

# Pennsylvania school district to be run for profit

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York City School District is set to become the first all-charter school district in the state of Pennsylvania and only the fourth all-charter district in the country, if a court ruling stands. The move comes despite opposition from teachers, parents, students and the elected school board.

With eight schools and 7,500 students, York would be the largest school district in the country run by a single for-profit company. New Orleans, with 87 schools and 45,000 students, is the largest district to be turned over to charter school operators. It is run by over 40 charter school companies, some for profit, some community based. Two school districts in Michigan have also been converted to charter schools.

The state's newly elected governor, Democrat Tom Wolf, has publicly opposed the takeover but has, so far, taken no action to prevent it. Even if he does, he has no plan to provide the resources needed to solve the problems faced by York City schools and other school districts throughout Pennsylvania.

The move to privatize the York City School District is part of a push by former governor Tom Corbett, a Republican, to destroy public education in the state. In 2011, the Corbett administration cut over \$1 billion from public education, disproportionately affecting poorer school districts.

Funding for York City schools was cut by nearly \$9 million, or over 15 percent of its budget, amounting to over \$1,000 per student. By contrast, wealthier districts were cut, on average, by \$94 per student, with some districts cut as little as \$35 per student.

This funding cut was followed by passage of a 2012 law that allowed the state to take over financially distressed school districts, which included York and four others throughout the state. David Meckley, a York county businessman, was appointed the district's

chief recovery officer.

York is one of the poorest school districts in the state, with 83 percent of its students qualifying for free lunch. Twenty percent of students are in need of special education and 20 percent are learning English as a second language.

York, like many cities in Pennsylvania where the industrial base has been decimated, is dominated by poverty. Over half of all youths live in poverty, and more than six in every 10 of those aged five and younger are living in poverty. Median income is just over \$30,000 a year, compared to \$52,000 for the state as a whole.

York's official unemployment rate is 13 percent, more than twice the state average. Even this figure hides the reality, as many people are not counted because they have given up looking for work.

Since his appointment, Meckley has sought to have the entire district privatized and placed under the control of the for-profit Charter Schools USA. The Florida-based company operates 70 charter schools, mostly in Florida, with some in a few other states. Last November, the school board raised questions about Charter Schools USA's ability to run the schools and tabled the proposal.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education then sought to have the entire district placed in receivership, with Meckley appointed as receiver. The undemocratic move would take all powers away from the elected school board, including the hiring and firing of teachers and staff, and entering into contracts. Meckley's only power would be setting tax rates.

The school district is appealing a December decision by York County President Judge Stephen Linebaugh of the Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court that placed the school district into receivership. A decision is expected

soon. If the commonwealth court does not overturn the lower court's ruling, Meckley will go forward with his plan to privatize the district.

Governor Wolf won the gubernatorial election in large part because of the opposition of people throughout the state to the cuts in education made by his predecessor. The two main teachers unions, the Pennsylvania Federation of Teachers (PFT) and the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA), along with the various state workers unions, promoted the illusion that Wolf would restore the cuts made by Corbett.

Wolf has promised that he will increase funding for education but has not given details on how much or where the additional funding would come from.

Since winning the election in November, Wolf has gone on a speaking tour to promote the severity of Pennsylvania's budget deficit, which now stands at \$2.3 billion. He has proposed a severance tax on natural gas drilling, something that Corbett refused to do. But even if it were to pass the Republican controlled legislature, at best it was projected to provide about \$500 million in revenue when gas prices were high. No new projections have been released since the collapse of gas prices, but it would only amount to a tiny fraction of the budget deficit.

Far from opposing the cuts made by Corbett, Wolf's main difference with him is purely tactical—Wolf seeks the assistance of union leaders in imposing cuts and attacking workers' pensions.

Both Wolf and the legislature have set as a primary agenda item, the reform of the pension plans of 77,000 state workers and teachers, which are underfunded by some \$50 billion. Wolf is seeking to cut benefits and force workers into some type of 401-(k)-style pension plan with vastly reduced benefits.



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