

After years of privatization, Detroit charter school enrollment tops public schools

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The State of Michigan has been at the forefront of attacks on public education, implementing policies which have repeatedly sought to test the waters nationally for growing privatization and direct corporate control of schools.

Long before Republican Governor Rick Snyder used the state's emergency manager law to throw Detroit into bankruptcy—and loot public pensions and city assets, like the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts—this anti-democratic measure was first used to restructure Detroit schools.

The regressive overhauling of public education in the interests of a profit driven class-based system has both foreshadowed and now complements processes set into motion with the bankruptcy of Detroit.

Michigan's first emergency manager for a school district was named in 2009 by Governor Jennifer Granholm to take control of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). Robert Bobb, who was simultaneously being paid by both DPS and the Kellogg and Broad Foundations (well-known corporate advocates of privatization), began closing 29 schools in just his first year alone. As of this date, more than 100 DPS schools have been closed.

The school closures were closely coordinated with plans by Mayor David Bing and major corporate interests to “downsize” the city by cutting off essential services to areas deemed too poor or under-populated for private investment. The shutdown of schools—which serve as the center of community life—was used to drive remaining residents out of these neighborhoods and divert students and public resources to for-profit charter schools.

The same corporate bedfellows, financial elites, and politicians are wreaking havoc on schools, where they are seeking to end the notion of the democratic right to

free and equal educational access for all citizens.

In 2011, Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan called DPS “ground zero” for the administration's pro-business school “reform” agenda of scape-goating teachers, shutting down public schools and boosting charter enrollment. Comparing Detroit to New Orleans—where the entire district was essentially privatized following Hurricane Katrina in 2005—Duncan said, “We don't need to wait for a hurricane before we can reform schools.”

According to a recent report in the *Detroit News* enrollment of charter school students in Detroit now surpasses that of those attending traditional public schools. With 51,083 Detroit children enrolled in charters, 51 percent of the district's students are no longer in traditional public schools. Only New Orleans, with 79 percent, has a higher percentage of students attending charters.

In 1996, there were only five charter schools in the state, but under the impact of the right-wing Mackinac Public Policy Center, Bush's No Child Left Behind and the Obama administration's Race To The Top, the number of charter schools has exploded. Since taking office in 2009, the number of students enrolled in charters throughout the US has doubled under Obama, who has overseen the destruction of 330,000 public education jobs and the closure of more than 4,000 public schools.

In 2011, the Michigan state legislature removed the legal cap of the number of charters. Today over 120,000 students in Michigan attend 276 charter schools in the state. Five Michigan cities are among the top 20 urban centers with the largest charter school populations in the nation. This includes Detroit #2, Flint #4 (33 percent attending charters), Grand Rapids #9 (23 percent), Lansing #19 (13 percent) and Traverse

City #20 (12 percent).

Michigan charter schools, more so than in any other state of the nation, are run for profit, with for-profit Education Management Organizations (EMOs) in charge of 79 percent of the Michigan charter schools. Michigan now has 33 for-profit EMOs operating one or more public schools, ahead of the 27 companies running schools in Arizona and 16 in Florida. Teachers at charter schools are employed “at will”, and subject to arbitrary firing and disciplinary measures. Very few charter school teachers have pension plans and most cite pay and working conditions substantially below their public school counterparts.

The expansion of charter schools has coincided with a savage attack on public school employees, as the Detroit Federation of Teachers collaborated with subsequent emergency managers to impose more standardized tests, to discipline and fire teachers and slash their wages and benefits in the name of school “reform” and “accountability.”

Michigan and Massachusetts were among the first states to establish public school systems in the 19th century. School reformers of that period rejected the idea that working class children should be relegated to pauper schools and insisted that high quality education for all was central for a functioning democracy. As a result of the mass struggles of workers, Detroit schools remained among the best funded in the nation as late as the 1970s.

Today, school “reform” has been turned into its opposite, with politicians from both big business parties determined to create a class-based system, where the majority of working class students are once again condemned to pauper schools.

After decades of systematic state budget cuts to education, struggling public schools are finding themselves now in a desperate competition for students with often well-marketed charter operations. Further, not only do the public schools have to compete against corporate interests running charter schools, but Michigan has also pioneered the concept of a statewide “turn-around” district for so-called failing schools, another effort at undermining traditional public education.

In 2012, Governor Rick Snyder, working with the then Detroit schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts—a former General Motors executive who

replaced Robert Bobb—established the Education Achievement Authority or EAA by hiving off 15 schools from the DPS to form this new district.

It was handed corporate backing and millions of dollars of funding from the cash-strapped Detroit Public Schools, courtesy of the emergency manager. Additionally the governor provided money through a slush fund, an ostensibly non-profit organization called the Michigan Educational Excellence Foundation. The EAA now is responsible for about 7 percent of the city’s students.

This signature policy initiative by the Republican governor was enthusiastically embraced by the Obama administration. In July, Education Secretary Arne Duncan traveled to Detroit and called the EAA “the future” of education. The district mirrors the labor policies of the charter schools, specifically stripping teachers and education workers of seniority rights and wage protections as well as other gains won over decades.

Now with more than a year under the EAA’s belt, there is evidence that this education fraud has been a resounding failure. Parents are “voting with their feet”. Over 25 percent of the EAA student population, more than 2,000, have transferred out. Additionally, the dean of College of Education at Eastern Michigan, a partner with the Snyder Administration’s EAA experiment, has resigned from the board overseeing the district, and there is mounting pressure for the school to disassociate itself from the EAA.

Despite its abysmal record, Michigan’s superintendent of education Mike Flanagan has proposed expanding the EAA starting as early as January 2014. His proposal, one that would continue the process of dismantling public school districts in other parts of the state, House Bill 4369, has narrowly passed in the state Senate. State representatives tabled a final vote until after the holiday recess.



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