

Michigan school closures “on hold” while privatization plans move ahead

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Following weeks of outrage over the threat of mass public school closures, Michigan’s Department of Education superintendent, Brian Whiston, sent letters on March 1 to school districts offering a potential 18-month reprieve for the targeted schools.

Protests, town hall meetings and rallies have been attended by angry parents, teachers and students in the threatened districts. The Kalamazoo, Saginaw, and Detroit Public School Community District school boards also filed or planned to file lawsuits against the State of Michigan to stop slated school closures.

Under the new offer, districts containing the 38 so-called failed schools would have 60 days to form a partnership with the State’s Department of Education and School Reform Office (SRO) to “turn around” the schools.

Most of the targeted schools are in Detroit, the nation’s poorest large city. The other districts—Benton Harbor, Bridgeport-Spaulding, Kalamazoo, Muskegon Heights, Pontiac, River Rouge and Saginaw—have also been devastated by decades of deindustrialization, state and local budget cuts and school closures.

In January, the SRO had threatened the shutdown of schools based on three years of testing in the “bottom 5 percent,” a brutal policy that would have created an onerous commute for thousands of children and “school deserts.” Following the SRO announcement, the Great Lakes Education Project, the charter school advocacy group established by now-US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, issued a statement demanding the closure of all 38 schools.

While the newly announced Michigan “partnership” plan, developed as part of the Obama-era Every Student Succeeds Act, grants a tentative reprieve to “failing schools,” it sets up a new system of “accountability” to attack teachers and promote the private takeover of public schools.

The state is implementing a rating system for all schools, which will be labeled “A” through “F.” Districts with schools rated F will be offered a “partnership,” which will require meeting a series of benchmarks (“within year student growth” and “proficiency on rigorous content standards”) as specified in their district agreements. Those with one or more D schools also could be “selected to participate.” Failure to meet goals and timelines with required testing levels will result in “moving to the next accountability level.”

Consequences could include school closures, firing of principals and staff, or placing the school under a charter management company. The A-F school rating systems and dashboards have been used nationally to promote so-called school choice, charters and vouchers.

The “partners” involved in the reorganization of the targeted schools will, according to the state directive, include businessmen and foundations alongside parents, education professionals, tribal education councils, unions and school board members. This policy will also open the door for new incursions of for-profit interests into the schools.

“We don’t want the schools to close at all,” Debra Bulock, a parent of a Denby High School student, told the *Detroit Free Press*. She worried that the probationary period will only delay the school’s closure. “I don’t want them to go through this again,” Bulock added.

Expressing the deeply felt anger of teachers and students, Pete Cunningham, a Mumford math teacher and wrestling coach, told *MLive*, “If they close Mumford, they are going to have to drag me out of there and they’re going to drag our mats out of there because we’re running practices until they lock the chains. They’re not going to do that. They’re not stupid. But putting that list out there and saying they’re going to close those schools, that is detrimental to the families in that community. People leave thinking it’s actually going to happen.”

“If we close schools in the worst neighborhoods in Detroit, then what are we saying?” Cunningham added. “These kids can’t go to high school? They can’t be on a wrestling team?” Mumford is the only open-enrollment public high school in Detroit that offers the sport.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) staged a pro-forma rally against the school closures at Osborn High School in February for the TV cameras, but worked behind the scenes, as usual, to suppress resistance.

The union’s is circulating a toothless petition, posted on their website, to the SRO. The petition asserts that the threatened closings are “racist.” This has two purposes. The first is to prevent a unified struggle of all Michigan residents, black, white and immigrant, against the attack on public schools. The second is to make sure that the black political and business establishment in Detroit, which includes the largely African-American DFT leadership, benefits from the carve-up of public education.

The false narrative of state racism, and its corollary the demand for “local control,” was employed to smother the yearlong struggle by teachers against the shutdown of the DPS, and subordinate teachers, students and parents to the political maneuvers between state and local Democratic politicians and the Republican administration of Governor Rick Snyder.

The DFT petition does not even call for stopping the school closures. Instead, it advocates the setting up of a “coordinated system that includes parents, students and community members” (e.g., the union hierarchy) to provide a fig leaf for the continued privatization of Michigan schools. Such a body would answer to the same financial elite, including the billionaire DeVos family and private edu-businesses, bent on mass school closures.

The Democratic members of the Michigan House of Representatives have feigned opposition to the new round of closures, while appealing to Governor Snyder not to close schools “without consultation and input from the local community.” These forces played the same sordid political role in facilitating the shutdown of the 174-year-old Detroit Public Schools district last June and paving the way for the current crisis.

Any “non-performing” district that declines to participate in the new so-called partnership program will be subject to school closings as originally threatened. School attendance openings in Detroit are often filled up by May, with application periods closed for the next school year. The SRO advised parents to consider schools from 60 other school districts, some more than an hour’s drive away from their neighborhoods. Without

information about whether their school would remain open or not, students faced the possibility of not finding an accessible school.

Many of the schools on the list have recently been upgraded, a particularly cynical aspect of the SRO’s proposal. Among them is Mumford High School in northwest Detroit, which moved into a new \$50 million building in 2012, paid for with \$500 million in bond funds voted for in 2009. The bond also paid for a new \$22.6 million Gompers Elementary-Middle School, and for major improvements to Denby High School at \$16.5 million and Ford High School \$16.85 million. These schools are all on the closure list.

Detroit is already littered with more than 100 shuttered schools from the last 15 years of state-imposed Emergency Management. Buildings are left to rot, while charter schools open up on private properties. Over half of all Detroit students now attend charter schools.

The state’s ability to close schools has been the result of decades of education policy lobbying by the DeVos family together with the long collaboration of state Democrats. This trend was accelerated under the Race to the Top and the Obama administration. Snyder’s ill-fated Education Achievement Authority, which was highly touted by Obama Education Secretary Arne Duncan as “the future” of education, has 8 out of 15 schools slated for closure, ranking in the “bottom 5 percent” for three or more years.

Michigan now leads the country in unregulated charter schools and for-profit charter management companies. DeVos is now taking this wrecking operation to the national level.



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