of teachers to bargain collectively.

In a press release issued after his January 21 State of the Commonwealth speech, Patrick promised that his fiscal year 2011 budget proposal, due January 27, will contain no cuts to local aid for education. Because charter schools are publicly funded, Patrick is at pains to provide enough funding for the increased number of charters he wants to see. However, his proposed budget still needs to be negotiated with the legislature this spring. Also, on the same day as his State of the Commonwealth speech, the Executive Office of Labor

and Workforce Development announced that the state's unemployment rate increased by 0.7 percent to 9.4% in December. Tax revenues will continue to suffer as the economic crisis deepens.

Patrick, a former Coca-Cola executive vice president and board member of mortgage company Ameriquest, is also hoping that an increase in the number of charter schools will provide the "flexibility" needed to train a more exploitable workforce. Despite his administration's repeated posturing about educating the poor, its true intent is revealed in the introduction to a 2008 report titled "The New Promise of Public Education: Ready for 21st Century Success." The report states that "our existing education system is not adequately preparing every student for success in life and work. As a source of workers, it doesn't meet the needs of employers." In other words, when poor and working class school districts are opened up to charter schools, the private sector will be able to better train students to meet the needs of big business.

An increased number of charter schools in the state will also allow for-profit companies to expand their operations. Although state law stipulates that charter schools be non-profit, they are allowed to contract out to for-profit companies. Sabis International, for instance, runs two schools in the western part of the state and is hoping for a third in the city of Brockton.

In a state that has traditionally been run by the Democratic Party, Patrick and the legislature are at pains to conceal their motives behind lofty rhetoric. However, in a January 13 editorial, the *Boston Globe*—the state's leading liberal mouthpiece—let one of the cats out of the bag. The state's Board of Education had turned down the application for a charter school in the working class city of Gloucester, but was overridden by the secretary of education, "in part to impress charter school supporters, including [our] editorial page," the *Globe* wrote.

Cuts to higher education in the University of Massachusetts (UMass) system have been as dramatic as and more direct than those to K-12 schools. When dropping tax revenues precipitated emergency budget cuts outside of the normal cycle this past October, the state's colleges and universities lost more than \$60 million in funding. They are not covered by the governor's promise to maintain education funding in his fiscal 2011 budget, and the University of

Massachusetts's flagship campus in Amherst could lose as much as \$50 million in 2011, according to a notice posted on the school's web site by its chancellor.

An article on the eNews web site of the UMass Lowell campus details the programs affected by October budget cuts totaling \$4 million: the elimination of 52 full-time jobs, cancellation of a popular radio program produced by the campus station, elimination of outreaches to local K-12 schools, and the expectation that other programs become "self-supporting" through fees.

The administration of the UMass system is sure to attempt a hike in fees to make up for the budget cuts. High fees already precipitated a student strike in November 2007, and any attempt to balance the budget on the backs of working class students will meet with opposition.

It is worth noting that, in an attempt to disguise the true cost of tuition, UMass has developed an arcane system of fees, including a "Service Fee" that pays for debt service on capital projects administered by the University of Massachusetts Building Authority.

As with the K-12 schools, for-profit companies are trying to make inroads into the UMass system. According to WMass Indymedia, one of the demands of the November 2007 strike was "control of and a refrain from the increasing privatization of student spaces."



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