

Obama education secretary, Michigan governor promote school “reform”

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President Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan joined Michigan’s Republican Governor Rick Snyder on Monday to promote the attack on teachers and public education being carried out under the guise of school “reform.”

In appearances at public schools in Detroit and nearby Ypsilanti, Duncan praised Snyder—a former venture capitalist and multi-millionaire technology executive—for his innovative thinking and commitment “to invest not in the status quo but in the vision of reform.”

The decision of the White House to send Duncan on a photo-op tour with Snyder was aimed at demonstrating bipartisan unity when it comes to dismantling public education and funneling public assets to private corporations.

Just last month, the *Detroit News* revealed a secret plot by top Snyder officials, right-wing think tank operatives and politically connected technology executives to circumvent the state’s ban on school vouchers and channel public money to privately operated schools. Under the scheme, technology firms—including those which donated to the governor’s election—would pocket public money by operating cut-rate “value schools” that replaced teachers with long distance video conferencing. (See, “Snyder administration plot to privatize Michigan schools exposed”)

In an answer to this reporter’s question about the conspiracy at a press conference following their appearance in Detroit, Duncan, looking visibly upset, claimed not to have “followed the story closely.” He said he had never supported vouchers but “we are not going to agree on every issue. I love my wife dearly, but my wife and I don’t agree on everything.”

For his part, the governor continued his claim the

secret cabal was simply a “group of individuals meeting on their own.” He said he had asked them to stop meeting, but quickly added that he did not want to “discourage people from innovating,” and had instructed state board of education chief Mike Flanagan to pursue efforts in improving “technology.”

Since taking office, the Obama administration has overseen the destruction of more than 300,000 teaching positions and the closure of 4,000 public schools. The White House has used the Race to the Top program to induce cash-strapped school districts to expand the use of standardized tests to fire teachers, close so-called underperforming schools and increase the number of charter schools.

In 2009, Duncan called Detroit “ground zero” for the president’s education agenda, adding that in a few years, it could “leap frog” New Orleans, which at the time led the nation in percentage of children (three quarters) in charter schools. With Snyder on his side Monday, Duncan praised the “progress” of Detroit.

Since 2009, the Detroit Public Schools, which has been under the control of an emergency manager appointed by Snyder’s Democratic predecessor, has been in the process of closing two-thirds of its public schools, including 28 more by 2016, while slashing the wages, benefits and jobs of thousands of teachers. With 41 percent of children in charter schools, Detroit trails only New Orleans, while Michigan leads the nation in the percentage of charter schools run by for-profit companies—80 percent, compared to 35 percent nationally.

In his visit Monday, Duncan chose to “shine the spotlight of success” on another one of the governor’s innovations, the setting up an independent entity called the Education Achievement Authority of Michigan (EAA), which last year took over 15 so-called

underperforming schools in Detroit.

Teachers and school employees in the EAA district were stripped of job and wage protections, and the schools have been staffed with large numbers of low-paid and inexperienced Teach For America recruits.

Duncan and Snyder held a stage-managed town hall meeting at Brenda Scott Academy of Theater Arts in northeast Detroit, one of the EAA schools. With them were EAA Chancellor John Covington and Flanagan.

Duncan used well-worn rhetoric about “adults putting aside our differences and focusing on what is best for our children,” a euphemism for silencing opposition from teachers and others to the Obama’s administration’s policy of “doing what is best” for corporate America. It was “mind-boggling,” he said later in a press conference, “that anyone would want to see any type of schools fail,” suggesting that anyone who exposed the real motives behind the privatization of public schools was really against “the children.”

Duncan said there had been a few “bumps in the road” for the generally successful EAA schools. Earlier in the day, he had been handed a letter from Democratic Michigan State Senator Bert Johnson, who, while insisting that he was a supporter of “school reform,” asked Duncan and Obama “to seriously consider the ramifications of giving the appearance of tacitly supporting this failed experiment” of the EAA schools.

Johnson accused EAA officials of using “flawed results” from computer-based math and English exams to claim academic progress, taking a \$14 million in cash and loans from the deeply indebted Detroit Public Schools and employing inexperienced and low-paid teachers who quickly quit their jobs.

Finally, Johnson noted that the EAA officials had channeled large amounts of money into no-bid contracts, including \$300,000 to a company associated with a former member of the EAA board, and that this was all overseen by highly paid officials. These included Chancellor John Covington, who left his post as superintendent of the Kansas City Public Schools just a few weeks before the state of Missouri revoked that district’s state accreditation.

In their remarks, Duncan and Snyder outlined at reactionary vision of turning public school buildings into “service centers,” essentially run by private businesses. There were one hundred thousand school

buildings in the US, Duncan said, with classrooms, computer labs, gyms and in some cases, swimming pools. These should be opened 12-14 hours a day, he said. Instead of building new facilities, private operators like the Boys & Girls Club and the YMCA should be given control of the school buildings in the afternoon and evenings, while other, presumably private companies could “co-locate services” in school buildings.

Snyder added that auto parts companies like Lear Seating had adopted Detroit elementary schools, and that federal, state and local government were “service providers” that had to provide the best product to their “customers.” His plans included bringing private health care providers into the schools and running programs out of the schools for the “structurally unemployed” to get low paying jobs.

Duncan also noted that over the next few years one-third of the current teachers were set to retire, declaring this a great opportunity to restructure public education—i.e., by driving out the higher-paid teachers who have opposed privatization.

After leaving Detroit, Snyder and Duncan traveled to the Ypsilanti, where 350 teachers were given their pink slips last month and forced to reapply for far fewer jobs under the terms of school “reform.”



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