

Detroit kindergartens “experiment” with 100-student class sizes

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Two articles appeared last week on kindergartens that reveal the immense social chasm in America. A Detroit news report gave a snapshot of the state of affairs in Detroit, epitomizing the appalling destruction of public education for the working class. The second report in the New York Times dwelt on the angst of the private school application process for the youngsters of Wall Street’s elite, revealing an educational world apart.

In Detroit, under the control of an emergency manager both in the city and school district, bankruptcy is being used to drastically reduce the living standards of the working class population, including the caliber of education for its youth.

The city’s “failing schools” district, the Educational Achievement Authority (EAA), has launched a new concept, a “Kindergarten Hub” at the Brenda Scott Academy of Theater Arts. The eastside school, located in one of Detroit’s high poverty areas, has elected to combine all kindergartners together, cramming 100 five-year-olds into one class.

The “Kindergarten Hub” is held in the school’s former library and is supervised by three teachers: one first-year teacher, one second-year teacher and a “master teacher”, aged 30, supplemented by one para-professional for two hours a day. The group of students apparently also includes special education children.

These very young children are having their first school experience amidst an unheard of 33-to-1 student-to-teacher environment. The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommends a teacher-student ratio between 1:10 to 1:12, less than one third the EAA numbers. Small class size is incontestably recognized as critical in learning and child development; they have been proven to result in greater social skills as well as higher IQ and test scores.

Those chosen for this EAA “experiment” live in Detroit’s eastside, devastated by decades of plant closures, where unemployment tripled between 2000 and 2010. The most recent literacy study in Detroit reveals a staggering 47% of

the adult population is functionally illiterate. The school population at Brenda Scott Academy is considered “highly transient,” with 73% of pupils qualifying for free or reduced lunch, the standard benchmark of poverty.

In other words, the most at-risk and vulnerable children are being subjected to a thin-gruel and dehumanizing “education” on the cheap. One indication was given by a Detroit Free Press reporter who attended a class in May where 70 students “sat on a rug to watch a teacher demonstrate how to cut out a paper watering can from an outline”.

The article went on to quote an EAA official claiming, “Through testing and the students’ work on laptops, teachers say they can keep close tabs on their progress.”

This can only be described as crude warehousing of children. How can teachers even attempt to nurture these young minds without individualized attention? What about physical activity and the need for play?

Mandatory use of technology for the very young is barely more than “electronic babysitting” and, together with standardized testing of kindergartners, constitutes, in many educators’ opinions, outright child abuse. Above all, it is indicative of the ever-widening class gulf in education in America.

Detroit’s Education Achievement Authority was opened as a low-cost school model, based on “individualized learning”, in other words, substituting computers for teachers, and designed to opening the door to complete privatization. Similar mass classes are utilized in other EAA schools with “hubs” as well, just none for children so young.

The EAA was implemented by the combined efforts of Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and Republican Rick Snyder with the critical assistance of the American Federation of Teachers. One of its innovations is its control structure; it is run by a board of local businessmen rather than a local school board. Among those originally named were the present mayor Mike Duggan. The EAA is financed by pro-privatization foundations including Broad, Ford, DTE and Kresge, wealthy billionaires such as the deVos

family, and state foundation funds.

When it was launched in the 2012-13 school year, it was warmly proclaimed as “the future” by the Obama administration and named a Race to the Top finalist. Since that time, the district has been plagued by teacher turnover, student dropout, financial scandals and exposures of wholesale indifference to students. Special needs students have routinely been denied the assistance legally mandated by their Individual Education Programs, according to reports and outraged parents.

Remarking on the volume of the tumult around her at the Brenda Scott Academy, Denise Smith, of Excellent Schools Detroit, noted that the special education kindergartners should probably have a special area. “Hanging curtains from the ceiling and rearranging furniture could help cut down the noise”, she remarked to the Detroit Free Press.

Former EAA Chancellor John Covington, whose four-year contract was worth \$1.5 million, resigned last spring in the wake of EAA scandals. He has been now been replaced by Veronica Conforme, who formerly worked for David Coleman, the architect of Common Core. As interim chancellor, Conforme will make \$325,000 annually.

Trinity School

It is an entirely different state of affairs at Manhattan’s Trinity School. Clearly their clientele, which no doubt include some of the bankers and hedge fund managers overseeing the deindustrialization of the United States and plunging Detroit into bankruptcy, consider the EAA “experiment” for “other people’s children”.

Last week, Trinity’s kindergarten was featured in a New York Times report, which provides a slice of life in the Upper West Side. “The frenzy over getting children into elite New York preschools is well documented,” states the account. “Parents sweat, barter and bribe to get their 4-year-olds into prestigious early education programs.”

Getting into a premier prekindergarten program means “an early leg up in a nearly 14-year battle to gain admission to the country’s most competitive colleges” the Times explains, citing excellent student-teacher ratios (6:1 at Trinity), learning specialists and art programs with “great music and theater”.

This is not to mention other amenities. The Trinity School has three theaters, six art studios, two tennis courts, a pool and a diving pool. Poly Prep Country Day School has a \$2 million learning center with six full-time employees offering one-on-one help with subjects including note-taking and test-

taking.

One parent notes the \$40,000 costs in a previous report, “People don’t want to put a price tag on their children’s future, so they are willing to pay more than many of them can afford.”

Administrators say such schools are struggling with “diversity” (by that, they mean students whose parents were not alums or who do not have siblings already enrolled). As the Times reported earlier, “One of the lucky 17 who got into Trinity’s kindergarten class” and will be apparently providing this urgently needed “diversity”, will be the daughter of Rajeev Bhaman, a stock portfolio manager, and Gala Prabhu, a management consultant. The couple made application to nine kindergartens in a process Mr. Bhaman described as “my full-time job for four months”.

Apparently only 2.4 percent of children from families with no previous connection to Trinity are typically admitted, a rate substantially below that of Harvard. “But,” the Times concluded, “far from being deterred by the sticker prices, more families seem to be hiring consultants — at an additional cost — in hopes of getting a leg up.”

Forbes rates Trinity as the best prep school in the US where “the name of your high school can open doors for life.” The profile concludes, ‘Prep schools are organized to ensure elite college placement—that’s the whole idea,’ says Mitchell L. Stevens, associate professor of education at Stanford University and author of *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*. ... Tiny classes, individualized attention—and in the case of boarding schools, 24 hours access to faculty—certainly help students earn their way into the best colleges’.”

Such well-endowed facilities lie a million miles away from the EAA and the vast majority of American children, as public education is reduced to tatters under the fraudulent claim “there is no money.” The trillions amassed by the Wall Street banks and the vast sums squandered on wars demonstrate there are more than sufficient resources to provide all the necessities of life, including the right to an excellent education for all.

The author also recommends:

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