

# Corruption revelations shake Michigan education authority

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14 May 2014

A *Detroit News* report revealed this week that Education Achievement Authority (EAA) Chancellor John Covington used credit cards issued to him by the EAA for personal expenses. Nearly \$240,000 has been charged to two credit cards, with \$178,000 being spent on hotel and airfare to 36 cities from April 2012 to February 2014, while another \$10,000 was spent on gas for Covington's chauffeured car, \$25,000 was spent on IKEA furniture and a combined \$8,000 was spent at Amazon.com, Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Meijer, Home Depot and Lowe's. The *News* used the Freedom of Information Act to acquire the documents.

The EAA was set up in June 2011 by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder under the pretense of assisting low-achieving Detroit schools. Covington was appointed chancellor shortly afterward. These latest revelations come shortly before a vote is to take place in the state Senate on legislation to expand the EAA. A proposal in the legislature would allow the placement of schools in the bottom 5 percent of academic achievement into a school district run by the state. The House passed legislation in March which gives low-performing districts the option to be taken over by the EAA or by intermediate districts. The latter option would undoubtedly overload underfunded school districts providing the impetus for further cuts and privatizations.

Criticism of the EAA has been mounting over the last two years from educators and parents. Since the revelations were made public yesterday, Democratic Party officials have been vocal in their criticism. Democratic State Representative Ellen Cogen Lipton has been conducting her own investigation of the EAA, also using documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. She told one interviewer, "what I began learning turns your blood cold. I think they are

breaking the law."

An EAA spokesperson claimed that even though the credit cards were in Covington's name, they were used by staff members and don't include personal expenses.

The revelations regarding Covington, far from being an aberration, provide an insight into the outlook of those, like Covington, who seek to exploit the miserable condition of the public education system to further their own mercenary aspirations. The actual purpose of the EAA is to privatize primary and secondary education. Covington was initially offered \$225,000 to take the job of EAA Chancellor, with a \$175,000 signing bonus to boot, but even this lavish salary was increased to \$425,000 in short order. He was appointed to this position despite the fact that the Kansas City school district, his former employer, saw half of its schools shut down and its test scores drop precipitously under his watch.

While some Democrats are using the scandal to make political hay, the EAA is itself an outcrop of legislation initiated under Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm. In 2009, Granholm, with the assistance of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), created the State School Reform/Redesign District (SSRRD) to represent the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools in Detroit. Robert Bobb was appointed emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools that same year, and since then a string of emergency managers have closed over 100 Detroit Public Schools—further facilitating the process of school charterization.

In 2011, under Snyder, the contract to oversee the schools in the SSRRD was awarded to the EAA. Then, in 2012, the EAA was named the only Michigan finalist in Obama's Race to the Top competition.

Additionally, the Obama administration has thrown its full backing behind the privatization of public

schools and the attacks on teachers. Last May, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan went on a public campaign with Governor Snyder to promote “education reform,” specifically choosing to “shine the spotlight of success” on the EAA. Duncan referred to Detroit as “ground zero” for Obama’s education agenda, stating that in a few years Detroit could surpass New Orleans, which currently leads the nation in percentage of children—79 percent—in charter schools. Detroit is currently second in the nation, with 51 percent of children attending charter schools.

The unions, operating as an appendage of the Democratic party, have not raised a finger to oppose the privatization of public schools or the attacks on teachers. The primary concern of the union bureaucracy is to secure a place for itself in order to maintain its privileges. In line with this, the unions have participated in the process of privatization. During Granholm’s term the AFT proudly noted its role in creating the “failing district”—the SSRRD—saying the union had worked “fast and furiously” to enact legislation “allowing more high performing charter schools.”

Governor Rick Snyder has also recently appointed Joyce Hayes Giles to chair the EAA board. Giles, a former DTE executive, came up with the idea of combining gas and electric charges onto one bill. This move increased the profits of the corporation notorious for utility shutoffs in Detroit by ensuring that if a customer could not pay one bill then both utilities would be shut off. Giles is also on the board of directors for Health Alliance Plan of Michigan, Habitat for Humanity Detroit and was once a member of the Detroit Public Schools Board of Education.



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