

Michigan gives green light for charter school expansion

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In another broadside attack on public education, Republican Michigan governor Rick Snyder signed Senate Bill 618 into law last month lifting a 150-school cap on university-sponsored charter schools. The measure, now Public Act 277, provides for an increase in the state's 225 charter schools to 300 in 2012, 500 in 2014, with no limit thereafter.

The measure is in line with the policy advocated by President Obama and his Education Secretary Arne Duncan, who have called for states to eliminate charter school caps in the interest of "cost efficiency" and Race To The Top (RTTT) financing. States that have not facilitated the expansion of charter schools have been penalized in RTTT applications and denied critical funding.

Michigan has the most for-profit charter schools in the nation, with almost a quarter of the nation's total. While the preponderance of charter students nationally attend nonprofits, in Michigan more than 85 percent are attending for-profits, according to a new report from Dr. Gary Miron, Western Michigan University education expert.

The elimination of the cap on charters, enacted in December, is part of a barrage of statewide policy changes aimed at increasing this already substantial privatization of education. The next element of the Orwellian-titled "parent empowerment package" coming up for a vote is SB 619, a measure that would eliminate all controls and caps on the lucrative cyber—100 percent online—charters.

The pending bill would end the 400-student limit for cyber schools, eliminate the requirement of a record of success in cyber education prior to authorization (the state's first two virtual charters just opened this past school year), and allow authorizers to charter as many schools as they want. Cyber education in Michigan is dominated by Michigan Connections, a division of the Connections Academies, a private for-profit with virtual schools in 21 states. In 2011 the firm was purchased by the Pearson, part of the Financial Times and Penguin business empire, for \$400 million cash from an investor group led by private equity firm Apollo Global Management LLC. Pearson is a dominant name in the education industry, controlling digital learning, publishing and testing services internationally.

SB 168 originally included the first attempt nationally to allow the "outsourcing" of teachers. The measure proposed allowing public schools to hire teachers through private for-profit companies, rather than by district-wide contracts. In the end, the

Republican legislators temporarily abandoned the plan in order to ensure the unfettered proliferation of charter schools.

Michigan has become the location of unabashed profiteering within education. Forty-three for-profit companies in the state administer 181 for-profit charters. More than 110,000 K-12 students in Michigan now attend charter schools, up from fewer than 5,000 in 1995-1996. More than half of districts contract out food, transportation or custodial services, and a measure was introduced in the legislature last February to require districts to outsource all these services through competitive bids.

State Education Committee chair Phil Pavlov recently defended the measures he sponsored, including SB 618, practically salivating over the potential for profits in the Michigan education market.

"If you took a look at what for-profit is, you would see traditional public schools are operating at nice profit. I would just suggest that in education in the state of Michigan—where \$18 billion trades hands every year—I would suggest that there is a lot of profit being made on many levels.... Capitalism is alive and well in Michigan," Pavlov concluded.

Profits, not student success, are unambiguously driving the process. The removal of the charter school caps in Michigan was authorized despite the 2010 Report to the State Legislator on PSAs, which found that charters underperform traditional schools more or less across the board. According to the report, Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) proficiency across grades 3-9 in both writing and math was lower in PSAs. Only 67 percent of PSA students around the state achieved math proficiency in 2008, compared to 78 percent of their public school counterparts, for instance.

In terms of Michigan Merit Exam (MME) proficiency, only 20 percent of high school juniors at PSAs were math-proficient in 2010, compared to 50 percent statewide. And graduation rates at PSAs ranged from 46 percent to 52 percent from 2007-2009, but were roughly 75 percent statewide during that same period.

Dr. Gary Miron recently testified before the Michigan State House, stating that school reformers have "gone away from those original charter ideas to the point that they should probably be called 'corporate' schools or 'franchise' schools instead." Similarly, he told the US House of Representatives, "Charter schools have provided an easy route for privatization; many states allow private schools to convert to public charter schools, and increasing the use of private education management organizations

is increasingly being seen as the mode for expanding charter schools. Today, one-third of the nation's charter schools are being operated by private education management organizations (EMOs) and this proportion is growing rapidly each year."

