

Detroit to close 45 more schools

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Robert Bobb, the emergency financial director hired by Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm to oversee shrinking the Detroit public school system, announced his plan to close 45 more public schools on Monday.

Bobb made his announcement before a hand-picked audience of 800 people at Renaissance High School in Detroit. Teachers, bus drivers and parents seeking to voice their opposition to the cuts were denied entrance at a security checkpoint manned by nearly a dozen police and security guards.

Bobb's plan entails the closure of five more schools than had been previously announced. This would bring the number of schools closed since 2005 to 140; more than half the district. Bobb said that his plan would entail the slashing of 2,100 more jobs, together with additional outsourcing.

In his hour-and-a-half-long speech, Bobb stopped to recount his "accomplishments" since being installed as emergency financial manager for the DPS in 2009. Since that time, he has closed 29 schools and laid off 1,500 employees. He has worked with the Detroit Federation of Teachers union apparatus to push through a concessions contract that would force workers to take a drastic pay cut, together with healthcare cuts amounting to \$45 million.

When Bobb announced he plans to shortly close 45 schools—five more than had been anticipated—even the hand-picked audience sat stunned. Bobb then went on to outline a host of regressive measures, including gutting special education programs and the introduction of "competition" into the school system.

He said his goal was "to create a purely market driven school district" and work toward "partnerships with the business community." Bobb said he would "force the closures of poor performing schools."

Some of the students whose schools are shut down will be put into new private and charter schools, many of which will be run for-profit. DTE Energy, for

instance, the company responsible for hundreds of thousands of utility shutoffs, runs a charter school of its own. As one bus driver protesting Bobb's speech told the WSW, companies are "waiting in the wings" to make money off of charter schools once public schools are shut down.

Bobb is basically a front man for corporate interests that plan to open scores of privately run and unregulated charter schools, which will be paid for with public school money. Bobb's recent \$81,000 raise—bringing his total salary to \$425,000—was chiefly paid for by charter school interests.

The plan for replacing public education in Detroit with privately run charter schools is already in place. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that a group of organizations, led by the Skillman Foundation, has already put together a \$200 million plan to start 70 new charter and for-profit schools.

One group, Michigan Future Schools, has set aside enough money to start seven high schools over the next two years. Doug Ross, a former Clinton administration official and head of one charter enterprise, told the local newspaper, "Making the old schools better doesn't work. They need to be closed and new schools created by people with track records."

Bobb said that he aims to raise the graduation rate for public high school seniors from the current rate of 58 percent to 98 percent. Such a proposal is ridiculous on its face, given that the majority of students face a future of more program cuts, school closings and teacher layoffs. Insofar as Bobb intends to increase graduation rates at all, he plans to accomplish this by driving out low-income and at-risk children before they reach high school.

The greatest factor influencing academic performance is whether a student has a roof over her head, food in her stomach, and heat at her house. In a city where the real unemployment rate is close to fifty percent, these

basic requirements are not met for many, if not most, students.

The entire program pursued by Bobb, Governor Jennifer Granholm and President Barack Obama starts with the absurd premise that closing “underperforming” schools—i.e., those that educate the poorest children—will raise the quality of education. Of course, if students most in need of help are simply forced out of the school district, test scores and graduation rates will rise. But this is equivalent to saying that the way to increase the health of a group of people is to kill the sick ones.

The plan is to make school so unbearable for working-class children that they stop coming, literally. Bobb said he expects enrollment in the Detroit Public School system to fall from 85,500 this year to 56,503 within five years.

Bobb’s speech was met with a demonstration of parents and school bus drivers who were losing their jobs due to the privatization of school transportation. Protesters marched outside the school, then demonstrated inside the building, where they were blocked by a row of police at a security checkpoint.

SEP member Jerry White addressed the protesters, saying, “Bobb is a henchman of the private charter interests who is seeking to destroy public education. He is backed by Mayor Bing, Governor Granholm and President Obama who want to hand over public funds to corporate interests and destroy the right of working class youth to have a decent education.” White stressed that the working class had to resist this attack by organizing independently of the trade unions, like the Detroit Federation of Teachers and Teamsters who were collaborating in the privatization schemes, in order to mount a struggle against both parties of big business.

High school students Desmond, Vente, and Trey came out to watch the demonstration. Desmond and Vente attend Renaissance High. Although it is one of the best academic schools in the district, they said the latest cuts make it nearly impossible to get a decent education. “We have different teachers every day,” said Desmond.

Trey, who attends Frederick Douglass Academy, said he hadn’t had a regular math class in three weeks. “We have substitutes every day, and we still don’t know who the sub will be tomorrow,” he said. “You don’t

know what assignments are getting turned in; you don’t know if your teacher is going to be there to grade them.”

Trey expressed solidarity with the teachers, saying, “They’re laying off the veteran teachers first, teachers that have been working hard for decades. They’re laying off teachers before they save up enough to survive on, to retire. It’s not right.”

James Meridith, a school bus driver who previously worked at Chrysler said, “Having public schools is the only way to have fair and equal education. But they want to eliminate and bring down the public school system.

“They call this a democratic system but all the democratic guarantees of the past are breaking down. As for the unions, they are just sitting by and letting this happen. The Detroit Federation of Teachers pushed through Bobb’s wage cuts.”

Cassandra Jackson, a parent, said, “I’m opposed to this takeover and privatization of the schools. It’s just a big money heist and legal extortion. They are trying to make us pay for the new charter schools that are being built. Obama is backing this too. It shows that the issue in America is not a racial divide but a class divide—and there is class warfare being carried out against us.”



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