

# Detroit media, politicians back corporate plan to privatize education

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Detroit Public School Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb is working closely with a coalition of wealth philanthropic organizations and charter school advocates to massively reorganize the school system, including shutting down dozens of public schools.

If implemented, the changes will completely transform the school system into a hodgepodge of quasi-public charter schools, for-profit private charter schools, and outright private schools, each competing for survival and funding. Their plan would, in addition, place the school district under the control of Detroit Mayor and businessman David Bing.

A group of foundations, which include the Skillman Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the MacGregor Fund, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, have signed on for a plan to completely reorganize Detroit's schools.

Their plan includes the closing of virtually every high school in the city, and their subsequent reopening as smaller institutions. The stated aim is to create 70 new schools, 35 of them high schools enrolling a maximum of 500 students, and having a baseline graduation rate of 85 percent. Detroit schools have the lowest graduation rate in the country.

The proposal compliments, though is formally separate, from a plan announced by Bobb to close 45 schools by June and another 13 by 2012. The shutting down of public schools opens the way for the expansion of charter schools. (See "Detroit—a model for nationwide assault on public education")

These foundations, in reality repositories for vast personal fortunes, will supply seed money to an array of organizations and individuals, all claiming to be able to provide a quality education to Detroit's youth (while, no doubt, lining their own pockets in the

process).

One such organization, Michigan Future Schools, has already received a \$13 million grant to open seven new high schools over the next three years. MFS is one of many groups and individuals who exist under an umbrella organization called Excellent Schools Detroit. Under the auspices of this organization, any person can qualify for start-up funds, which, according to the *Detroit Free Press*, will average about \$800,000.

One of the models for the new schools is the University Preparatory Academy, a "public" charter school founded by Doug Ross. Ross, a former assistant secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, runs several schools that serve a small number of K-12 students in Detroit.

Ross is quoted in the *Free Press* article as saying, "Making the older [schools] better doesn't work. They need to be closed and new schools created by people with track records." Ross continues, making reference to the proposed new types of schools, "They're not going to be like those huge comprehensive high schools that most of us went to. The only problem now in urban settings is they don't educate you well, and that unfortunately is a fatal flaw."

Ross is a key player in the drive to transform the school system. At a press conference earlier this month, Ross, flanked by Bobb, and Carol Goss, president and CEO of the Skillman Foundation, commented that "the plan will succeed even if DPS does not." This is, no doubt, his fervent hope.

The demise of the public schools system would open the door to a drastic downward shift in salaries and benefits for teachers and support staff, the elimination of any semblance of seniority rights, and the imposition of drastic changes in work rules. As is the case

presently in charter schools, teachers would be subject to being fired “at will,” without explanation or recourse to a hearing.

The quality and accessibility of education is now being dictated by the laws of the “marketplace,” and, as in any corporate productivity drive, teachers will be forced to work more and receive less.

Ross and his ilk are emboldened by the latest capitulation by the American Federation of Teachers and its affiliated union in Detroit. The recent firings of teachers at a Rhode Island high school, an event greeted with enthusiastic support by the Obama administration, elicited only a tepid verbal protest by AFT President Randi Weingarten.

Meanwhile, Detroit Federation of Teachers President Keith Johnson steadfastly defends his sellout of teachers last December; a contract that saddled teachers with a \$10,000 pay cut over two years, in addition to attacks on their health benefits.

Both organizations have championed the education “reforms” promoted by the Obama administration and Education Secretary Arne Duncan, which include merit pay, so-called peer review, and the subjection of experienced teachers to constant scrutiny and evaluation.

The Obama administration has in recent months railed against so-called “incompetent” teachers. Teachers have been selected as scapegoats for the crisis in education to deflect attention from the decades of budget cuts, the mania over standardized test scores and the general decline in the quality of social life—conditions the schools reflect, rather than create.

Thus, the ruling elite in Michigan, aligned primarily with the Democratic Party, and backed to the hilt by the Obama administration, is moving quickly to initiate the wholesale closings of schools, and their reincarnation as charter “public” schools. Such a move would likely mean the dislocation of tens of thousands of students, as well as thousands of employees through layoffs, firings and outsourcing.

Moreover, with no thought to the confusion such a reckless endeavor would create among both parents and students, save the predictable platitudes about “placing children first,” Robert Bobb and company are embarking on a policy that will open the floodgates for the privatization of education in Detroit. The result will inevitably be the education of the few at the expense of

the many.



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