

# Behind the growth of D.C. charter schools

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Earlier this month, Washington D.C. Public School System Chancellor Kaya Henderson announced a plan to close 20 schools deemed under-enrolled in the nation's capital. This plan was followed by a series of recent community meetings, in which Henderson and other school board officials sought to elicit a meager amount of "public participation" from teachers and parents in order to give the closures the veneer of popular legitimacy.

The affected community members have justifiably reacted to the hearings with skepticism and scorn, stating that their grievances are bound to be ignored in any final decision coming from Henderson and her colleagues.

An examination of the class interests behind the distortions of the district administration reveals the real driving force behind these closures. As with all major political decisions in American society, the determination of the district to shutter these schools serves the interests of private profit.

This fact becomes clear upon considering the lack of any credible arguments for the closures. A recent column in the *Washington Post* provides a DCPS parent's point-by-point refutation of all of the official reasons Henderson and others have offered in order to justify their decision.

The research behind the closures chiefly consists of a single report provided by the Illinois Facilities Fund, an institution closely connected to the expansion of charter schools. The argument that school closures will save money is undermined by the \$40 million cost that was incurred when Henderson's predecessor, Michelle Rhee, carried out similar closings in 2008. In fact, many of the schools that were consolidated during that period are still lacking some of the resources they were promised.

Fundamentally, the closures are part of a relentless "education reform" agenda which aims at nothing less than the replacement of public education with for-profit ventures serving only the most well-to-do.

The DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB), established in 1995 as a part of the District of Columbia School Reform Act, is the central organization tasked with facilitating this transformation. With a board of

directors appointed by the mayor, and existing semi-autonomously alongside DCPS, this organization represents an official conduit from the private business sector to the public school system.

Brian W. Jones, the board chair, was general counsel for the US Education Department during the George W. Bush administration and has profited in the student loan industry as executive vice president of the College Loan Corporation. Jones also helped co-fund Latimer Education, Inc., a for-profit online education company aimed at providing post-secondary education to African-American students, and has served as a board member of the Alliance/Advocates for School Choice and the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

Jones' political leanings run decisively toward the right. In addition to working for the Bush administration, he has served as the president for the Center for New Black Leadership, a group which seeks to promote private-sector "solutions" to issues of racial justice and foster the growth of a new group of African-American business leaders.

John McKoy served as the former vice president of private defense contractor Lockheed Martin, and has extensive connections to the Democratic apparatus. McKoy was appointed by Democratic mayor Anthony Williams in 2003 to help lead the Anacostia Waterfront Corporation, charged with renovating waterfront communities along the Anacostia River in southeast D.C. The government-owned corporation was later shut down due to widespread community opposition and "transparency issues."

McKoy currently serves as a program director for the non-profit think-tank Fight for Children, an organization supporting collaborative efforts between government and private businesses to "secure quality education and healthcare for lower-income D.C. residents." Included in this think tank are representatives of private contracting firms and former district leaders, two of whom being former mayors—Adrian Fenty and Anthony Williams.

The inclusion of Fenty is telling. Prior to Kaya

Henderson's appointment as chancellor of public schools, she served as a deputy beneath ex-chancellor Michelle Rhee, who, serving with Fenty's approval, was responsible for massive attacks on public education, including the shutting of two dozen schools and the destruction of teacher contracts.

Most recently, Fenty has openly voiced his support for Rahm Emanuel's crackdown on Chicago school teachers and plans for widespread school closures. Williams appointed McKoy to his position in the Anacostia Waterfront Corporation. (See "DC public schools lead in reactionary education 'reforms'")

Emily Bloomfield formerly worked for Stand for Children, another "school choice" non-profit. During the recent Chicago teachers' strike, the organization routinely called local houses requesting that parents punch a button to demand that the strike come to a close. In at least 10 states, the group has fought for legislative initiatives making it easier to fire tenured teachers and introduce merit-based pay systems. Stand for Children receives substantial funding from the Walton family, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Bezos Family Foundation.

Sara Mead is a policy writer at Bellwether Education Partners, a start-up consulting agency which helps "performance-driven" educational institutions, organizations, and businesses advertise and promote their efforts to turn their policy agendas into reality. Bellwether has received endorsements from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Stand For Children, and other groups associated with charter schools and the privatization of education.

Don Soifer is the executive vice president and founding member of the Lexington Institute, a right-wing think-tank whose mission statement declares its objection to "the unnecessary intrusion of the federal government into the commerce and culture of the nation." The Institute has been described as "the defense agency's pay-to-play ad agency" because its publications favor increased military spending and the Institute, in turn, receives substantial backing from defense contractors.

Soifer himself has written on the dangers that "multiculturalism" in education pose to "Western values and institutions." A brief article in the *Washington Times* which he co-authored with another Institute member objects to the American education system's perceived emphasis on bilingual education and its "favorable" treatment of central Islamic religious concepts. The article closes by warning that if the education system fails to

replace this emphasis with forms of linguistic and cultural unification, then the country "may find itself in the kind of multicultural mess that exists in major European nations."

The inclusion of such figures into a body purported to direct education policy in the district highlights the growing big business interests which are being served by such a board, as well as the Democratic Party's own complicity in the process.

As if to demonstrate the existence of such a potential for corruption, an investigation by the *Washington Post* in 2008 discovered that Thomas A. Nida, the former chairman of the D.C. charter school board, had been responsible for procuring loans for charters through his position at United Bank. Nida then voted for their acceptance in his capacity as chairman for the PCSB. The *Post* found nearly \$200 million instances of such conflicts of interest within the charter system at the time.

Far from being an exception, this type of corruption represents the rule of such operations in which public money is placed at the behest of private business, whose "regulators" have more in common with themselves than they do with the public who is then made liable for their decisions.

In the coming year, several for-profit charters will come into operation in the D.C. school district. One is the virtual school K12, which will house up to 500 students. The other is Rocketship Education, which proposes to take as many as 5,000 students from the district.

K12 Inc is already under suspicion for its high levels of student turnover, as well as connections to the former Wall Street security embezzler Michael Milken. The inclusion of such outfits exposes the general character of the wrecking operation being undertaken within the D.C. public school system.

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