

“Priority Schools” in Detroit: A thin disguise for charters and privatization

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The Detroit Public Schools, headed by its financial czar, Robert Bobb, is poised to implement a sweeping reorganization of the school district that will trample on the working conditions and democratic rights of teachers. In carrying out its policy, the district enjoys the complete support of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

At a recent DFT executive board meeting, it was announced that as many as 41 schools will be designated as “Priority Schools” for the 2010-2011 school year. An additional 10 schools will be affixed with this label the next year. The scheme is aimed at eliminating hard-won gains of teachers like job security and seniority rights, and is the first step toward transforming dozens of public schools into privately run charter schools, which will exclude children requiring the most attention and resources.

In a series of “Letters of Agreement,” attached to the union’s contract ratified in December 2009, DFT President Keith Johnson has signed off on a host of “reforms” consistent with the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” education initiative: the unimpeded spread of charter schools, the lengthening of the school day and year, peer review and evaluations based on the narrowest of criteria, the overemphasis of standardized test scores, merit pay and other attacks on teachers.

It should be noted that at the time of the contract’s ratification, the central issue was the imposition of the so-called “Termination Incentive Plan,” consisting of a \$10,000 pay cut over two years, a plan designed to compel older teachers to retire. So, while the complicity of the DFT-AFT leadership with education “reforms” being carried out by Robert Bobb was well known among teachers, the full content of the union’s capitulation contained in the “Letters of Agreement” was not discussed—if, in fact, it was even available at the time of the ratification vote.

The establishment of these “Priority Schools,” certainly in the numbers announced by Johnson, marks the beginning of the end of the DPS as a cohesive public schools system.

Bobb and Johnson, at the behest of their handlers in Washington, namely the Obama administration, Education Secretary Arne Duncan and AFT President Randi Weingartner, are imposing a free market competitive business model on the public schools of Detroit.

Last year, Duncan declared the Detroit public schools as “ground zero” for his reactionary reform agenda. As he is doing in the other cities, Obama’s education secretary is currently campaigning for Detroit to eliminate its school board and hand authority over the schools to the mayor when Bobb leaves his post next year—a measure that has the backing of the Democratic mayor and governor and millions of dollars from private foundations. “You need a willingness to make tough decisions,” he said.

Each Priority School is in effect a “school of choice.” Instead of rebuilding the neighborhood schools, Bobb will institute a period of open enrollment, allowing families with the wherewithall to transport their children to the school of their choice. Thus, families with the resources to do so will move their kids to supposedly safe and well-supplied schools located in neighborhoods relatively undisfigured by the economic calamity besetting Detroit.

One “Letter of Understanding” spells out the criteria for the “Priority School” designation: “Determination of such schools shall be based upon data inclusive of, but not limited to student performance on standardized tests, student attendance, transiency, chronic discipline and/or violence concerns, and AYP status.” AYP, or Adequate Yearly Progress, is the requirement outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, in which schools are judged as failed if AYP, chiefly determined by improved standardized test scores, is not met over an established period of time.

Under the guidelines developed by Arne Duncan, the entire staff can be fired at a “failing” school, it can be closed permanently, or it can be transformed into a charter school or other privately managed school.

The letter continues: “Priority Schools shall not be limited to low performing schools.” Indeed! There are very few schools in Detroit that are not low performing, through no

fault of either the teachers who labor in these habitually underserved schools or the chiefly impoverished students who attend them. The district has suffered from a decades-long campaign of funding cuts, mismanagement and outright thievery, the byproducts of deindustrialization and the concomitant destruction of whole areas of the city.

The economic “Katrina” that has ravaged Detroit has opened the doors to those whose chief aim, as in New Orleans in the aftermath of the hurricane, is to dismantle public education in favor of the spread of charter schools, and ultimately the privatization of education.

The “Letter of Understanding” further spells out the subordination of the interests of teachers to this reckless onslaught on public education. “Staffing at Priority Schools shall be on an application basis.... There shall be an extended day/school year for the Priority Schools contingent upon funding.... Members shall be required to engage in prescriptive and prescribed (professional development) within the regular school year, and designated additional professional development days.”

The letter continues that each teacher will be subject to a stringent pre-evaluation leading to a “Certificate of Qualification.” Following approval, each teacher’s job will be subject to constant scrutiny and demands for unquestioning compliance with whatever extraneous activities are undertaken at the school. “During employment at a Priority School, members selected shall do so with the understanding that their ongoing assignment at the Priority School shall be contingent upon staff meeting evaluative criteria in an annual review process...meeting pre-established benchmarks and targets, and making a continuous commitment to all that is prescribed in this agreement.”

In other words, do as you are told without question or complaint, and you will keep your job. Underneath all the jargon about benchmarks and targets is the language employed by charter schools when they fill staff positions. Once hired, a teacher can be fired “at will.”

What is being implemented by Bobb and Johnson is similar to what occurred in Chicago’s public schools under the leadership of the then schools’ CEO, Arne Duncan, Obama’s current education secretary. Duncan had closed numerous neighborhood schools, established “Priority Schools” in mainly gentrified neighborhoods, and claimed success.

Meanwhile, most of Chicago’s youth were subjected to a further deterioration of education, and an increase in violence, as many students were forced to attend school in economically ravaged gang-infested neighborhoods. As in Chicago, any teacher who wishes not to be placed at a Priority School, or is removed from such a school, will become a CTAL (Contract Teacher at Large), to be placed at

the discretion of the district.

The “Letter of Understanding” makes clear its intent to destroy seniority rights. “District-wide layoffs shall occur in accordance with the layoff provisions of the collective bargaining agreement. However, should the district decide to retain teachers assigned to Priority Schools who would otherwise be laid off, the teachers with the next highest seniority in the applicable subject area shall be released from their current assignment and be reclassified to CTAL until a vacancy for which the teacher is certified becomes available.”

Other “Letters of Understanding” elaborate the formation of joint labor-management peer review panels, dubbed “Peer Assistance and Review” (PAR), which will stigmatize and punish supposedly “incompetent” teachers based on as-yet-unspecified criteria, and “performance-based bonuses”—what is, in effect, merit pay. Under this scenario, the DFT bureaucracy will play a key role in hiring and firing teachers and blacklisting those who they believe are not sufficiently pliable.

All these education “reforms,” touted by the Obama administration, and supported by the teachers’ unions, are opposed by the vast majority of teachers. No matter! In Detroit, The DFT’s role is to serve as the policeman for the imposition of these policies with a minimum of disruption. The notion, promulgated by the “dissident” faction within the DFT, led by Steve Conn, that the defense of public education can be carried out by trade union organizations like the DFT, but under a new more “militant” leadership, is aimed at blocking workers from breaking with this rotten organization.

Teachers must organize to fight the attack on public education and on their livelihoods. But new forms of organization are required, including committees to unite rank-and-file teachers, school workers, parents and students independently of and opposed to the DFT and the Democratic Party. This is, above all, a political struggle against a ruling elite, and its defenders in the Obama administration, who view public education as an obstacle in the defense of its vast ill-gotten wealth.



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