

Michigan governor outlines assault on public education

Jerry White
29 April 2011

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder outlined his plan to “reinvent” education through a sweeping attack on teachers and public education in a speech in Detroit Wednesday. Complaining that the public schools were not providing a sufficient return on investment, the Republican governor and former corporate CEO said he would improve academic results even as he cuts half a billion dollars—or \$470 per student—in state aid.

Michigan already ranks 21st in the nation in per-pupil funding after decades of budget cuts fueled by the downsizing of the auto industry, chronic unemployment and corporate tax cuts. In depressed manufacturing cities like Detroit, Flint and Saginaw and hard hit rural areas, teachers face the double challenge of teaching children from low-income families in schools plagued by overcrowded classes and a shortage of supplies and staff.

Snyder pointed to the all too predictable academic problems that result from this state of affairs to declare that the “current educational system is broken.”

Rejecting any notion that the necessary resources should be allocated to tackle this immense social problem, Snyder insisted that education should be based on the capitalist market. “Instead of focusing so heavily on funding levels, we need to talk about what really works and what doesn’t when it comes to helping kids learn,” the governor said.

His proposals include:

- Removing the cap on the number of charter schools in districts that have at least one academically “failing” school as determined by the state.

- Forcing districts to compete for desperately needed resources by basing additional aid on academic improvement targets. Snyder has set aside in his proposed budget \$300 million for that purpose.

- Compel districts to compete for students and

funding by allowing a student’s allotted state funding to follow him or her to any district.

- Encourage students to take online courses by changing state rules that require students to spend 1098 hours in the classroom annually.

- Basing teacher tenure not on seniority, but on proficiency “growth” during three years of a five-year probationary period. Teachers who don’t meet levels for two years could be fired.

- Eliminating seniority protections during layoffs.

- Annual reviews for teachers, with at least 40 percent of each review based on student achievement.

- Force school employees to pay 20 percent of their health care costs and find “significant savings” by opening all non-instructional services—janitorial, school buses, etc.—to private bidding.

Snyder announced that as many as 23 financially distressed school districts could be placed under emergency financial managers. Under the new law signed by the governor earlier this year, the appointed officials have dictatorial powers to remove elected school boards, nullify labor agreements and sell off public assets.

“Soon, I will be applying the new Emergency Manager legislation for those districts that continue to fail financially and academically and take no steps to eliminate the drain on community financial resources,” he said. The governor’s spokeswoman later added that the list was made public because “tough decisions” could no longer be avoided.

Detroit’s EFM, Robert Bobb—who was appointed by Snyder’s Democratic predecessor—is using his new powers to lay off hundreds of teachers, gut their seniority and other workplace rights and hand over 45 public schools to private charter interests.

In addition to Detroit, another 17 of the 23 districts

on the governor's hit list are in the Metro Detroit area, ranging from impoverished Pontiac to the more middle class West Bloomfield, which has a \$1.7 million budget deficit to erase by June 30.

"We are going to avoid falling into a financial emergency at all costs," West Bloomfield district spokeswoman Pam Zajac told the CBS News affiliate in Detroit. The district, which instituted a 10 percent pay cut across the board, is considering layoffs, she said.

The corporate controlled media immediately hailed the governor's plan. Right-wing *Detroit News* columnist Daniel Howes wrote, "In one shot, Gov. Rick Snyder confirmed Wednesday that he wants to radically reshape Michigan's public education model in a way that should feel familiar to anyone schooled in the metrics of corporate life. ...Yep, just like in the real world of business and competition, where success is measured by end results, not dollars spent."

There is growing opposition in the working class to the gutting of education and other essential services, while Snyder hands over further tax cuts to the corporations. In the wake of the massive public sector protests last month in Wisconsin, and in anticipation of similar resistance in Michigan, the Republican-controlled legislature last week began debating punitive measures against teachers who go on strike, including a minimum two-year suspension of their teaching licenses.

In the face of this attack on public education and teachers' rights, the president of the state's largest teachers' union, the Michigan Education Association, pledged to "continue its conversation" with Governor Snyder on "real education reform." While criticizing some aspects of the governor's proposal, MEA President Iris K. Salters said in a statement, "We've already made suggestions to the governor regarding streamlining the process to discharge ineffective teachers in our A+ Agenda that we shared with him, and we look forward to working with him and other lawmakers to accomplish those changes."

The position of the MEA, as well as the unions affiliated to the American Federation of Teachers, such as the Detroit Federation of Teachers, is that school "reform," ie., merit pay, gutting seniority, charter school expansion, privatization—should be accomplished with the assistance of the union

apparatus, not without it. The "MEA continues to agree with Snyder's call for collaboration and partnerships to improve student achievement," Salters concluded.

Allied with the Democrats—who, from President Obama to Detroit Mayor Bing, are carrying out similarly savage attacks on education—the unions agree that teachers and students alike must sacrifice to cover state and local deficits.

The claim that there is no money for public education in Michigan is a lie. After slashing the jobs and living standards of auto workers, General Motors and Ford announced \$11 billion in profits last year and paid tens of millions to their top executives, like Ford CEO Alan Mulally (\$83 million) and Executive Chairman Bill Ford Jr. (\$62 million).

If a 10 percent wealth tax was levied on the state's ten richest people—Frederick Meijer (\$4.7 billion), Richard DeVos (\$4.2 billion), Ronda Stryker (\$2.6 billion), Alfred Taubman (\$2.3 billion), Mike Ilitch (\$1.7 billion), Manuel Moroun (\$1.7 billion), Jon Stryker (\$1.6 billion), Roger Penske (\$1.4 billion), John Brown (\$1.3 billion) and William Ford (\$1.2 billion)—the state's entire educational deficit (\$421 million) would be wiped out more than five times over.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact