

# Officials move to dismantle Philadelphia public school system

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As part of a nation-wide attack on public education, officials in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania are utilizing a budget crisis in the district as an opportunity to drastically restructure the public education system. Dozens of schools will be shut in the operation that is ultimately aimed at turning over the entire system to for-profit charter operators.

Last week, the School Reform Commission of Philadelphia—a body jointly appointed by the state governor (currently Republican Tom Corbett) and the mayor (Democrat Michael Nutter)—announced its decision to close 64 public schools over the next five years. Forty schools will be shut at the start of the 2013-2014 school year and six additional closings will be made in each of the following years.

The Philadelphia school district is the eighth largest public education system in the nation, and includes approximately 300 schools overall. In addition to closing one-fifth of the schools, the rest of the school district will be reorganized into smaller “achievement networks” made up of 20-30 schools presided over by officials with contracts based on strict performance criteria.

Thousands of students will be transferred to charter schools, which already oversee about 46,000 students in the city. The percentage of students in charter schools is expected to rise from 25 to 40 percent by 2017.

The plan was outlined last week by “chief recovery officer” Thomas Knudsen—the former CEO of utility giant Philadelphia Gas Works. Knudsen, who was appointed in January, said the plan is a “breaking-apart of the district” along market lines. Revealing his deep-seated hostility to public education, which the corporate elite equates with socialism, Knudsen said the plan would transition the district from a “command and

control” to a “service delivery” model. The aim is to create “an entrepreneurial approach” to public education, he said.

The plan, which is now subject to public comment before being approved by the School Reform Commission, has received the strong support of Mayor Nutter. “If we don’t take significant action, the system will collapse,” the Democrat insisted, adding that it was necessary for the population to “grow up and deal with” the situation.

The city’s schools, along with other districts throughout the state, have been starved of funding and threatened with collapse in the wake of the \$1.1 billion in combined cuts to education carried out by Governor Corbett over the last two years. The Philadelphia schools have already laid off school nurses, scaled back “auxiliary” employees such as cafeteria staff and other aides, and stripped away extracurricular activities. Those measures led to several schools operating without trained medical staff during the day and a number of teachers stepping in to work without pay in order to sustain tutoring groups and other after-school services. The schools also lost millions of dollars for language instruction, music, athletics, and counseling services.

Now the situation has grown even more extreme, with the outright closure and elimination of schools being coupled with further layoffs and cost-cutting policies. The district’s central office staff has been sliced in half, and now presently stands at 650 people. The office is going to be pruned down even further, to about 200 remaining employees who will handle “non-core” functions such as basic accounting and strategic planning decisions outside the scope of the achievement networks. This drastic downsizing is aimed at rendering the district’s central administration

virtually useless.

Other policies include the privatization of administrative maintenance positions, restructuring employee benefits, and freezes to all non-personnel expenditures. Teacher and service unions have been asked to make wage and benefit concessions totaling \$156 million, and there have been small reductions (7 percent) to charter-school funding as well.

The attack on public education in Philadelphia has a long history, going back to the establishment of the five-member School Reform Commission as part of a state takeover of the district in 2001. In the wake of the takeover, many schools were handed over to charter operators, including for-profit Edison Schools Inc (now EdisonLearning Inc.). The Commission has received \$1.5 million in funds from the William Penn Foundation in order to pay for the advice of Boston Consulting Group, a private consulting firm.

Although the main impetus for the restructuring plan comes from a Republican administration it is fully backed by Philadelphia's Democratic mayor and is in line with the attack on public education being spearheaded by the Obama administration.

Just last week, Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, announced that Pennsylvania will receive \$19.6 million in School Improvement Grants to "turn around" so-called persistently low-achieving schools. The stipulation for the funding is that the state will implement one of four intervention models. These include: replacing the principal, screen existing school staff and rehiring no more than half the teachers; closing a school and re-opening it as a charter school or under the supervision of an educational management organization (EMO); or permanently closing it and dispersing students to other schools.

The Obama administration is taking the leading role in this attack, using meager federal funds (in the "Race to the Top" program) to pressure districts to shut down schools, enforce deep attacks on teachers and other school workers, and transfer control to charter operations.

In several cities, including Detroit, New Orleans and now Philadelphia, these reactionary policies have been implemented by Democratic mayors and school officials. Mayor Nutter has enthusiastically praised "breaking down traditional barriers" between public and private educational institutions. In a recent visit to

Mercy Vocational, a private Philadelphia Catholic school, Nutter held up the school as a sterling model for both the city and the nation, and reiterated his support for the city's Great Schools Compact. The Compact is a plan which involves annual transfers of students from "low performing" schools into charter schools and allowing educational management organizations and other private bodies to have a greater voice in educational policy throughout the city. The city was awarded a \$100,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for its passage of the plan back in December of last year.

The crisis faced by the Philadelphia school system is just one example of the attacks being made on public education across the state and the country. In January the nearby Chester-Upland district ran out of money is it currently facing outright extinction.

The actions of the Philadelphia district underscore the fact that the aim of these measures is not simply the implementation of certain cuts, but an end to the very institution of public education.



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