

What is the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren?

Unions, Democrats and Republicans form school privatization group

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In December, a new 31-member “grassroots” organization was announced called the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren. Proclaiming itself “not an initiative from the state or from the city, but from the people,” the group includes General Motors executives, a former emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools, business groups like New Detroit and the Chamber of Commerce, together with substantial representation from the unions.

The mandate of the coalition is purportedly to develop ideas to revitalize Detroit schools, overhaul the city’s educational system and complete the “rebirth” of the city supposedly begun with its emergence from bankruptcy last month. The Detroit Public Schools face a \$170 million deficit and are now under their fourth Emergency Manager, Darnell Earley. (See “Michigan governor names 4th emergency manager for Detroit Public Schools”)

In fact, the organization is a stalking horse for the further destruction of education and the expansion of privatization across the state, where a growing number of school districts are facing large cuts or even insolvency. The group is being carefully steered by Michigan’s Republican Governor Rick Snyder, other state and local Democratic and Republican politicians and various education industry interests to propel major changes in the structure of the Detroit school system.

The approach is entirely in line with the Obama administration’s Race To The Top, the federal defunding of education and support to charter schools. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan proclaimed Detroit “ground zero” in education reform in 2009, and under a series of four emergency managers the city has steadily moved towards privatization with the majority of its students now enrolled in charter schools.

The current initiative, however, seeks to ramp up these efforts and pattern the city after New Orleans, which now has an all-charter district. The Coalition will have its recommendations for the state within 90 days.

The Coalition is comprised of a significant section of union bureaucrats. Like the Detroit bankruptcy, which transferred public assets to private coffers, looted pensions and health care

benefits, the attack on public education depends on the active assistance of AFL-CIO executives looking for their own cut of the spoils.

The Coalition’s steering committee includes David Hecker, Michigan American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president; Edna Reaves, secretary-treasurer of the AFT-MI and executive vice president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers; Jimmy Settles, vice president UAW (Ford); and Tashaune Harden, union bargaining chair of the Alliance of Charter School Teachers and Staff (AFT-MI) at the Leona-group owned charter school Cesar Chavez Academy.

The AFL-CIO is grateful to be included in Snyder’s plans this time around. AFT-MI President Hecker, one of the five co-chairs of the group, commented, “The diversity of thought will help us craft the best recommendations and will provide this Coalition the influence across the political spectrum.”

Previously, Snyder officials created a conspiratorial group of 20 consultants and politically connected technology businessmen to advance a voucher-like program for online, low-cost “value schools” in violation of state law. At that time the Michigan Education Association merely objected to the unions not being at the table, lamenting, “Remarkably, no educators are part of the secret workgroup.”

At the helm of the 31-member Coalition is Skillman Foundation President and CEO Tonya Allen. Skillman is deeply involved in the notorious state-controlled Education Achievement Authority (EAA) for “low-performing schools.” Allen also sits on the board of Excellent Schools Detroit, another nonprofit group facilitating the charterization of the district.

Such private foundations, funded by big business and wielding millions of dollars, provide the resources necessary to attack public education. Unelected bodies, they function in the education sphere as they did with the bankruptcy’s “Grand Bargain” to orchestrate the transfer of public resources, in that case the Detroit Institute of Arts, from public to private control.

Notably the Coalition includes one of the state’s chief hatchet men, former Detroit Public Schools (DPS) Emergency Manager Roy Roberts, a former GM manager. During his tenure as EM,

Roberts cut the pay of DPS staff by 10 percent across the board and formed the EAA.

Rounding out the group are various businessmen, state representatives, nonprofits, pastors, education administrators, and personnel from charter management company New Paradigm for Education, and the Chamber of Commerce. It includes the proforma “diversity”—NAACP head Rev. Wendell Anthony and the chief of the Hispanic Development Corporation Angela Reyes—and even a representative from the “urban farming”-oriented Boggs School [Julia Putnam]. Like the trade union executives, these various black, Hispanic and “activist” entrepreneurs want access to the public resources and business contracts that will open up from the dismantling of the public schools.

Snyder has named a liaison to the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, Paul Pastorek, the former Louisiana state superintendent of education, which sums up the purpose of the group. Pastorek was instrumental in the establishment of the Recovery School District 2003 by the Louisiana state legislature for the explicit purpose of converting “failing” public schools into privately run charters.

According to the *Detroit News*, Pastorek has already spent the past few months “taking stock of Michigan’s education system, focusing on Detroit.” Snyder’s team says Pastorek will make recommendations in the near future. It appears that the Coalition will provide the rubber stamp, along with the requisite window dressing, to the privatization drive.

Snyder’s spokesman told the media the governor hopes to have statewide reforms in place in six to 12 months.

It appears that the first initiative from the Coalition will be a common or universal enrollment system for all Detroit Public Schools, EAA schools and charters. In 2012, the Louisiana Recovery School District adopted this approach, which makes it easier for parents to enroll their children in charter schools by placing them on equal footing with neighborhood public schools.

New York City Charter School Center executive James Merriman explained to *Education Week* that the main purpose of a common application was “to make it easier in a choice environment for parents to choose.” Charter schools, which do not have much time, manpower, or money to spend on marketing and promotions, have benefited the most, he added.

This universal application is touted as the linchpin for creating “transparency and accountability” for Detroit students in a much-quoted report commissioned by another pro-charter nonprofit organization, Innovation in Public School Choice (IIPSC). There is no transparency or accountability for the big business interests driving the process, however. Instead, there is layer upon layer of nonprofits/foundations/groups nested within each other promoting a for-profit agenda. Innovation in Public School Choice includes, for example, the leading advocate for charter schools in Michigan, Dan Quisenberry, president of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, and Jared

Bukhart, executive director of the Michigan Counsel of Charter School Authorizers.

The assault on public education is already well advanced in Michigan with 80 percent of the state’s charters run by for-profit management companies, the highest percentage in the nation.

Last year the *Detroit Free Press* ran a devastating exposure of these schools after a yearlong investigation. The series found: Michigan spends \$1 billion per year on charter schools, often with little transparency; a majority of the worst-ranked charter schools have been open 10 years or more; some charter school board members were forced out after demanding financial details from management companies; and state law does not prevent insider dealing and self-enrichment by those who operate schools.

One indication of the sordid money-grubbing practices of Detroit-area charters is depicted in the Innovation in Public School Choice (IIPSC) report. Apparently, the practice of using gifts such as new sneakers and iPads to entice families to enroll in charter schools is “widespread” and has been described as Detroit’s “trinket economy.” The math is simple, they say, if enrolling a student generates approximately \$7,200 in revenue, an iPad is an investment that is in effect “re-sold” to a family at a big profit.

Similarly, charter schools have been exposed as using highly dubious methods to boost student numbers on “count day,” which determines their annual remittance from the state. The IIPSC report quotes one teacher saying, “I was supposed to show movies and give out popcorn so that kids would come in. I don’t want to bribe kids to come to school. Other charter schools will advertise an open house or even a school fair or carnival or a block party and schedule it for count day, and claim the kids who attend in their count day numbers.”

The increasing crisis of public education in Michigan reflects the deliberate defunding of schools by the Obama administration and state and local officials, Democrats and Republicans alike, the rise of the billion-dollar for-profit education industry and the active participation of the unions in dismembering this essential democratic right.



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