

Los Angeles expands charter schools in attack on public education

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The Los Angeles Unified School District has for the third time in a single year made it possible for several of its new and existing schools to be converted into charter and other semi-private institutions.

In total, 48 outside bids were received last week for 13 schools, and the district board is set to vote on the proposals next February. The district is the largest in the state of California and the second largest in the country, serving more than 694,000 students at 730 schools.

In the time elapsed since the state passed the Charter School Act in 1992, 183 schools serving approximately 78,000 students have been constructed as, or converted into, charters. The problems faced by such a large district, which has experienced mass layoffs and multibillion-dollar cutbacks in recent years, are being exploited to push for expanded charter schools under the guise of education “reform.”

In these efforts, charter school operators and advocates find ready support within the political establishment and within the district board itself. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a Democrat, has repeatedly praised the charter school movement. Caprice Young, former LAUSD Board president, recently agreed to a two-year contract to head the financially troubled ICEF Public School company, which runs 15 small charter schools in South Los Angeles. Prior to Young’s appointment, ICEF laid off 75 employees and cut its overall budget by 20 percent.

Calls for charter school support and so-called public school choice are inevitably accompanied by measures to give district and public officials a freer hand in dismissing public school teachers. The mayor’s Education Reform Strategy released Wednesday explicitly outlines such measures. They include the extension of the probationary period for teacher tenure

from two to four years, along with an overhaul of the panel system, whereby teachers are protected from arbitrary dismissal through a relatively comprehensive review process.

The current education reform movement, of which the LAUSD Public School Choice movement is a part, is not driven by the desire to provide children with a quality education. It has everything to do with dismantling public education and firing dedicated teachers. The charter school movement largely comprises a group of affluent individuals with numerous political connections to the Democratic Party, many having served in the administrations of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama in particular.

Equally false are the claims that charter schools will give parents greater autonomy in educating their children. Ten of the 13 schools in the current round of “public school choice” are newer schools for which voters had no say in creating them as charters.

Moreover, charter institutions are not required to meet the needs of parents and students other than following the charter, which generally requires certain minimum scores on state and nationwide student testing.

Furthermore, massive cuts are enacted against existing public schools, allowing charters to present themselves as favorable alternatives to the resource-starved public schools.

Last week, the district laid off more than a thousand non-teaching support staff and reduced wages and benefits for more than 3,000 additional employees. (See “Los Angeles Schools suffer more job cuts.”) The resultant dire conditions compounded by previous years of budget cutting and layoffs have provided a base of support for the charter school movement.

Various legal avenues have already been prepared

through which rising parental discontent could be channeled. Most recently, the California state legislature passed a law that allows a majority of parents at a given school to pull a “trigger” that forces the school to enact sweeping reforms of personnel or be converted into a charter institution. The measure was passed so the state could meet conditions for the Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative. It was left in place even after it became clear that California would not receive any of the \$4.2 billion offered under the plan.

The parental trigger option has now been exercised at McKinley elementary school in the Compton Unified School District south of downtown Los Angeles. The school was one of the poorest performing in the city in terms of test scores, yet had experienced steady improvement over the past several years. These gains, however, were publicly derided by Ben Austin, aide to former president Bill Clinton and current executive director of Parent Revolution, a charter school advocacy group. According to Austin, “It’s not enough to say that year after year you’re going to get better.”

While the parent petitions for McKinley were delivered only this Wednesday, reports are coming to light that many parents may have signed under dubious circumstances, with some being approached to sign vaguely worded forms to improve their local schools without being offered more-specific details.

The measures being taken at McKinley and at LAUSD underscore the frenzied pace with which charter school conversions are now taking place. Many of these charter school institutions have experienced severe financial difficulties, while the majority achieve educational outcomes that are qualitatively no different from public schools.



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