

Dr. Michael Barbour, distance education specialist

“Full-time online learning is actually detrimental to student success”

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Dr. Michael Barbour is an assistant professor in Instructional Technology at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. With 15 years in the field of online education, he has been involved with K-12 distance education in Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea. He has taught and worked in research, course design and administration.

In December, Dr. Barbour testified before the state of Michigan’s House of Representatives Education Committee to oppose Senate Bill 619, a measure that removes all restrictions on online cyber charters. The professor noted the limited nature of the research on online education and that the existing studies tend to show “full-time online learning is actually detrimental to student success.”

Citing one comprehensive report from Colorado, Dr. Barbour pointed out, “On average, there is a decrease in the percentage of students achieving proficiency the longer they are enrolled in full-time online learning.”

The Colorado study surveyed 10,500 students enrolled in the 10 largest online schools over three years. Fully half dropped out within a year, ending up further behind academically than when they started. The analysis showed that online schools produce three times as many dropouts as they do graduates.

The state of Minnesota’s 2011 K-12 Online Learning Audit showed similar high dropout rates among full-time online students, as well as lower proficiency rates in math, Barbour noted. Online students in grades 4-8 made about half as much progress in math, on average, as other students in the same grade over their two-year study period.

A decision on Senate Bill 619 by the State of Michigan is expected imminently. Dr. Barbour spoke with the WSWs about his perspective on the bill, the effects of profit on education, and the implications for social equality.

WSWS: How did you become concerned with the development of cyber and charter school education?

Michael Barbour: I am originally from Newfoundland, Canada. It is an island province and there are hundreds of communities with less than 500 people living in them. I became a teacher in the tiny rural fishing community of Bonavista. The only Advanced Placement (AP) classes offered were online, and AP social studies didn’t exist. So I got a little federal funding and started an online

AP social studies program. As I pursued my graduate education, I began to design courses and collect data to figure out how we could to do this online education more effectively.

WSWS: Why did you go to Lansing to testify against the State of Michigan’s bill SB619?

MB: I believe that evidence should push policy. If you look at full-time online learning in the US, the data does not support expanding it. The reason they put the restrictions on the two cyber schools we have here in Michigan—Michigan Virtual Academy and Michigan Connections—was because they wanted a two-year data collection window. Well, it doesn’t make sense to say after just one year, “We’ve got some data. It says that these schools are not effective, but let’s ignore that and just throw open the doors.”

As someone who has been in this field for 15 years, I’ve been watching. If you look in jurisdictions where they had restrictions and removed them or jurisdictions without restrictions, this is where you have the most trouble. Pennsylvania and Ohio are two examples. In the first few years there were a dozen or more court cases in Pennsylvania alone for corruption. Students were being enrolled without actually attending, so the cyber schools were getting the funding without servicing the students. Similarly, in the beginning in Ohio there were huge numbers of students enrolling and hardly any of them performing anywhere near the level of a brick and mortar school.

If you look at the performance level for cyber schools in general there is no reason why we would want to remove the restrictions. If you throw open the doors now, the administrative challenges will undermine their mediocre performance even more.

[Editor’s note: “mediocre” has been quantified by a January 2012 report by the Education Policy Center, entitled “Profiles of For-Profit and Nonprofit Education Management”, which states that only 27 percent of for-profit companies operating cyber schools met the adequate yearly progress (AYP), compared with 48 percent of traditional brick and mortar charter schools.]

WSWS: Explain a bit more about the methodological flaws in the studies promoted by the charter companies.

MB: The political decisions are not based on the research. Cyber charters are often citing the data of supplementary students—students in brick and mortar schools but simply taking a course or two online. We are talking about students that can’t get AP Chemistry, for example, and take it through Michigan Virtual School. The home school will pay the fee and make space

available in the computer lab or maybe have a distance-learning room. This child may have Period 2 scheduled for his online class, and they will have a student-teacher ratio roughly the same as for a regular class.

When you look at the research that says that online students do as well or better than face-to-face students, this is based on these supplemental students! In fact, up until about 2006-07, most of the supplemental courses were designed for higher ability students. These are the children we'd expect to be doing as well as or better than average students.

WSWS: That Department of Education study showed a full half of students leaving Colorado cyber schools within a year?

MB: That is not atypical. In fact, the Colorado study found that the longer a student stays in an online program, the worse they do. These findings were similar to what media and legislative reports have seen in five other states—each year the students stayed in the online cyber, the percentage of students meeting proficiency dropped.

WSWS: What is your opinion of Obama's Race to the Top and his policy toward education?

MB: During the campaign, Obama was wonderful. If you looked at his educational policy then, it was very progressive. But once he came into office and appointed Arne Duncan secretary of education, it became a war on teachers. In all honesty, Bush would never have gotten away with the conservative things that Barack Obama has done to education.

In the first couple of years, I called Obama "Bush lite" but now it's "Bush heavy." The entire debate in the US has moved to the right of the spectrum. Even the left-leaning Democrats—it's never really been a left-wing party—have had an uncanny faith in the free-market system.

In New York, Michael Bloomberg has called for firing almost half of the teachers and putting all the students into the classrooms of the good teachers. You take a "good" teacher and give them 60 students in a class, and you won't have "good" teacher anymore.

Race to the Top is a route to privatizing public education. That's the bottom line. I use the comparison to your health system. The EMOs are education's version of the insurance company HMOs. They are going to make sure that they maximize their bottom line in much the same way the HMOs have done with health care.

WSWS: It has been reported that Ron Packard, the CEO of the for-profit virtual charter K12, made \$5 million in compensation last year. What has been the impact of for-profit charter schools on education?

MB: It's turned the education system into a two-tiered system. If you have economic capital, you get one level of service; if you don't, you get another level. That's what Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) have done.

I'm all for efficiencies in the education system, but if the cyber charter schools can figure how to educate a child for \$6,500 in Wisconsin and they're still receiving \$10,000 per student, I want that \$3,500 to go back into the student's education, not the pockets of some corporate shareholders or executives. This is a funding model that is cheating students.

If I want to maximize my profit as a for-profit charter, the best

way is to find a failing school, get that school closed, set up a school fairly close by but in a better neighborhood. I won't provide buses or a cafeteria. I'm going to require school uniforms, which is going to eliminate all my lower socioeconomic students, since poverty and academics in terms of student achievement go hand in hand.

Then I need to get middle class and upper middle class students into my program, so that I get a reputation as a top performing school. If the general neighborhood had a "failing" school, I can get a reputation as a "turnaround" program and further increase my enrollment.

WSWS: We are at a crossroads in the US regarding the fate of public education.

MB: I agree. There is a massive lobbying operation connected with charters and cyber charters in particular. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, his Foundation for Excellence, the pro-privatization think tanks, the Alliance for School Choice with its PACs, Digital Learning Now, and the American Legislative Exchange Council, which writes template laws and coordinates a 50-state strategy, are just some of the major players. All these people are connected with philanthropy, on the one hand, and the legislative organizations and conservative groups on the other hand.

WSWS: Are these measures subverting the notion of democracy?

MB: Totally, if the notion of a democratic society is to provide the opportunity that everyone has an equal chance to participate in the democracy. They are creating a system where there is one level of education for one class of people and a separate, less equal system.

Americans should be quite familiar with this. It's the separate but equal doctrine—and we all know that it was never equal. The same thing is happening now, not on overt racial lines—although in some jurisdictions you could argue race does play a big role in what's happening. You are creating two systems and depriving a group of citizens the right to participate fully in the society. Yet that is the basic purpose of education, to create a lettered population able to be active participants in society.



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