

Bi-partisan assault on public education in Detroit

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A proposal by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to drastically reorganize the Detroit school district, the latest stage in the dismantling of public education in the city, has received the complete support of the Obama administration.

Snyder, a Republican, has announced a plan to establish a separate state agency to run “failing” schools in the city. These schools, operating under an emergency financial manager, will be free to wipe out teacher pay, job security and benefits. If implemented, the initiative would remove nearly a third of the remaining DPS schools from the system, following year after year in which dozens of schools have been closed or turned over to private charters.

The plan was announced, with considerable fanfare, at a Monday press conference, held at Detroit’s Renaissance High School. Snyder and newly appointed Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts headed the proceedings, along with the usual assortment of politicians, charter schools advocates, and preachers.

Also in attendance was the superintendent of the Michigan State Board of Education, Michael Flanagan, as well as representatives from the Skillman and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundations, who are heavily invested in the “reform” of the city’s schools. The press conference was by invitation only, and police blocked several teachers from entering.

Present via videoconferencing was Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan. This was intended not only to signify the administration’s full support for the plan, but also to indicate that the measures adopted in Detroit would be a model for similar attacks on public education throughout the country.

The plan is entirely consistent with the administration’s “Race to the Top” program, which holds out the promise of federal money to states

contingent on the spread of privately run charter schools, the implementation of merit pay and measures to facilitate the firing of so-called underperforming teachers. Last year, Duncan described Detroit as “ground zero” in the fight to impose the Obama administration’s education “reforms”.

The governor’s plan involves the creation of a new state agency, dubbed the Education Achievement System (EAS). It is modeled after the Recovery Schools District that took over most of the public schools in New Orleans following the destruction of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, converting them into charter schools.

Under the new system, the EAS will take over the city’s lowest performing schools, which could be as many as 34 schools, including most of the Detroit’s neighborhood high schools. According to Snyder, the reorganization is set to take effect during the 2012-13 school year, and will eventually expand its coverage state-wide to include upwards of 200 “failing” schools.

Snyder has recently overseen sharp cuts in public education spending, combined with tax breaks for corporations in the state. The plan was not accompanied by any additional funding for either the schools to be taken over by EAS or those that remain in DPS. The EAS schools, however, will be free of the \$327 million in debt current held by the public schools, meaning that the debt burden of the remainder will increase substantially.

Referring to ideas similar to those now being implemented by Snyder, a *BusinessWeek* article earlier this year spoke of a “GM-style restructuring” of the Detroit schools. During the forced bankruptcy of GM, overseen by the Obama administration, the company was broken up into a “good” GM and a “bad” GM, with all the debts and liabilities, including benefits for

workers, left in the “bad” portion. The plan for DPS has many similarities, though which section of the school district will consist of the “bad” schools is not evident. Both groups will be subject to further closures, with the prime schools ripe for being picked up by for-profit charter companies.

Many of the schools being transferred to the EAS are embedded in the poorest sections of the city, ravaged by mass unemployment and crumbling infrastructure, and subject to the plans of Mayor Dave Bing to further depopulate these neighborhoods by gutting services. Of course, Snyder's plan proposes nothing to address these systemic problems that inevitably affect public schools.

Carol Goss, a representative of Excellent Schools Detroit, which is overseeing the charterization of public schools, cautioned about the “replication of services,” a clear warning to teachers, students and parents that more school closures and layoffs are in the offing. The EAS schools will, no doubt, be staging areas for further restructuring, until there is hardly a discernible public school system in the city. According to Snyder's plan, after five years, an EAS school can either remain with the agency, rejoin DPS, or seek to obtain a charter (the most likely prospect).

Under the new authority, each school administrator will have extraordinary authority to hire and fire teachers. A second agency, the Education Achievement Agency, will be established to supposedly oversee curriculum and teacher training. The EAA will enlist representatives from Eastern Michigan University to oversee the project.

While much of the Governor's plan remains vague, one thing is clear: every right of teachers—job security, wages and benefits, pensions and work rules—is in jeopardy. No teacher should be fooled by the palliatives from Snyder about “teacher empowerment.”

Speaking of the teachers, Roberts declared, “I have said to them if you want what I want, then I want you at the table. If you don't want that, and it's not about educating kids, then I don't want you at the table. So the decision is theirs.”

This statement is both a threat directed at teachers and an offer held out to the trade union executives that run the Detroit Federation of Teachers. The demand that teachers must be focused on “educating kids” is part of a campaign by the Detroit political establishment to insist that any attempt by teachers to defend their

benefits, jobs and pay is an attack on children. The opposite is in fact the case, as the laying off of thousands of teachers is directly tied to soaring class sizes.

At the same time, Roberts is offering a “seat at the table” to the DFT if it agrees to work with him in attacking teachers. The DFT has already made clear that it has no problem with Snyder's proposal provided the union maintains its ability to “represent” the teachers, that is, collect dues.

In a joint statement with representatives of the clerical and paraprofessionals unions, DFT President Keith Johnson declared; “More questions than answers remain at this point, not the least of which include... what will happen to the collective bargaining rights of employees... We are ready to roll up our sleeves and work with Detroit Public Schools emergency manager Roy Roberts and community groups... We are not prepared to be treated as bystanders.”

Governor Snyder is giving the DFT a year to prepare and intimidate the membership into accepting draconian attacks on teachers' living and working conditions following the expiration of the current contract in June 2012, a few months before the EAS takes over.

The union's conception of collective bargaining rights means the “right” to retain its dues paying base, as it polices the membership to squelch any independent movement to fight against the attack on public education. Like its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the DFT leadership is on board for all manner of education initiatives pushed by the Obama administration.



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