Miron has warned that for-profits tend to spend less on instruction and "much more" on administration, compared with traditional public schools.

Describing the process to the *New York Times*, national expert on education policy Alex Molnar of the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education said, "What we're talking about here is the financialization of public education. These folks are fundamentally trying to do to public education what the banks did with home mortgages."

The charter school phenomenon, a relatively recent social experiment propelled throughout the US in the 1990s, has been subjected to little thorough scientific study. However, more data is undermining the claims of their right-wing think-tank proponents. A 2009 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University showed that only 17 percent of charter schools did significantly better than traditional schools, while 37 percent did significantly worse.

About three quarters of for-profit online schools in the US failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress in 2010-2011 under No Child Left Behind, according to a report just published in the *Kalamazoo Gazette*.

A January 1 report in the *LA Times* entitled "Charter choices: good food, free food, no food" points out that charter schools are exempt from the federal law requiring public schools to provide needy students with at least one nutritionally adequate meal a day at a reduced price or for free. The report concludes, "Unlike traditional campuses that must follow state nutrition regulations for schools, charters can make independent decisions about what's for lunch. Some charter school officials decide not to serve it at all, even if that might mean that the nutrition needs of some of the state's poorest children are not being met."

On January 13, *Education Week* published a study by the journal *Science* that essentially dismisses the success claims of charter schools as unfounded propaganda. "Most studies of charter schools use unsophisticated methods and are flawed in ways that prevent researchers from accurately gauging those institutions' impact on student achievement," it concludes. It reports that "a meta-analysis of charter school studies revealed that about 75 percent of them do not meet rigorous research standards because they don't account for the differences in academic background and academic histories of students attending charters, when comparing them with those attending traditional public schools."

Michigan's embrace of charter education is one component of a series of regressive and anti-union measures aimed at dismantling public education as it existed in the postwar period. The legislature began the year by passing a \$1.7 billion reduction in business taxes, scrapping the Single Business Tax, and imposing a draconian cut of \$564 million, a whopping \$470 per pupil, from the 2012 school budget.

The Detroit Public Schools (DPS) lost \$25 million as a result, Lansing \$4 million, and Grand Rapids \$4 million, with similar dramatic cuts throughout the state. These measures are

dramatically worsening districts' operating deficits. Presently, the DPS is under a dictatorial Emergency Financial Manager, with Highland Park under state recommendation and up to a dozen districts on an unofficial "watch list."

In the aftermath of the cuts, according to the Michigan Education Association, teachers are working in classrooms without any paper, pencils, and other basic essentials, and, in many cases, without textbooks. Technology is in disrepair, and some schools lack copiers to reproduce worksheets. Under measures adopted by the state in July, teacher tenure now takes an additional year to achieve in Michigan and is tied to student performance—a metric that has yet to be defined. The provision mandates teacher firing after three years of being rated "ineffective." A similar rule change in the Chicago Public Schools led to the termination of 11 percent of new teachers.

However, the predictable response of the 157,000 member union, an affiliate with the National Education Association, was a plea to the membership to "keep the pressure on" state legislators over the expansion of cyber schools. They assessed the raiding of Michigan's coffers for charter operations in typical tepid bureaucratic language. "MEA opposed the bill on the grounds that lifting the cap robs traditional public schools of needed resources. The bill also lacked strict accountability standards for newly-created charter schools."

The fact is that the NEA, the nation's largest union, was the earliest endorser of Obama's 2012 reelection campaign. The Obama administration's education policies have been focused aggressively on the privatization of the public school system, including the elimination of charter and cyber school caps, "entrepreneurial partnerships" and relentless budget-cutting.

While the MEA fraudulently tells its membership, "It has been a long hard struggle and we haven't been able to prevent bad legislation from passing. Some may believe there's nothing we can do..." it is the union itself which has deliberately prevented any struggle from being mounted by throwing their full support behind the Democratic Party. The union has refused to organize a struggle against the deepening privatization of education and instead diverted member anger into recall campaigns and petition drives, which keep workers prostrate before the attacks of both state and federal governments.



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