

“This is a new world we’re seeing with Betsy DeVos”

## Detroit-area charter school shuts doors, leaves teachers unpaid

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Several hundred students and their teachers were locked out of Taylor International Academy in the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Michigan last week, 20 days before the end of the school year. The abrupt closing is one of the all-too-common disasters created by the chiefly unregulated charter school business, which will have even more opportunities to abscond with public resources under Trump’s education secretary Betsy DeVos.

Taylor is run by New Jersey-based Renaissance School Services, which was founded by a former executive of Edison Schools, a for-profit education company that ran into financial problems with investors over a decade ago. Renaissance took over the Southfield school, which is housed in a church, two years ago.

The now-shuttered building housed K-8 classrooms and was funded with public money siphoned off the district’s already under-funded budget. For years, the district’s public schools have been subject to deep budget cuts, including the layoff of teaching and support staff, privatizing transportation and other services, and closing schools.

Last Thursday, as teachers, students and parents showed up for scheduled classes, they found the doors closed. A chaotic scene then unfolded, with pre-school teachers, unable to enter the school premises, holding graduation for the young children outside in the parking lot of the school. Teachers were also unable to retrieve their teaching supplies, which many had purchased for their students.

Parents told reporters of their distress in learning their school was closing. Jahmara Taylor, like other parents, was almost in tears. She said she and her son had been

looking for another school for her fifth-grader, but were finding other schools were full.

Teachers at the school learned only last week that Renaissance, which calls itself a “turn-around specialist” company, had run out of money. Already, janitors were pulled from the school when the janitorial service company was not paid, forcing teachers to clean up their rooms. The school’s board voted to close the school immediately last week.

Central Michigan University, the state charter authorizer, has rebuffed questions from local press about whether the university will take responsibility for substantial amounts of pay owed teachers at the academy. CMU collects 3 percent of the state’s Education Foundation Grant allocated for each child at its charter operations throughout the state.

Under a spread-the-pay arrangement teachers delay pay for days they have already worked to guarantee income through the summer months.

Renee Jenkins, Dean of Students at Taylor International Academy, told a television reporter on the scene last week that she and her staff wanted to know when the management company, the board and the university knew they were in such trouble. “Were we set up for failure?”

Another teacher, Jacqueline Robinson, told WXYZ-TV: “This is a new world that we’re seeing with Betsy DeVos. Businesses come in. They are businesses and they are coming into education, into our schools. They can’t make their money? Oh well. They will pull out and leave.”

Janelle Brzezinski, spokesperson for the charter school office at Central Michigan University, had earlier announced three other schools run by CMU will

close this year. They are Woodward Academy, open since 1996, Starr Detroit Academy in nearby Harper Woods serving mostly Detroit residents, and the Academy of International Studies in the Detroit enclave city, Hamtramck.

All three are being closed ostensibly for academic reasons. Taylor International Academy, with its financial crisis, also ranked in the bottom 5 percent of schools in the state, according to the state's rankings list released earlier this year.

As a result of DeVos-sponsored lobbying and tens of millions of dollars in political contributions to state legislators, Michigan pours at least \$1 billion a year into charter schools. These schools are among the least regulated in the nation. In late 2011, Michigan lawmakers removed limits on how many charters can operate here—opening the door to a slew of new management companies. Michigan has the highest percentage in the US of for-profit management companies running its charter schools, at 80 percent.

An investigation by the *Detroit Free Press* showed there was no financial accountability required by the state of Michigan, therefore financial “irregularities” are rife. For example, National Heritage Academies, the state's largest for-profit school management company, charges 14 of its Michigan schools \$1 million or more in rent.

“People should get a fair return on their investment,” former state schools Superintendent Tom Watkins, a longtime charter advocate told the *Free Press*. “But it has to come after the bottom line of meeting the educational needs of the children. And in a number of cases, people are making a boatload of money, and the kids aren't getting educated,” Watkins admitted.

A national study of the American charter school industry, titled, “Charter School Black Hole” reported on the existence of “ghost schools” that received money and never opened their doors. In just two years—under the watch of the Obama administration's Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan—the State of Michigan provided a staggering \$3.7 million to 25 such fraudulent enterprises which never opened, while Ohio spent another \$4 million on seven. California spent \$4.7 million on schools which opened and quickly closed; Wisconsin \$2.5 million, Indiana \$2.2 million, etc.

The Obama administration spearheaded the expansion

of charter schools under its Race to the Top program that gave money to cash-strapped districts in exchange for lifting limits on charter schools, instituting merit pay, and punitive accountability schemes that scapegoated public school teachers for the educational problems caused by years of budget cuts, layoffs and the growth of poverty.

This process will accelerate under DeVos, a bitter enemy of public education, and the scene last week in Southfield will be played out again and again across the country.



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