

The ongoing attack on public education in the US

Detroit charter school teacher: “I feel horrible, nearly helpless, and completely unsupported by the administration.”

Joanne Laurier
4 January 2011

The Detroit public school system has come under sustained attack in recent years, in part through the creation of charter schools. These essentially private institutions receive public money, but are not bound by regulations governing public schools. They can hire and fire teachers at will, all in the name of “improving results.” Most of the success has been illusory, and always at the expense of the longer-term educational interests of the population as a whole.

A test-oriented, largely commercial educational philosophy has come to dominate, backed by both Democratic and Republican Party politicians. This regimen has no time for the all-rounded development of children, much less the reorganization of American society and its school system so that even the most deprived have an opportunity to genuinely benefit from their years in school.

Advocates of charter schools hold up the disastrous state of Detroit public education—the result of deindustrialization, dire poverty and the underfunding of the school system for decades—as an argument for massive reorganization. In fact, the proliferation of charter schools will accelerate the decline.

A host of wealthy philanthropists, academics, politicians and businessmen are pushing for the destruction of public education in favor of a model based on the “marketplace,” which will result in a rigid caste system: the poor left in holding pens known as public schools, while the more affluent students will attend schools of their choice.

Not accidentally, this process will produce a dramatic decline in salaries and benefits for teachers and support staff, the elimination of any semblance of seniority rights, and the imposition of major changes in work rules. More than one hundred Detroit public schools have already been closed down, with more to come.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to a young charter school teacher in Detroit. We are not identifying the teacher—who has no seniority rights or job security whatsoever—or the school, to prevent reprisals.

* * * * *

Joanne Laurier: How difficult was it to find a job in Detroit after you completed your Masters degree program?

Teacher: I had been applying to a lot of different jobs this past summer all over the Metro Detroit area and Ann Arbor without success. I found out about this particular job in a Detroit charter school from a friend and went in for an interview shortly before the start of the school year.

The school seemed pretty desperate to find someone, and it was only later that I found out that the organization that runs the charter asked the administration to fire half its staff and both principals because the school had failed an AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress—a measurement defined by the Bush administration’s “No Child Left Behind Act” of 2001] the previous year. They wanted a restructuring to take place and somehow figured that firing half the staff was going to help the school.

A lot of new teachers got hired close to the opening of the school year. Several teachers were also hired after the school year had already started. I know of one teaching position that was not filled until at least two months into the school year. Teachers did not want to talk about the firings. As a consequence, a lot of the new teachers like myself did not really know what happened.

JL: Had anything in your education prepared you for what you were to encounter at this school as a first year teacher?

Teacher: No, even though I had done my student teaching at a disadvantaged school in the Detroit area—a public high school that surprisingly was a lot more organized than the charter school I currently work in. The public school had systems that were non-negotiable and could not change on a whim—such as schedules for meetings and so forth. That’s not the case at my charter school.

JL: How many students do you teach?

Teacher: One hundred and eighty students pass through my six classes on any given day. I have six classes a day in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades, that is, I see six groups of kids everyday. The class size ranges from 25 to 34. Most of the students are from Detroit. For many this is not their first year at this school, which is considered to be safe and decent. That’s all fine, except that academically the school is not doing well.

My experience is limited because I’ve only had a year of student teaching and a half-year of actual teaching. At the public school where I student-taught, there were procedural guidelines that were

given to the teachers at the beginning of the school year. A lot of planning went into each year.

It's very different at the charter, despite the fact that the teachers and staff are doing a lot of preparatory work. It seems we are doing more work and getting less out of it. A much bigger workload gets put on teachers at the charter school. A lot more is asked of us—things that would normally be done by secretarial or administrative staff, such as hallway procedures.

Teachers were asked to develop those procedures after the school year had started. We were asked to come up with bathroom procedures, as well as disciplinary procedures. None of these were in place when school began. How can a school function without those basic rules and procedures in place? If the teachers don't know what's going on, the students certainly can't be expected to.

I can tell you a lot of the teachers feel overworked and unappreciated. The biggest fear among us is losing your job. There is no union, there is no job security. Some of the new teachers have not even signed any form of a contract. Informational packets for new hires are not complete. It sometimes takes a month or so after you start work before you realize things are missing—including documents as important as forms for the health care plan. So some of the new teachers did not have health care for a month, though they eventually got it, retroactively.

Because the school is so far behind in reading and math, the administration hired an outside testing company to track the students' progress by testing them three times a year.

The real problem is that it is very hard to teach any subject under the present conditions at the school. There are a number of serious social issues that are not really being addressed. For example, I have students for whom basic school supplies seem to be an issue. Just having paper and a pencil is extremely difficult for many of my students.

The school is a Title I school, which I believe means that 80 percent of the students qualify for a free or reduced-cost lunch. At least in the middle school, we also provide breakfast for all of the students.

JL: Are you aware if any of your students have no utilities in their homes?

Teacher: Most students are not necessarily going to talk about the situation at home with a first-year teacher. I think that one of the reasons that we're seeing a lot of behavioral problems is that all of their teachers from last year are gone—teachers with whom they probably built relations and trusted on some level. One definitely knows that the students are struggling at home, as well as at school.

For one thing, there is a lot of absenteeism. When you notice kids who are missing school two or three times a week, you wonder what's happening. I know of one student who had to drop out because the family car broke down. Drop-outs like this happen frequently because there are no school buses.

And, bear in mind, this is considered to be one of the better schools in Detroit. Schoolbooks are another problem. I wanted to get enough textbooks for my students to be able to take them home. I was told that that was impossible because the books would never be seen again. So instead, I have to make copies of every book chapter that is being studied. Not a very practical way of

teaching. A lot of my time is spent photocopying books.

Six hours a day of classroom time requires an enormous amount of preparation. And on top of that, several hours a week are spent doing tasks not related directly to my classes. I'm a young person, and yet there is an enormous amount of physical and mental exhaustion from being on my feet all day. I don't ever really sit down. We don't have any genuine downtime. I teach three classes straight, then have a half-hour lunch break—sometimes less—and then teach another three classes.

I would say that for all the teachers, it is a tension-filled environment. Student behavioral issues are blamed on the teachers. Despite all the cutbacks, the firing of teachers, the attacks on public education, the teachers are blamed when students have academic difficulties. I feel horrible, nearly helpless, and completely unsupported by the administration.

The first week I came to the school, I asked my students what they did over the summer. About half, maybe more, told me they did absolutely nothing. They said they watched TV and played video games. Most did not leave their houses or their neighborhoods. If students are not being encouraged to read over the summer or to engage in anything that is remotely educational, they cannot retain much of what they've learned during the school year.

JL: Why did you become a teacher?

Teacher: I had a wonderful education and a lot of teachers that inspired me and instilled in me a love for learning. I have always wanted to bring that to children, particularly in underprivileged areas. I truly believe that every person has the right to a free and good education.

Unfortunately, being able to open a kid's world up to culture, to learning, is a luxury that I don't have as a teacher now. Being able to teach kids to love learning and to be critical thinkers and to be able to experience the joy of discovering new things is not really built into the content standards that I'm supposed to teach. There is no time for this when we are supposed to be "teaching to the test."

With [Bush's] "No Child Left Behind" and Obama's "Race to the Top," as truly terrible as things are right now, it makes me shudder to think what will be left in the future. Students living in cities like Detroit, Chicago and New York have such a difficult time accessing a decent public education, which they are entitled to. Where are we going to be five years from now?



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact