

Snyder administration plot to privatize Michigan schools exposed

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Officials in Michigan Governor Rick Snyder's administration have been holding secret meetings with business leaders and right-wing opponents of public education to circumvent the state's constitutional ban on subsidizing private schools and open the way for a vast expansion of corporate-run schools.

Last Friday, the *Detroit News* revealed the existence of the 20-member body, which includes Snyder's chief information officer, David Behen; four employees of the Department of Technology, Management and Budget; and representatives of software companies and charter schools.

The group's focus was "expanding online learning opportunities using fewer teachers" and "providing students with a voucher-like 'Michigan Education Card' to pay for public school 'tuition' at 'value schools,'" according to documents acquired by the *News*.

The authors of the "value school" project are already in talks with Bay Mills Community College, which operates 43 charter schools around the state, about opening a so-called technology-centric charter school by August 2014. Records distributed to group members, the *News* said, "indicate they want to explore using fewer teachers and more instruction through long-distance video conferencing."

These cut-rate operations would cost \$5,000 per pupil, roughly \$2,000 less than the state minimum and half the state average for K-12 students. The balance of the state funding would go directly into the bank accounts of the private operators.

Executives from technology companies that would directly profit from the scheme were at the meetings. The companies represented were InfoReady Corp. of Ann Arbor, Vectorform LLC of Royal Oak, Billhighway Inc. of Troy, and the Huizenga Group of

Grand Rapids, whose owner, industrialist J.C. Huizenga, is the founder of charter school operator National Heritage Academies. InfoReady CEO Bhushan Kulkarni was among the top contributors to Snyder's campaign for governor.

Lansing attorney Richard McLellan, secretary of the board of directors of the right-wing think tank Mackinac Center, was asked to serve as the working group's treasurer, the *News* reported. McLellan is currently rewriting the state's school funding laws.

The "value" schools would "seek to maximize the roughly \$7,000 annual per-pupil funding regular schools get from taxpayers by applying 'concepts familiar in the private sector—getting higher value for less money,'" the *News* reported. "Each 'value school' student would receive a card "similar to the electronic benefits transfer used to distribute food stamps and cash assistance for the poor."

School vouchers—paid to parents to take their children out of public schools and enroll them in private or religious institutions—are illegal under Michigan law. Michigan voters overwhelmingly defeated constitutional amendments seeking to pave the way for vouchers in 1978 and 2000.

Voucher schemes, first promoted by free market guru Milton Friedman, were used by Southern segregationists to circumvent racial integration in the 1960s, the Chilean dictatorship in 1981, and religious opponents of the separation of church and state. They have been defeated in 24 out of 25 elections in 14 states since 1966.

Well aware of the popular hostility to school vouchers, the working group operated with conspiratorial methods. Meeting since December, primarily in the evenings and on Saturdays at private businesses, its members were told to communicate

through “alternative” private emails, rather than government emails, to avoid detection and a paper trail.

The months-long project was dubbed “skunk works,” a reference to secret government talks with defense contractors during World War II. The phrase is used in corporate America to denote secret projects unhampered by bureaucracy.

The conspiracy was exposed only after figures connected with the project expressed concern over its deeply anti-democratic character. This included former Michigan Teacher of the Year Paul Galbenski, an Oakland Schools business teacher, who said he quit after realizing “they were discussing a special kind of school being created outside of the Michigan public school system.”

“I thought we were beyond the Watergate secrecy, all kinds of things being done in a clandestine fashion,” William Mayes, executive director of the Michigan Association of School Administrators and a supporter of Snyder, told the *News*. The plan “is focused on lowering education’s price tag rather than on building a quality system for all students,” he added.

Republican Governor Snyder, a multimillionaire former venture capitalist, has already slashed hundreds of millions of dollars from public education to finance corporate tax cuts. Following last week’s revelations he tried to distance himself from the secret group, while making it clear that the dismantling of public education would continue in one form or another.

After telling a conference that the public school system was broken and not meeting the needs of private business, Snyder commented on the secret group, telling reporters, “I don’t want people to discourage people from being innovative and creative. You never want an environment where you say ‘Don’t come up with any ideas, only do what the governor says.’”

Dictatorial methods are being employed to overcome deep popular opposition to the looting of society by the banks and big business. With the collaboration of Democratic State Treasurer Andy Dillon, Snyder has imposed an emergency manager on Detroit to run roughshod over local and state laws prohibiting the sell-off of public assets, the abrogation of labor agreements and the gutting of city workers’ wages, benefits and pensions. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr is tasked with extracting every penny of public funding available to pay off the wealthy bondholders who hold Detroit’s

debt and related derivative contracts.

Several state Democrats have complained about Snyder’s methods, but they are no less committed to dismantling public education and tailoring it to the needs of big business. This is the official policy of the Obama administration, which has overseen the closing of an estimated 4,000 public schools and the destruction of more than 300,000 teachers’ jobs, while pursuing a reactionary school “reform” agenda of expanding charter schools.

For their part, the teachers’ unions have merely complained that Snyder is not including them in his anti-public education agenda. In a statement following the exposure of the governor’s conspiracy, Michigan Education Association President Steve Cook lamented, “Remarkably, no educators are part of the secret workgroup.”

The Snyder administration conspiracy and the bankers’ dictatorship in Detroit demonstrate the incompatibility of basic democratic rights—including the right to public education—with an economic and political system that subordinates all social questions to the enrichment of the wealthy few.



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