

New York State grants third round of charter school proposals for Buffalo

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Last month, the Buffalo Board of Education (BOE), which oversees New York State's second largest school district outside of New York City, escalated efforts to privatize the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS), while laying the blame for the crisis in public education, caused by poverty and joblessness, on the city's public school teachers.

According to the *Buffalo News*, "The State Education Department is taking the unprecedented step of opening up a new round of charter school proposals specifically for the City of Buffalo. While it is no longer possible for interested charter school founders to submit proposals for new schools in the rest of the state for 2015-16, Buffalo is an exception."

Since 2002, 30 public schools have closed in Buffalo, some reopening as charter schools. The city currently has 16 charter schools that enroll more than 7,000 students, compared with roughly 34,000 students enrolled in the city's 60 remaining public schools.

On October 8, the board voted, 5-3 to ask the New York State commissioner of education, John B. King, Jr., to allow late charter school applications for Buffalo. The *Buffalo News* wrote: "The last-minute resolution was not listed on the board agenda and came as a surprise to the public. Majority board members refused pleas by the board minority to delay the vote by a week. That led to accusations of 'collusion' between the board majority, Interim Superintendent Donald A. Ogilvie and the state Education Department."

Initially, the BOE's request was to allow late charter school applications for the takeover of four schools labeled as "failing" by the state: Lafayette, Bennett, East High School and Martin Luther King Multicultural Institute. However, that request was later broadened by new board member and multimillionaire real estate developer Larry Quinn, to include charter proposals for any location in Buffalo.

Although BPS has until late January to submit educational intervention plans for the four "failing" schools so they can remain open as district schools, it was Ogilvie who introduced the proposal to ask the commissioner to allow late submissions by outside charter school operators to compete for control of these schools.

The district has the option of entering into partnerships with outside "school turnaround" organizations, including a number

of university programs that provide classroom support and professional development for teachers. BPS entered into such an agreement with Johns Hopkins University (JHU) at East and Lafayette high schools in 2013. However, the university pulled out after only a year, citing a lack of flexibility on the part of the district. JHU had requested an increase in the teaching staff at the struggling schools. Instead, BPS laid off 63 teachers in September.

On October 10, four of the BOE's minority-bloc members who are opposed to the expansion of charter schools in the city sent a letter to Commissioner King, questioning the legality of the board majority's request. However, on the same day, the New York State Education Department's Charter School Office announced a new timeline for a third-round of charter school applications for Buffalo, lending credence to the accusation by minority-bloc members of collusion between the board majority, Ogilvie and New York State Education Department.

Board member Barbara S. Nevergold stated, "I was shocked ... to find that there's a link already on the New York State Education Department web page, that they are opening up this new round of charter school applications for Buffalo only. ... There is no way anyone can convince me there was no advance discussion and planning done to get to this point.

"It's time for him [King] ... to listen to what's being said, to include the voices, the opinions and the wants and wishes of this community, and not to listen to a small group—a majority on the board but a small group nonetheless—whose intent is really to disassemble the BPS and turn it over to charter schools' and private schools."

The board majority is backed by powerful forces including Wall Street and corporate investors seeking to profit off of the privatization of public education, as well as the Obama Administration, which has sought to scapegoat teachers for the crisis in public education. The disastrous conditions in the public schools is, in reality, a result of massive underfunding by the federal and state governments, as well as the effects of poverty on children's ability to learn.

Buffalo has the third-highest rate of child poverty in the US, with over 50 percent of children living in such conditions—a result of chronically high unemployment, and a lack of good-

paying, full-time jobs. The related problems of inadequate housing, hunger and crime make learning extremely difficult for children living in these circumstances. Buffalo is also home to many non-English speaking immigrants and refugees. Overcrowded classrooms and a lack of professional development for teachers dealing with such populations have greatly exacerbated the crisis in the public schools.

The past two consecutive school board elections have resulted in the election of a number of “reform” candidates, some having direct interests in the charter school industry. James M. Sampson, president of the BOE, is a charter school founder and CEO of a privately run agency that operates residential schools for troubled youth. He is also president of the board of directors of Buffalo ReformED, a local school “reform” outfit that advocates charter schools and merit pay for teachers. Carl Paladino, ex-Tea Party gubernatorial candidate and multimillionaire real estate developer, rents properties to charter schools in Buffalo. Larry Quinn advocates for charter schools and other school “reform” initiatives, including the elimination of teacher tenure.

Paladino has been an especially disruptive force on the school board, attempting to intimidate other board members who disagree with him, and frequently erupting in insulting and threatening outbursts at meetings and in email exchanges.

In October, the Alliance for Quality Education, a statewide organization that advocates on behalf of public schools in New York State, released a report entitled *Good for Kids or Good for Carl?* which questions Paladino’s ethics and the profits he makes from his charter schools interests. The report asks whether these “investments make it impossible for him to ethically vote on charter school issues.” Paladino has invested over \$20 million in charter schools over the past five years.

“He’s a for-profit entity, and he’s getting almost \$700,000 in tax breaks,” the executive director of the alliance, Billy Easton, told the *Buffalo News*. “He seems to be profiting coming and going.”

The announcement of the request for a third round of charter school applications was followed by numerous protests by students, parents, teachers and other advocates of public education.

However, in an effort to stave off a mass movement that would have been welcomed by teachers, students and parents in the city, the Buffalo Teachers Federation, which covers teachers who have worked without a contract for over 10 years, responded to this latest attack by issuing a statement that it “intends to challenge King’s decision in court.”

What the Buffalo BOE majority and Interim Superintendent Ogilvie, with the support of a slew of school reform interests including private investors and financial firms, are seeking to do in Buffalo is the same as what is being done in cities across the country. In Detroit, New York City, New Orleans, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and elsewhere, hundreds of public schools are being shuttered, while privately

operated charter schools are opened in their stead.

The implications of this vast change in the educational landscape are dire. The democratic rights of the population, once served by a system of public schools supported by tax dollars and responsive to the communities they served, are being replaced by privately run schools supported with public funds but unaccountable to the communities they serve, including parents and other taxpayers. They are often exempt from many of the state laws that govern traditional public schools, including the requirement to accept all students regardless of physical or learning disabilities or behavioral problems.

In addition, the stability of public education, where professional teachers develop long-term relationships with students and families, is disappearing, as charter schools, which only stay open as long as they provide returns to their investors, and where teachers do not have job security, lead to frequent disruptions in students’ lives and educations, as they move from school to school, and have few opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with educators.

Other calls from the Buffalo BOE and local politicians include demands for vouchers to pay for students in public schools to attend tuition-charging private schools, as well as for boarding schools which, as Paladino put it, would serve “children of dysfunction,” where they will be reprogrammed by the state.

Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown announced in 2014 that he would seek mayoral control of the Buffalo public schools, which could give him the power to appoint school board members in place of the current system of democratic elections.



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