

Push to dismantle public education behind plan to close another 28 Detroit schools

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The following article was written by a retired Detroit public school teacher

According to plans obtained by the *Detroit News*, state and school district officials will close another 28 public schools in Detroit by 2016. The school district has already been ravaged by a decades-long campaign of school closings, job destruction, and the unfettered spread of charter schools.

The school closures will be accompanied by the elimination of an additional 1,688 teacher, administrative and support staff jobs and a reduction of expenditures by nearly \$200 million over the next five years. The *News* reported that state officials approved the plan last week.

Officials project another reduction in the student population by 13,000, leaving the school district with only 40,000, a little more than a quarter of the 150,000 students who attended DPS schools in 2000. According to Jeffrey Mirel, author of *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit 19 07-81*, by 2016, the city's public schools will have the lowest student enrollment in more than a century.

The drastic cuts are, as usual, being presented as an economic necessity, with the governor's emergency financial manager Roy Roberts, a former General Motors executive, pointing to exploding deficits and the high costs of maintaining allegedly too many schools for too few students.

Responding to the leaked report, Roberts told the *Detroit Free Press*, "Earlier I referenced a 'potentially' smaller portfolio of schools. I used the word potentially because no decisions have been made about school closures, and nothing is yet set in stone." Then Roberts continued, "However, the reality remains that if we lose students, the district will have no choice but continue to shrink."

Here, Roberts is presenting the self-fulfilling prophecy used by all those engaged in the dismantling of public education, not only in Detroit, but throughout the country. Years of devastating budget cuts, school closures and the expansion of charter schools have driven students out of the school district. The resulting drop in school enrollment is then used to close more schools, eliminate more students and drive up deficits, and this, in turn, is used to close more "under-utilized schools."

At the same time, 16 public schools have been removed from the DPS and assigned to an entity created by the governor called the Education Achievement Authority (EAA). Designed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder in close collaboration with Roberts, the new "public" school district for so-called failed schools, will strip teachers and school employees of job and wage protections and include large numbers of low-paid and inexperienced Teach For America recruits.

When these EAA schools, public schools in name only, are included with the large number of charter schools that are continuing to spring up in Detroit like mushrooms on a rotting log and the thousands of Detroit students scattered among nearby suburban schools districts, the coming school closings will all but eliminate public education in the city.

Roberts has publicly wrung his hands about a situation he has been instrumental in creating. He said: "We have been whittled down to nothing. But we are not putting together a plan to lose. We need to be in strategy mode. We need to get kids back in DPS."

Echoing Roberts is DPS' chief financial officer, Bill Aldrich, who declared that the intention of the Detroit public schools was to be "competitive." To be competitive, he said, "we have to be reasonably stable

and have a lean cost structure.”

This begs the question: competitive with whom? Is it the charter schools they have helped create and continue to support? Or is it with the suburban school districts, who are also cutting teachers and programs for students and face the spread of charters and entities like the EAA, which Snyder and the Michigan state legislature are seeking to expand into suburban school districts?

The language used by Roberts, Aldrich & Co.—“portfolio”, “market share”, “competition”—is typical of the corporate and political elite that is thoroughly hostile to the egalitarian and democratic principles of public education. They are oblivious to the social havoc caused by school closings, teacher and support staff layoffs and the dislocation of children. Roberts, who epitomizes this anti-social type, is as comfortable announcing the next round of school closures as he would be closing a parts plant, and with the same callous disregard for the lives of the workers affected.

While they claim there is no money for public education, General Motors made a record \$7.6 billion in 2011 and \$4 billion in the first three quarters of 2012, and there is a sales boom in million-dollar-plus homes for corporate executives in the region.

But this is not simply a Detroit phenomenon. Roberts is merely one of a number of operatives who are dismantling the components of public education. In Philadelphia, Superintendent William Hite is advancing a drastic plan for the shuttering of the entire district, and in Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel is making similar threats.

These measures have the complete support of the Obama administration and Education Secretary Arne Duncan. From the first days of his tenure in office, Obama has championed the spread of charter schools and the privatization of education, while attacking teachers as being responsible for the crisis in education in America.

Obama’s Race to the Top education initiative, far from signaling the end of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation enacted in 2001 during the Bush administration, has represented its intensification. In fact, Roberts’ EAA was slated to receive Race to the Top funds without the slightest indication that the new school district had been evaluated, let alone that it had

demonstrated success in improving the education of children.

For the Obama administration, the 2016 goal articulated by Roberts is the consummation of the assault on public education indicated three years ago by Arne Duncan, when he declared Detroit “ground zero” for the reactionary agenda of school “reform.”

In carrying out this attack, the opponents of public education are counting on the complicity of the American Federation of Teachers and its affiliate, the Detroit Federation of Teachers. DFT President Keith Johnson, commenting on Roberts’ proposal, said, “What really concerns me is the template has been established for the virtual and complete dismantling of a public school district in Detroit.”

But Johnson has been a willing partner in this attack, suppressing any resistance by teachers and other school employees and collaborating with Mayor David Bing and successive financial managers to impose layoffs, wage cuts and punitive “accountability” schemes on teachers. On a national scale, the AFT was one of the first unions to endorse Obama and, under the slogan of “school reform with us, not against us,” it has supported merit pay, the expansion of charter schools—including those run by the unions themselves—and other anti-teacher measures.

No doubt, Johnson maintains the hope of collecting dues from those teachers forced to remain in the substandard and dictatorially run EAA schools and perhaps even charter schools.

The destruction of public education in Detroit is far advanced. But there are many signs of popular anger over the continuing school closings in Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington DC and other cities. For those teachers, parents and students who are looking for a way to fight against these attacks, the first order of business is to break definitively from the Democratic Party and all those trade union and organizations that serve as a cover for the attack on public education.



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