

The crisis of public education in California

Los Angeles votes on school restructuring initiatives

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Schools throughout Los Angeles held community elections last week to decide whether or not to restructure public schools in accordance with provisions of the city's recently drafted Public School Choice initiative. The vote—which was non-binding and thus does not force the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) to actually heed the expressed sentiments of parents, teachers, and students—took place on Tuesday and Saturday of last week. While the district initially promised that results would be announced on Saturday afternoon, LAUSD Superintendent Ramon Cortines has delayed their posting until February 12.

The Public School Choice initiative was drafted in response to recent legislation passed by state government that is intended to make California eligible for up to \$700 million in awards under the Obama administration's "Race to the Top" education program. The passage of the legislature—which allows the state to close public schools and convert them to charter schools—links teacher and administrator work evaluations to student test performance, gives parents greater freedom to take their children out of supposedly poorly-performing public schools and transfer them to newly created charters, and permits parents to petition for the replacement and firing administrators and teachers—does not guarantee that California will actually receive any of the "Race to the Top" money, only that it will be in competition with various other near-bankrupt states for the funds.

Three days before signing the bill, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed a budget for the state that included more than \$2.4 billion in cuts to K-12 education. If passed, these will follow on the

heels of upwards of \$20 billion in cuts to the school system in 2009.

At the school polls in Los Angeles last week, voters were asked to indicate which private or semi-private charter school company should be awarded contracts for taking over certain public schools and to vote up or down the overall restructuring plan.

Prior to the community voting, few attempts were made to educate those casting ballots about the content of the district's plans and how they relate to Sacramento's restructuring of public education or the "Race to the Top" initiative. Press reports released after last Tuesday's vote indicated extreme frustration with the process, with many voters explaining that did not know exactly what they were voting for and why.

In the two weeks leading up to the election, meetings were held throughout the district that promised to fully inform parents of the school restructuring plan's contents. Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* visited two such meetings, one at Garfield High School in East LA and one at San Pedro High School near Long Beach. At each meeting, the audience was offered more rhetoric than details.

At San Pedro High School, the presenters, who consisted of members of the LAUSD board, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), and the school administration attempted to put a positive spin on the fact that one aspect of the restructuring plan will vastly increase class sizes by offering fewer courses and making individual class sessions longer. They promised that although classrooms would be more overcrowded than ever, the extended 100-minute instruction time would allow teachers to devote more individualized attention to students.

While both meetings had a question and answer session, audience members were not allowed to ask direct questions of the organizing committees, but rather had to submit their questions on index cards, which were then selectively read and answered. At the San Pedro High School meeting, the organizers chose to answer relatively inconsequential questions—like, for example, whether or not students would have to wear uniforms if the new plans go into effect and whether sports teams would also have shorter practice times after school—such that a substantial portion of attendees got up and left well before the meeting concluded.

Nevertheless, the vice president of LAUSD and author of the district’s plan, Yolie Flores, tried to claim that the voters were given a true voice in determining the future of the schools. “This has opened up a process for the first time in this district that has engaged hundreds of parents and we want to celebrate that,” she said.

Last week’s advisory vote, however, was a sham aimed at giving a democratic veneer to a deeply anti-democratic attack on public education. The fiscal crisis in California is being used, with the active participation of both political parties at the local, state, and federal level, to impose changes in public education that could not be pushed through under normal circumstances.

After the state’s school system has seen more than \$20 billion in cuts to basic funding over the last three years—hundreds of millions of dollars worth of which have been taken away from Los Angeles, which is the largest district in California—the LAUSD and all those promoting the Public School Choice Initiative are claiming that measures that will semi-privatize the school system, further promote testing mania, erode job security for teachers, and create an anti-egalitarian system of elite charter institutions for the best students and overcrowded holding pens for the rest, should be implemented so as to have the possibility of winning some miserly portion of an already miserly federal grant.

Teachers, parents, students and members of the community should reject as a lie all claims that the Public School Choice Initiative in Los Angeles, or similar measures in other school districts in California, will improve conditions in the schools. Instead of accepting “advisory” votes on right-wing school restructuring efforts, communities should demand

genuine democratic control over public education for parents and educators. Through the formation of neighborhood action committees independent of the school districts, the trade unions, and either political party, teachers, parents, and students should launch an uncompromising fight for a free, high-quality public education for all. Such a struggle must be rooted in a socialist political program that insists that working people and their children will not pay the price for the current economic crisis, while big business and the rich continue to preside over vast and expanding amounts of private wealth.



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