

Michigan partnership agreements only a temporary reprieve in statewide school closure threats

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After years of failed state-run education “turn-around” schemes, Michigan has forced 37 schools to sign new “partnership agreements” in order to prevent closure at the end of the school year.

Last January, the State Reform Office demanded these schools, all located in high-poverty areas, be closed based on three years of “bottom 5 percent” rankings on standardized tests. They include schools in Detroit, Pontiac, Benton Harbor, Saginaw, River Rouge, Bridgeport-Spaulding, East Detroit, Muskegon Heights and Kalamazoo.

The announcement of unprecedented mass closures sparked outrage among students, parents and educators across the state. Districts had been previously assured by state officials that the results of a new test, the M-STEP, would not be used to mete out “serious consequences,” but despite that they were used to rank the schools as “failing.”

As a result of intense opposition, state officials opted for an end-run in March, devising a series of “partnership agreements” that will temporarily halt closures while providing a veneer for ongoing privatization policies. As of the end of April, all threatened districts have been brought to heel by state officials, signing on the dotted line.

Agreeing to a partnership is the newly formed Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), representing 16 of the “failing schools,” as well as all eight schools from the state-run Education Achievement Authority (EAA) District. The EAA is being disbanded June 30 in view of its obvious failure to improve student outcomes amidst the exposure of widespread graft and corruption.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers has remained silent on the agreement, while the Michigan Education

Association has backed Republican-sponsored legislation calling for an end to the “failing schools law.” Neither teachers’ union has organized any resistance to the severe attacks on public education in the state.

The “partners” involved with the school districts include the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA), Eastern Michigan University, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University along with a series of for-profit foundations and corporations. These include the Skillman Foundation (which has been intimately involved in all the pro-privatization restructuring plans in Detroit), United Way, DTE Energy, Ford Motor Company and General Motors.

There has been no public explanation as to the role of Detroit-based auto manufacturers in relation to the educational pedagogy and teacher mentorship that the “partnership agreements” purport to offer.

Significantly, the agreement mandates schools demonstrate substantial student improvement in a series of incremental deadlines or face the imposition of “accountability measures” that include the school’s loss of decision-making, firing of staff, etc. At the end of three years, schools could be closed.

After years of layoffs, restructuring and downsizing, the districts—with a gun to their heads—are agreeing to hand over the future of their schools to the MDE, Wayne RESA and other business entities. In return, they receive back a modicum of short-term resources and support staff. With the age-old carrot-and-stick approach, the agreements offer some of the essential staff needed in a modern school district, such as paraprofessional positions, behavior intervention specialists and technology coaches, with the possibility of lower class sizes and additional teacher professional development.

The privatization lobby, well funded by the DeVos family (of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos), are already whetting their appetite for the inevitable results of another “failed” experiment. The *Detroit News* pointed out that one year of expanded support could “prove” that schools are “reform-resistant.” Meanwhile, the for-profit section is well aware that any modest, but temporary, benefits will cost pennies in comparison to the lucrative profits to be made through privatization.

Michigan’s original proposal to close the “bottom 5 percent” of state schools is unprecedented in the United States. The designation of “failed schools” was mandated under President Obama’s revision of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It was used to complement the competition for educational grants, first under NCLB and then under Race To The Top, requiring rating systems and incessant standardized tests.

The State of Michigan has waged a continuous assault on school funding, resulting in the present state of disarray. In 2014, the Detroit Public Schools budget called for the elimination of 152 teaching positions, and extracted an additional \$13 million in savings from its employee health plans. The budget also called for the closure of 24 schools between 2015 and 2019 and proposed to sell 40 vacant school facilities, victims of previous rounds of school closures, to the city of Detroit for a mere \$5.5 million. This is only one of dozens of rounds of cuts carrying out the same attacks and layoffs.

Financial interests are circling the wagons around the partnership agreement as the next step toward large-scale privatization. The transformation of Detroit Public Schools in 2016 into the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) under the control of a Financial Review Commission was the first step in this process. As a result of the years of cuts and attacks, DPSCD is currently operating with around 300 classrooms lacking teachers.

The DFT plays a critical role in the attacks on public education by blocking and diverting the opposition of teachers to these attacks. In early 2016, Detroit teachers took wildcat action to oppose cuts independently of the DFT. When the DFT finally regained control, the union stifled further action.

Years of concessions agreed to by the DFT are now culminating in the elaboration of plans to destroy teacher pensions. After continuous underfunding, aggravated by diversion of money for new teachers into a hybrid 401k/pension plan, the Michigan Public Employees

Retirement System (MPSERS) faces a shortfall of \$26 billion.

Using this statistic, the Michigan legislature proposed a new plan to end MPSERS and switch over to an exclusive 401k-style plan, with all the insecurity that entails.

Another aspect of attacks on teachers comes with the folding of the experimental district, the Educational Achievement Authority (EAA), back into DPSCD. EAA teachers are currently paid \$15,000 more on average than DPSCD teachers. In the return to DPSCD, these teachers face a \$15,000 pay cut, with the DFT claiming that the district cannot pay such “exorbitant” salaries.

The EAA was funded by the same players in the partnership agreement. The Skillman Foundation provided \$2 million, the Kresge Foundation, \$2.5 million; DTE Energy, \$1 million; and General Motors, \$500,000. Other pro-privatization millionaires and billionaires donated to the EAA, including Roger Penske, Mike Ilitch, Steve and Cindy Van Andel and Doug DeVos, along with the Gates Foundation.

At the same time as this partnership agreement is signed, the DPSCD School Board has hired Nikolai Vitti as the new superintendent. His contract provides a base salary of \$295,000 in the first year, with yearly increases, a \$20,000 annuity and \$9,000 as a car allowance. By contrast, teachers in DPSCD took a 10 percent wage cut in 2014.

Vitti is currently the superintendent of Jacksonville, Florida schools. The Duval County School Board, which contains Jacksonville, is carrying out a “strategic abandonment” of education programs to balance its budget that is mainly affecting high-poverty schools. School principals are now offered only one of three support staff—a math coach, a graduation coach, or a reading interventionist. In response, Vitti said, “There is not enough money to give schools all three choices.” The money will be redirected toward charter schools, in a similar process to the one in Detroit, where over half of the students now attend charters.

The plan for public schools is to create a class-based education system. There will always be a “bottom 5 percent,” guaranteeing the closure process will continue indefinitely and children are forced into charter schools.



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