

California moves to increase charter schools

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In the midst of historic austerity measures being implemented by the administration of Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, California public schools confront staggering budget shortfalls. In certain districts, privatization is being offered up as an alternative to mass teacher layoffs, school closures, program terminations, and increased class sizes.

State officials and private financiers are working to ensure that certain charter schools—at least for now—receive increased funding, while leaving public schools without the funds necessary to maintain even a minimum of necessary programs. Under these conditions, some teachers, demoralized by decades of relentless cuts and a union that collaborates with state officials, have declared themselves in support of the conversion of their schools into private charter schools. In fact, charter schools do not represent the way forward for the defense of education.

The state already has 912 charter schools with 115 opening in the past year alone. Around 14 percent of these charter schools were converted from public schools, which is much higher than the national average of around 10 percent. Usually, a majority of teachers or parents must support the conversion before the school can reopen as a charter school.

Twenty-three schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) have already turned into charter schools, and there are more on the way. Most notably El Camino Real High School, which is one of the highest performing schools in LAUSD, was recently converted into a charter school.

El Camino boasts the national record for US Academic Decathlon Championships, having won six times. In 2010, the school scored 797 out of 1000 on the state's Academic Performance Index, while the district average was only 709. Despite this success, the teachers voted overwhelmingly to become a charter school last year, expecting to receive an additional

\$415,000 in state funding.

The increase comes from differences in funding between schools within a district and independent schools. For the 2009-2010 school year, the state funded independent high schools an average of \$7,369 per pupil while school districts received \$6,417 per pupil. In addition, El Camino anticipates extra state funding because of the 25 percent of its student body that qualifies as disadvantaged. LAUSD reserves such funds for only those of its schools which pass a 40 percent threshold.

In other words, the state of California itself has given charter school advocates a considerable boost by rigging the deck against traditional public schools.

Principal Dave Fehte told the *Contra Costa Times*, “This is not about having any animosity with the district . . . this is a financial decision. This will allow us to continue to be a really good school and to move beyond that.”

The conversion was approved late last month in a unanimous decision by the school board without discussion.

Outside of increased funding, charter school advocates tout an increased “flexibility” in how charter schools can spend their funds. From the very beginning of the economic crisis, this “flexibility” has been presented as a safeguard against further cuts. According to Marguerite Roza, senior data and economic adviser at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, “charter schools are not immune to the current recession, but they are more nimble, and their budgets have more room to be modified on the fly.”

By “nimble,” Roza means charter schools can rapidly push through wage cuts and other restructuring actions on teachers and staff without being obstructed by even such modest contractual language that applies to public schools. Charter schools also save money by hiring inexperienced teachers and demanding more from

them. The long hours, reduced job security, and lower pay and benefits for charter school teachers have resulted in a higher turnover rate than traditional schools.

According to studies by Vanderbilt University and Western Michigan University Evaluation Center, 25 percent of charter school teachers leave their schools each year, with 14 percent leaving the profession outright. Both those measures are over double the turnover rates at public schools.

For new teachers at charter schools, the average turnover rate is 40 percent. Over a third of charter school teachers are under 30 years old. Contrary to their glossy presentation by state officials and private foundations, charter schools in California are notorious for poor labor practices, high turnover rates among teachers, and generally low academic performance.

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University conducted a study showing that charter schools are over twice as likely to perform worse than better in comparison to traditional schools. Only 17 percent of charter schools did significantly better, while 37 percent did significantly worse.

Test scores notwithstanding, it has never been the intention of the charter school movement as a whole to improve the overall intellectual and cultural level of the nation's children. On the contrary, charter schools act as a bludgeon against teachers' salaries and pensions while speeding the drop in education quality nationwide. Every school that becomes a charter is one less school providing even the meager pensions and benefits of public schools.

Ultimately the phenomenon of teachers voting in support of the conversion of their schools to charter schools is tied to the atmosphere of demoralization actively cultivated by the teachers' unions. Instead of demanding that California fully fund education, unions like the California Teachers Association and United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) have year after year accepted pay cuts, furlough days, and mass layoffs.

In response to tens of thousands of layoff notices sent to California teachers this year, the UTLA advised its members to appeal their layoff notices on an individual level. This amounts to a strategy of "every man for himself." It goes without saying that without any additional funding, for every successful appeal by one teacher, another teacher is fired. Dead end actions like

this and unwavering support for Governor Brown's cuts leave teachers feeling desperate.

In Northern California, 80 percent of the teachers at Clayton Valley High School voted to convert to a charter school. In response to the unending cuts at that school, office secretary Renee Steen told the *Contra Costa Times*, "We feel so devalued. We're feeling pretty downtrodden these days."

School privatization will have disastrous consequences for teachers and for education as a whole. There can also be no doubt that whatever jobs and programs are saved as a result of charter school conversion will find themselves on the chopping block again sooner rather than later.

The implementation of charter schools in California is part of a nation-wide trend, heavily promoted by the Obama administration and a number of corporate think-tanks. Obama has tied limited federal aid to the states to the passing of laws aimed at expanding charter schools, shutting down "failing" schools, and attacking teacher pay and benefits.

The aim is to undermine the public education system as a whole, leaving the schools entirely subordinate to various private profit corporations and run ever more directly in the interests of the ruling class as a whole.



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