Michigan school districts to undertake drastic cuts for federal grant aid

Clement Daly
25 June 2010

Last week the state of Michigan received $119 million from the federal School Improvement Grant program. The amount is significantly less than the "minimum of $150 million" promised to Michigan through the program by US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan in February. The restricted funding compels struggling school districts to impose more drastic cuts and closures on their workforces and students than have already been undertaken this year.

Through guidelines drawn up by the US Department of Education for determining the "persistently lowest achieving schools," a list of 108 schools throughout the state were named eligible to apply for grants of up to $6 million—paid out in installments of $2 million over three years. The list represents only a fraction of the more than 3,000 public schools and charters in Michigan.

Of the 108 schools eligible, nearly half—47 of them—are part of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS), a district of 172 schools. According to DPS spokeswoman Kisha Verdusco, about 30 of the 47 named schools are already targeted for restructuring or closure over the next three years.

Other districts well represented on the list include Grand Rapids with six schools, Saginaw with four schools, and Flint and Kalamazoo with two each.

To qualify for the grants, schools must implement one of the four improvement models drawn up by the federal government. These include the "turnaround model," requiring the replacement of the principal and at least 50 percent of the school's staff; the "restart model" of closing the school and reopening it as a charter operation; the "transformational model," calling for the replacement of the principal and the implementation of comprehensive instructional reforms and "flexible operations" that can include lengthening the school day, increasing teacher workloads, and ripping up employee contracts; or simply closing the school altogether and enrolling the students elsewhere.

A review of these options demonstrates that the purpose of the grants has nothing to do with improving the quality of education and everything to do with dismantling of public education to further its transformation into a for-profit enterprise. In fact, the central aim of the School Improvement Grant program is cutting costs through an assault on the living standards of teachers, staff and students.

Not surprisingly, the lowest performing schools are located in the poorest areas of the state. All 108 eligible schools are Title I schools whose students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches as low-income students.

The continual demand for teacher accountability as a means to improve student performance conveniently turns a blind eye to the devastating social conditions within which teachers work and students learn. These conditions are the direct product of decades of free-market policies promoted by Republicans and Democrats alike.

The state education budget, tied to lottery revenue and property taxes, has languished as Michigan's auto industry and housing markets have collapsed. Schools have been forced to run deficit budgets for years.

Invoking the financial crisis, the Obama administration along with the administration of Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm have demanded school districts "live within their means" and have initiated an all-out assault on basic programs, teacher pay, and the right to a quality, free education itself. School districts throughout Michigan, like their counterparts across the country, have taken a blunt axe to their operating budgets to qualify for limited funding.

© World Socialist Web Site

This fall a separate list of the lowest 5 percent of struggling schools in Michigan will be compiled as required under the law passed last year by the Michigan legislature in the state's bid for more than $500 million in Race to the Top funding. The law requires that targeted schools submit an academic improvement plan, to be carried out under supervision of the state at the threat of state takeover.

Since all 108 schools identified according to the federal criteria are expected to also be on the state list, officials are hoping to pressure schools into implementing the desired reforms to avert state supervision or takeover. Moreover, the grants provide a certain amount of political cover—in the same way the Race to the Top initiative does—for officials to carry out draconian cuts and restructuring that would otherwise be too risky.

Strategic to the Obama administration's education reform strategy is the cynical method of forcing a competition between funding-starved school districts for inadequate resources. Thus, a paltry $4.5 billion was offered as part of the Race to the Top initiative for all 50 states to fight over, with most of these states mired in debilitating budget crises. With the School Improvement Grants, the most impoverished schools of Michigan are being forced to compete with one another for a woefully inadequate sum.

Similar competitions will play out within states around the country for School Improvement Grants as desperate schools vie with each other for limited funds. Those schools that go the furthest in implementing the principles of Obama's anti-education reforms—closing public schools in favor of privately-run for-profit charters, eliminating teacher job security based on tenure and seniority in favor of "merit pay," and the tying of school funding to standardized test scores—will be rewarded with a few extra crumbs.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site