

Collier speaks with Detroiters opposing high school privatization plan

Our team of reporters
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D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for Detroit mayor spoke to protestors from Detroit's Northwestern High School Alumni Association on Saturday. They were opposing Detroit Public Schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts's plan to turn the 100-year-old public high school into a "self-governing school" called the Detroit Collegiate Preparatory Academy at Northwestern (DCPA).

DCPA was originally supposed to take over space at Northwestern High School for only two years until officials found a more suitable location. Now the DPS emergency manager has decided to replace the former public school with what is essentially a privately run charter school.

Celebrating 100 years of teaching at the start of the 2014 academic year, Northwestern has been home to many accomplished figures, including Norman Whitfield, a songwriter and producer who cofounded Motown Records, and Henry Carr, a two-time Olympic gold medal sprinter.

Roy Roberts, a former executive at General Motors and director of a private equity firm, wields dictatorial powers granted by the state legislature and authorized by Governor Rick Snyder to void labor agreements and impose drastic cuts.

Last year, Roberts said Northwestern would be one of the 10 public high schools he would turn into a self-governing school. These schools will be run along business lines, with leading figures from area corporations taking a direct role in hiring and shaping the curriculum. Members appointed to the councils running the school will be chosen by Roberts and administered by the Detroit Public Schools Office of Charter Schools.

The governing council will include Kevin L. Bell from Chrysler Group LLC, Penny Bailer of City Year

Detroit (a corporate-backed promoter of "social entrepreneurship" in the schools) and Gail Spencer from the American Federation of Teachers Michigan. The latter is particularly significant since the AFT and its Detroit affiliate have been crucial partners in the attack on public education in Detroit, which is now third in the nation—at 37 percent—in the portion of students attending charter schools.

Roberts's so-called school reforms include the closing down of McKenzie, Northern, Chadsey, Kettering and Southwestern high schools and transferring 15 schools into the so-called Education Achievement Schools district. Teachers dumped into the EAS have had their wages and benefits slashed and lost their pensions. Out of the 600 teaching positions that were available, inexperienced and low-qualified teachers, many from Teach for America, filled 200 positions.

D'Artagnan Collier joined the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, in 1984, when he was a 16-year-old student in Detroit's Osborn High School. He explained the correlation between what is happening at Northwestern and Detroit in general with the Obama administration's attacks on public education across the nation. "Obama has overseen the shutdown of more than 4,000 schools and the destruction of 300,000 teachers' jobs. This is an assault on public education and the only way forward is to break with both big-business parties and fight for socialism."

Anita, a physician and medical director, detailed how draconian cuts have impacted the high school. "We had a school clinic, a strong music program, kids would come all over to visit the planetarium—and they cut all of it.

"We raised \$100,000 for brand new band uniforms

for the students through the Alumni Association, and now they won't be able to wear it because the school is changing colors."

When asked about the support the protestors have received from students, parents, and others, Anita responded, "We are trying to do this the right way, we have a petition and are peacefully protesting. The school lets the students out the back door so they won't see us. However, we have the support of all the parents and the students."

Jessie, one of the protestors who has worked for the city for 30 years, expressed her concerns: "In the fall, the emergency manager will take over this school and it will lose all of its tradition, the name along with the mascot and the colors will be changed. Northwestern will no longer be representing red and grey."

One of the issues raised among the protestors is that DPCA is an application school. For the first two years, current students will be covered under the grandfather clause, but will still need to be required to fill out an application. Because it is an application school, after two years it can legally deny students from attending, forcing students to attend schools farther away.

The protestors also had three letters written by students and parents expressing alarm over the new school. As one letter questioned about the application process, "Once NWHS becomes an application school many of our children will not be accepted into it after the grandfather period. Where will they go then?"

Another letter expressed similar concerns: "The school that welcomed immigrants, southerners and racial diversity helped to make Detroit [an] economic engine... It's loving environment and culture is helping to uplift the current residents of this neighborhood with its open door policy. All this will be lost when you terminate 'my school of choice.'"



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