

Muskegon Heights, Michigan to convert entire school district to charters

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In an unprecedented assault on public education, the Muskegon Heights Public Schools in western Michigan face complete dissolution. Earlier this month, the District's Emergency Manager, Donald Weatherspoon, fired all teachers and staff and began soliciting bids from private companies to run the schools as a charter system. Weatherspoon was appointed by Governor Rick Snyder to oversee finances in the district, which has a debt of \$12.4 million.

Weatherspoon's plan involves removing all the educational functions of Muskegon Heights Public Schools, leaving it as a shell with no purpose other than to pay off its debt. In its place, whichever company charter operator successfully negotiates a contract with the district will take charge of all K-12 education as the Muskegon Heights Public Academy System.

The Academy System would collect all the per-pupil state funding. In turn the district would collect a 3 percent fee from the Academy System and rent district buildings out for academy use. Additionally, the district would continue to collect property tax for the schools it is no longer running in order to pay off its debt. There is currently no estimate for how long that would take.

A new law passed by the state legislature cleared the path for this unprecedented step by exempting charter schools from collective bargaining agreements in their respective districts. Prior to Senate Bill 618, which went into effect last March, charter schools were bound by the contracts negotiated with the regular public schools.

As Emergency Manager, Weatherspoon has the power to unilaterally amend or revoke the collective bargaining agreements of the district's teachers. However, the new law guarantees to charter schools the complete freedom to lower wages regardless of whether or not Weatherspoon exercises his controversial and

socially explosive powers. The appointment of Emergency Managers, by both Republican Governor Rick Snyder and former Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, is an expression of the anti-democratic lengths that the ruling elite is willing to go in order to enforce austerity on the working class.

Emergency Managers have been appointed in four different Michigan cities: Flint, Benton Harbor, Ecorse, and Pontiac. Additionally, Emergency Managers have taken over school districts in Detroit and Highland Park. Emergency Managers are invested with dictatorial powers to remove elected officials, cut pay, sell public assets, and tear up union contracts.

In Detroit, a state-appointed Emergency Manager has decimated the public school system, closing scores of schools, while promoting the spread of charter schools. Meanwhile, the wages and benefits of teachers have been gutted.

Weatherspoon claims that the new charter system will be able to make a fresh start and provide a high level of education. The basic economic situation that led to the district's \$12 million burden, however, will remain.

Nearly half of all students in the Muskegon Heights school district live in poverty. The ballooning deficit was due in part to declining enrollment and a drop in per pupil funding. According to *Michigan Live*, enrollment in Muskegon Heights Public Schools dropped 22 percent between 2006 and 2009, while per pupil funding fell by an additional 9 percent, amounting to a total loss of \$3.6 million in revenues. Overall the tax base for Muskegon Heights Public Schools is only \$81,042 per pupil, or nearly half the county average of \$155,480.

Any new charter system would be faced with the bleak economic realities of the city and have even less income to work with as property tax would be diverted

from students to pay down the district's debt. The only room for a charter system to turn a profit is through the drastically increased exploitation of teachers and staff.

When Weatherspoon fired all teachers and staff in the district on May 16 he was attempting to enforce poverty wages and cuts to employment. In a long interview with the *Muskegon Chronicle's* editorial board, Weatherspoon described his vision for the district. In his plan a "substantial amount" of the students' education would come from online sources, including the open-source Khan academy.

Nationwide, charter schools have performed no better than standard public schools. The true motive in privatizing the district is to cut salaries and allow the private sector to doubly profit from the school system's crisis by, first, collecting interest on the debt, and then by diverting public education funds to private coffers. The promotion of charter schools is in line with the Obama administration's reactionary Race to the Top initiative.

It remains to be seen whether any company believes it can even turn a profit in managing the economically distressed school district. A final decision on the plan is expected by June 21. In what should serve as a warning to teachers, staff, parents, and students across the country, former interim superintendent for Muskegon Heights, Dave Sipka, told *Michigan Live* that entire districts run as academies could become a model for other financially struggling districts. "I think it's a new day in education in the state of Michigan. I think this is a historic move," Sipka said.



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