

Obama's corporate education model

# What is Michigan's Education Achievement Authority?

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Under the guise of assisting low-achieving schools in Detroit, the State of Michigan has established an “independent” educational district, the Education Achievement Authority (EAA) in the 2012-13 school year. Legislation is pending imminently to codify it into state law and expand it statewide.

Schools with the lowest five percent of test scores have been incorporated into the experimental district, under a state-centralized model that reports to its own corporate-based “board of education” appointed by the Governor.

The EAA model is based on individual computer-based learning and employs teachers merely as “facilitators.” The schools are exempt from many public school regulations and are notorious for ignoring the requirements of special education students. Lower-paid and undertrained teachers are forced to work without books, supplies or even adequate numbers of working computers.

Far from being designed to help children, the EAA is a Trojan horse for profit interests and a national model for the privatization of education. With most of the EAA students drawn from districts in deep poverty, the experiment preys on the most disadvantaged.

The Obama administration has enthusiastically promoted the EAA as “the future.” After declaring Detroit “ground zero” in education reform in 2009, US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the EAA “the right type of work.” He subsequently toured an EAA classroom and gave it his unqualified endorsement.

Billed as offering “individual learning programs,” the EAA schools subject students almost totally to a computer training system that is inept, unregulated and incomplete, but cheap to operate. Teachers are relegated to uploading course materials and remotely monitoring progress. The core program is Buzz, software designed for the EAA by Agilix in 2012. Classes are not provided books. One teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site* that she was disciplined for copying written materials, at her own expense, and distributing it to students.

“The Buzz interface is extremely confusing for teenagers,” another teacher told the *eclectablog*. “Students constantly complain, but teachers are required to use it. Many have started

to feel that the district’s private partner, Agilix, is trying to sell the product to other districts, and that a profit-motive has crept into everything... hence why teachers are so stringently required to use Buzz. Dr. Esselman [EAA Chief Officer Accountability, Equity and Innovation] brings visitors into the school and is always encouraging them to look at Buzz.” According to introductory material on Vimeo, the EAA appears to be their only client and, on the basis of the EAA’s promotion, Agilix was given an audience at the Obama White House.

“As far as BUZZ goes, the software from Agilix, it does not work,” commented another teacher cited on *eclectablog*. Teachers who used free websites to back-up their lessons and provide a place for students to go, she said, were told “we would be written up if we continued to use our own classroom website.”

As a result of many factors, students have left the EAA in droves—as of last December, nearly 25 percent of EAA students had returned to Detroit Public Schools (DPS). But the dramatic drop for both the direct-run EAA schools and their three supervised charter operations only prompted the state’s push for a more rapid expansion.

How is the EAA a business model?

- As with the city of Detroit, the pretext for the takeover was a financial emergency. In other words, make the hardest-hit victims of capitalism into the poster children for justifying “reform” by well-heeled corporations. The EAA is a *de facto* class-based system of education for the most impoverished students, those selected as the “lowest-performing”.

- The EAA is a conduit for charterization of public schools. Schools are placed into the EAA, where they are either immediately turned into charters or run by the EAA board for five years. At that time, it is assumed they will emerge as independent charters and not return to the public school system.

- Agilix is just one of many businesses involved. The EAA vends out every possible service to for-profit companies, including human resources, security, food service, custodial and grounds keeping. In an impoverished district where the special education numbers are disproportionately high, even this aspect of schooling is outsourced. That beneficiary is

Futures Education/Futures Healthcore LLC which specializes, according to its website, in cost containment. All evaluations, social workers, speech pathologists and behavioral interventionists are also contracted through this agency.

- All EAA schools are removed from elected local school boards and run by the EAA board of appointed businessmen including the first Secretary of the Board, Mike Duggan, now mayor of Detroit, Mike Morris, chairman and CEO of American Electric Power, previously CEO of Consumers Energy, Mark A. Murray, president of the mega-retailer Grand Rapids-based Meijer, and Dr. William F. Pickard, CEO of VITEC and CEO of Global Automotive Alliance and partner in the MGM Casino.

- EAA teachers have no pensions, do not retain DPS rights such as seniority and are at-will employees. With approximately one-quarter of teachers from the Teach For America program (placed into the urban setting with five weeks of training) and another quarter first-year recruits, there is no support and mentorship for undertrained professionals.

- The EAA was designed by business foundations and corporate sponsors, first among them being the Broad Foundation (\$10 million gift). Governor Snyder's Michigan Education Excellence Foundation has raised an additional \$60 million including: Michael Bloomberg's Philanthropies (\$10 million) Skilling (\$2 million), Kresge (\$2.5 million), DTE (\$1 million) Gates, Douglas & Maria DeVos (\$1 million) General Motors (\$500,000), and Kellogg (\$1 million). Other millionaires and billionaires have chipped in, salivating at the possibilities of opening K-12 education to the business model, including Roger Penske, Mike Ilitch, Steve and Cindy Van Andel and Doug DeVos.

Broad also secured the appointment of protégé John Covington, a graduate of his Broad Superintendent Academy, as the chancellor of the EAA (with a \$175,000 signing bonus and a \$225,000 salary his first year escalating to an astounding \$425,000 in subsequent years) despite the fact that his prior employer, the Kansas City school district, had been stripped of its accreditation as result of actions taken during his watch. Having "right-sized" the Kansas City school district and closed half of the city's schools, test scores in that city fell dramatically to their lowest ever level.

The role of the AFT and the Democrats

While Republican Governor Rick Snyder, working with the then Detroit schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts—a former General Motors executive—put the final elements together, hiving off 15 schools from the DPS and placing them under EAA, the groundwork was laid much earlier. In fact, the EAA is a brainchild of the Democrats and the Obama Administration.

In December 2009, Democratic Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, working with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), created the State School Reform/Redesign District (SSRRD) to represent the lowest-performing bottom five

percent of schools in Detroit. This was executed specifically in line with applications for Race To The Top funding by the Obama administration.

At the time the AFT proudly noted its role in creating the "failing district," saying the union had worked "fast and furiously" to enact legislation "allowing more high performing charter schools; enable the state to take control of academically failing schools; enable persons interested in teaching to get an interim teaching certificate; basing a portion of teacher evaluations on student growth; and using teacher effectiveness to determine teacher retention."

Earlier in the year, Granholm named Robert Bobb, the first statewide emergency manager to run the Detroit public schools. Bobb proceeded to shut down 60 DPS schools stating, "I don't have to respond to a school board. That means we can move faster." The EM was also a graduate of the Broad Superintendent Academy, and received paychecks simultaneously from the district, the Broad and the Kellogg Foundations.

Then in 2011, Republican Governor Rick Snyder completed the cycle by awarding the contract to oversee lowest-performing schools, the SSRRD, to the EAA. In 2012, the EAA was named the only Michigan finalist in Obama's RTTT competition. Duncan then came to Detroit in 2013, visiting one classroom and enthusiastically promoting the EAA as "the future" in a glowing article in *Scientific American*.

In other words, the EAA was created by both Democrats and Republicans—from Obama to Snyder—emergency managers and the unions, the very same players responsible for placing the Motor City under the dictat of the Jones Day-banker-government cabal—and the results are the same: transfer of public wealth into private hands, destruction of democratic rights, and an assault on pensions.



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