

Detroit Public Schools emergency manager resigns

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Detroit Public Schools (DPS) Emergency Manager Darnell Earley announced his resignation Tuesday, saying he would leave his position by February 29, three months ahead of schedule.

Earley has been the target of popular outrage because of his attacks on public education and on teachers in the 46,000-student school district, and also because of his role as the former emergency manager of Flint, Michigan.

Governor Rick Snyder appointed Earley as the fourth emergency manager of DPS in January 2015 in order to restructure the school system and vastly expand the number of for-profit charter schools. Between October 2013 and January 2015 he was the financial overseer of Flint. During his tenure he switched the city's water supply to the highly polluted Flint River, which resulted in the lead poisoning of residents and irreparable damage to children.

Earley's snap resignation follows the announcement of an FBI investigation into the Flint water crisis and Wednesday's hearing of the US House of Representatives Oversight Committee. A congressional staff member told the *Detroit Free Press* that Earley has declined to testify at the hearing, and other reports indicate that he has hired an attorney.

Over the past several weeks, Detroit teachers have engaged in a series of sickout protests, culminating in the near-shutdown of the school system on January 20, the day Obama visited the city. The movement, which erupted outside of the control of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), brought national and international public attention to rodent- and insect-infested schools and other deplorable conditions in the long cash-starved district.

While the protests generated widespread support, including from students who walked out of their high

schools in solidarity with teachers, the response of the DFT and its parent union, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has been to corral and smother the movement by diverting it down the dead end path of petition campaigns, lawsuits and appeals to local and state Democrats.

The DFT has made the removal of Earley a central demand, claiming that the restoration of an elected school board would return "democracy" to Detroit.

The departure of Earley—a long-time Democrat—is meant to clear the way for the passage of a bipartisan deal in the state legislature to restructure DPS and further undermine public education. As the *Detroit News* commented, Earley's "position at the district has become a major impediment to Snyder's plans to financially stabilize the troubled school district."

The *Detroit Free Press* noted, "Two controversial bills that would overhaul the district will be the subject of a 1 p.m. hearing Thursday before the state Senate Committee on Government Operations."

The deal would include replacing the emergency manager with a nine-member school board appointed by Snyder and Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan. Even after an elected board assumed power in January 2017, it would remain under the thumb of an unelected Financial Review Commission. The top priority of this oversight commission would be to impose further cost-cutting measures to satisfy bondholders and for-profit education companies. In other words, the schools would remain under the dictatorial control of the banks without a formal emergency manager.

The plan also includes breaking up DPS into two districts. Modeled after the Obama administration's restructuring of GM and Chrysler in 2009, it would set up a "bad" district to liquidate the district's debts and liabilities, including perhaps teacher pensions, with

whatever resources it can get from state aid, private foundations etc. The other district, renamed the new Detroit Community Schools, would essentially be controlled by various education businesses and investors. It would be given free rein to run roughshod over the rights of teachers.

Governor Snyder, who said he would find a replacement for Earley before the end of the month, issued a press release praising the emergency manager for restructuring “a heavily bureaucratic central office” and putting in “place operating and cost-containment measures” that would “set the course for a sustainable, new Detroit Community Schools, as I have proposed.”

Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature have been engaged in a protracted debate over the funding of the measure and the exact proportioning of decision-making powers and resources. The sometimes-bitter struggle has had nothing to do with restoring “democracy” or improving the schools. On the contrary, it is essentially over how the spoils from the dismantling of public education will be divvied up.

One of the major players behind the so-called reform of DPS is The Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren—a supposed “grassroots” organization consisting of various business interests and trade union officials. It is co-chaired by David Hecker, the president and secretary treasurer of the Michigan chapter of the AFT. It also includes United Auto Workers Vice President Jimmy Settles 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.

John Rakolta Jr., a prominent Republican businessman who is another co-chair, told the *Detroit Free Press* that the governor cannot afford to have DPS run out of cash this spring while the Flint water crisis continues. “They can’t have a two-front fire and that’s what this is going to cause,” said Rakolta, who is chairman and CEO of the Walbridge construction company.

DFT Interim President Ivy Bailey hailed Earley’s departure as a “step in the right direction,” adding that it “presents a perfect opportunity for state officials in Lansing to pay off the debt their appointed managers have created and return the Detroit Public Schools to local control... Now is the time for DPS to have an

elected school board that answers to the people of this great city.”

The terms of the proposed legislation make clear, however, that the bipartisan attack on public education will only escalate. The DFT has collaborated with the attacks on teachers and public education by Democratic Party-run school boards for decades, and it will continue to do so under a new Financial Review Commission. The only concern of the union apparatus is gaining the franchise in the expanding charter school sector so that it can continue to get dues income from miserably paid charter school teachers even as thousands of public school teachers are driven from the profession.



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