

Detroit to vastly expand charter schools

Trial run for Obama's education "reform"

Nick Rodriguez
16 March 2011

Detroit Public Schools (DPS) Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb announced a plan on Saturday to convert 41 public schools into charter schools by the beginning of the next academic year. The announcement of "Renaissance Plan 2012" came just one day prior to the Obama administration's release of proposed modifications to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as No Child Left Behind.

The plan advanced by Bobb, which falls in line with the proposals from Washington, has been presented as the only potential alternative to the proposed closure of 70—just shy of half—of Detroit's schools (See "State of Michigan gives green light to close 70 more Detroit public schools").

By transferring the schools over to private charter companies, the district will save \$75-99 million in operating costs, Bobb says. The emergency financial manager also claims the move will bring in an estimated \$22 million from the lease of buildings and equipment still owned by the district. The DPS currently faces a deficit over \$327 million, a sum that has grown from \$200 million when Bobb was first brought in to supposedly fix the district's fiscal crisis.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) is scheduled to meet with Bobb for closed-door talks on Monday to review the proposal. However, President Keith Johnson has already signaled his willingness to go along with the proposed charter school expansion by refraining from making any critical comments to the media, only telling the *Detroit Free Press*, "By law, if they are DPS charters, they have to be under the collective bargaining agreement."

The collective bargaining rights of teachers, however, remain in question as a bill poised to pass the Michigan legislature would give dictatorial powers to emergency

financial managers like Bobb, allowing them to trash labor contracts and overrule local ordinances, including the liquidation of city councils and school boards.

To this point, the DFT leadership has worked hand in glove with Bobb, ramming through concessions on its members and standing by idly as schools are shuttered. For the DFT to make reference to the supposed benefits of the collective bargaining agreements that will exist in the new charter schools under conditions in which it has agreed to district-wide wage and benefit cuts, as well as layoffs, is the height of hypocrisy.

The DFT has expressed opposition to the legislation on emergency financial managers being discussed in Lansing because it is concerned that the bill will undermine the position of the union. For the DFT leadership, the sacred right of collective bargaining represents the privileged position of the bureaucracy as dues collector over the rank-and-file. When it comes to the rise of charter schools and the gutting of public education they remain indifferent.

Bobb intends to meet with Mayor Dave Bing to confirm that the as of yet unreleased list of schools to be transferred to charter companies lines up with the mayor's plans to "right size" Detroit by suspending services to whole sections of the city. Bobb told Fox 2 News, "We have to, of course, meet with the Mayor and his team to ensure that the schools that we have identified are in areas where the city is proposing to grow."

Bobb, whose contract expires July 1, will not oversee the completion of Renaissance Plan 2012, but a seamless transition is being prepared with Kirk Lewis. The former president of Bing's automotive supply company, Bing Group, and until recently Detroit's group executive for corporate and civic affairs is rumored to be Bobb's successor. Bing has cautioned

Republican governor Rick Snyder about the appointment of Lewis, citing concerns over public opinion regarding mayoral control of the schools. Regardless, however, of whether or not Lewis is tapped as Bobb's successor, the plans to charterize 41 public schools are set and in motion.

Despite the lack of a direct comment on Bobb's Renaissance Plan 2012, the timing of its release—just one day before Obama's proposed changes to No Child Left Behind—suggests that Detroit is being used as a testing ground in a national assault on public education.

In previous months, Education Secretary Arne Duncan has applauded the willingness of DPS to “challenge the status quo,” at one point referring to the city as “ground zero” in the struggle for education “reform.”

Under the No Child Left Behind legislation, 37 percent of US schools have been characterized as “failing.” Duncan told Congress last week that up to 82 percent of schools nationwide could be considered “failing” this year, as measured by the bill's Adequate Yearly Progress standards.

Under Obama's new proposals, the Adequate Yearly Progress standards will be lifted and government intervention will focus on the bottom 5 percent of schools. Schools in this bracket will have one of four options: (1) closure, (2) restart as a charter, (3) “transformation,” replacement of the principal and the imposition of “merit-based” standards on educators, or (4) “turnaround,” replacement of the principal and the majority of the staff. Bobb's Renaissance Plan 2012 clearly fits these standards.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact