

Large turnout at meeting on attacks on public schools in Michigan

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On Monday, more than one hundred teachers, parents and administrators attended a community meeting at Rochester High School, in Rochester, Michigan about twenty miles north of Detroit. The meeting is one of many being held throughout the state to oppose the latest attack on public education being pressed by Governor Rick Snyder, the state legislature, and backed by the Obama administration.

Recently, letters of protest from dozens of school districts in Michigan have been sent to Governor Snyder and the Obama administration over their destructive anti-public education policies. The letters focus attention on several legislative initiatives that the Snyder administration is attempting to push through before the end of the year, as well as the Obama administration's Race to the Top Education Initiative.

The pending legislation includes State House Bill 6004 and Senate Bill 1358 that, if enacted, would greatly expand the scope and reach of the Education Achievement Authority, a statewide school district established a year ago by Governor Snyder and Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts. The EAA is currently headed by John Covington, who jumped from his position as CEO of the Kansas City, Missouri school district. The Snyder administration is paying Covington nearly half a million dollars a year in salary plus incentives.

Currently there are 15 Detroit schools governed by the EAA. The two pending bills would greatly expand the EAA's authority to seize under-utilized or unused buildings throughout the state, and reopen them as either EAA schools, charter schools or non-public entities.

Another pending bill, House Bill 5923, would allow the EAA to set up new forms of charter and on-line "schools", with selective enrollment that would siphon off public moneys directed toward community-governed public schools. A fourth Bill, SB 620, also known as the

"Parent Trigger" Bill allows for the lowest achieving schools to be converted into charter schools, while purportedly allowing parents and teachers to have input into the education reform "model".

Behind a guise of "parent empowerment", this bill would open the way to privatization, as for-profit middlemen would seize public schools to run them as they see fit. Such a policy is already well underway in Detroit as numerous schools have been taken over by a motley crew of hucksters, preachers and community "activists", the most notable being the seizure of Catherine Ferguson, a school that specialized in the education of teenage mothers in Detroit, by a for-profit entity.

The letter to the Obama administration was directed against his Race to the Top education initiative, which in reality is an intensification of the No Child Left Behind legislation enacted in 2001 under the Bush administration. Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, has pursued a blatant policy of vilifying teachers, and supporting the *en masse* firing of teachers, as was the case in Rhode Island two years ago, while promoting the unfettered spread of charter schools.

The signatories on the letter are protesting specifically against the EAA being declared a finalist in Obama's Race to the Top competition for federal money, and the prospect of tens of millions of dollars being awarded to a school district that has been in operation for less than a year.

There is an element of hysteria in the manner in which the Snyder administration is seeking to push through this legislation, as if to preempt a mass response from the masses of working people in Michigan, who are becoming increasingly politicized by the incessant attacks on their living conditions and basic democratic rights.

Monday's meeting was an indication of the growing ferment, even in communities considered to be affluent.

The meeting was chaired by interim Superintendent of the Rochester Public schools Tresa Zumsteg, who declared that “connecting schools to profit rather than communities will gut public education.” She referred to the insinuation of “corporate entities” into the process of educating children, and cited money-making outfits such as K-12 Inc., that is spending millions of dollars in advertising targeting primarily young children.

Vickie Markavitch, Superintendent of the Oakland County School District, echoed Zumsteg’s arguments. “Unbelievable things are happening in Lansing ... that are, in my opinion radical and dangerous.” Markavitch described “groups trying to get public money for the privatization of education. They are attempting to corporatize American public education.” Referring to these elements as “profiteers”, Markavitch explained that for the last 20 years their tactic has been to “denounce and then to defund public education. In order to justify defunding, they had to cast doubt ... their agenda, a for-profit raid on billions of dollars in public money.”

Markavitch made a muted criticism of the Obama administration for creating a false picture of recent data about eight grade math performance, that actually showed improvement in comparison to other countries, but made no mention of his Race to the Top education initiative. In closing, the speaker urged those in attendance to send online letters of protest to Governor Snyder and local politicians.

During the open-mic discussion, one speaker, evidently a supporter of Snyder’s policies, attacked the proceedings. He defended the drive for profit applied to education, citing the Skillman Foundation, one of several such repositories of vast fortunes that have thrust themselves into public education in order create an increasingly privatized class-based system. He also protested the fact that the meeting was not a panel discussion presenting “opposing viewpoints”.

Another speaker, an older GM retiree, replied to this speaker in no uncertain terms: “The United States has had public education for as long as this country’s been in existence. I have confidence in the teachers and administrators here, that they will fix the problem. I have no confidence in those bandits in Lansing.”

There was also a tendency in the discussion to simply blame the Republicans for the current attack on public education. This prompted a speaker, a retired Detroit teacher, who was distributing a statement for the *World Socialist Web Site*, to respond. He began by reminding those in attendance that the Bush administration’s No

Child Left Behind act of 2001 had received overwhelming support from Democratic Party-controlled Congress, and that the Obama administration has been intensifying these attacks. The speaker cited examples from California and Chicago, where Democratic Party politicians are spearheading the assault on teachers and the closings of schools. He explained that in California, the Democrats have a super-majority in both state houses, and a Democratic Governor.

The WSWS supporter characterized for-profit education companies that have sprung up over the last decade as undermining the “egalitarian and democratic component to public education”, denounced the drive for profit as “inimical to the education of children”, and stated that the Obama administration speaks for a “ruling elite within which there is no constituency for defending the right to an education for the vast majority of children in this country.”

The speaker closed by stating that as a socialist he was opposed to the letter-writing campaign. It was not a question of appealing to Democratic and Republican Party politicians, he said, but of mobilizing the working class—teachers, city and state workers, and the youth—in an independent political struggle to defend the social right to an education. These remarks received a warm response from the audience, and there was considerable applause. After the meeting most in attendance eagerly took the World Socialist Web Site statement, and a number of teachers and parents stopped to express support.

One teacher spoke at length about her own political transformation. “My disillusionment with capitalism is extreme,” she said. “I used to be a Republican, then a Democrat. Now I’m moving to the left. My home is underwater, and I’m locked into student loans. I have worked my butt off for twenty years in this profession. I’m getting close to retirement, but I’ll be leaving with a knife in my back. You don’t think I’m pissed off? Do I think capitalism is the way to go? Absolutely not!”



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