

# State takeover looms for Kentucky's largest school district

J. Cooper

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Tuesday evening was the occasion of a contentious meeting called by Kentucky's Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) board of education. Hundreds of parents, teachers, principals and community members, urging against a state takeover of the school district, turned out on the eve of a two-day tour and review of the district by Wayne Lewis, the newly-appointed commissioner of education. Also attending the meeting was a contingent from the Kentucky Pastors in Action Coalition, who favor a state takeover, which could herald the first charter schools opening in the Commonwealth.

The Jefferson County district is the largest in the state, encompassing 172 schools, 6,600 teachers and 101,000 students, throughout the Louisville metropolitan area.

Lewis "has begun announcing changes," according to an April 24 article in the Lexington *Herald-Leader*. The article, headlined "New education commissioner making changes. Is action on charter schools next?" mentions Lewis' decision to spend Wednesday and Thursday touring schools throughout JCPS, which has been under a state audit since 2016. The author then poses the question: "Will re-energizing Kentucky's stalled charter school effort be his next step?" The drive for charter schools is now on the fast track.

Also on Tuesday, the Louisville *Courier-Journal* reported that the Kentucky Pastors in Action Coalition, alongside the right-wing libertarian Bluegrass Institute, held a press conference announcing their support for a state takeover of JCPS. The pastors' coalition advocated for the passage in 2017 of a controversial charter school bill—which was signed into law last year—and supported other school-choice initiatives, including a scholarship tax credit program and publicly funded vouchers for preschool, according to the *Courier-Journal*.

Kentucky educators, inspired by the rebellion of rank-and-file teachers in West Virginia last month, fought against the attempts by Republican Governor Matt Bevin

to eviscerate the cost-of-living escalator of retired teachers and mobilized over 5,000 at the state capital in Frankfort on April 2. The Kentucky Education Association (KEA) moved in to prevent a statewide strike and instead used an April 13 "Day of Action" to promote the election of Democrats in the November elections.

The KEA focused all its efforts on pushing the state legislature to override Governor Bevin's veto of the budget and tax bill, both of which had been passed by the Republican-majority state House and Senate. Once the overrides passed the legislature, on their last day in session, the KEA swiftly demobilized the teacher protests, and celebrated the "victory" that the original bills would now become law.

The bills provided meager increases for public education, which will be paid for by gutting other state programs, cutting higher education and preschool by 6.25 percent, and implementing regressive taxes placing the heaviest burden on the working class.

Students from Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) on Monday held a mock "funeral for higher education" at the Capitol rotunda. EKU has eliminated over 150 teaching positions in the fall and will be shutting the theater, nursing and economics degree programs.

With the legislative session over and the teachers back in the classroom, the governor moved quickly in what has been characterized by one Democratic state senator as a "carefully orchestrated coup to take over the state Board of Education." Governor Bevin installed seven new members to the state Board of Education (BoE) on Monday, April 16.

While posturing as defenders of public education and school teachers, the Democrats have in fact served as accomplices in the decimation of the school system. Bevin's Democratic predecessor, two-term governor Steve Beshear, carried out some of the deepest cuts in Kentucky history, including to public education, after the

2008 financial crash.

On Tuesday, April 17, the commissioner of education, Stephen Pruitt, resigned under pressure following a four-hour closed-door meeting with the new 11-member BoE, now all Bevin appointees. Pruitt was appointed education commissioner in 2015 by Beshear, just two months before Bevin was elected, and publicly opposed the expansion of charter schools. Many of the outgoing BoE members, whose four-year terms had just expired, expressed shock at the rapidity with which Pruitt was ousted.

The newly appointed board elected Milton Seymore as their new chair, who promptly appointed Wayne Lewis as interim commissioner. Lewis had been a non-voting adviser to the state BoE for the past year and was a staunch ally of Governor Bevin. Lewis is notorious for his advocacy of charter schools. He is chair of the Kentucky Charter Schools Advisory Council and authors a blog called Education Policy Matters, which campaigns for charter schools. Former Kentucky BoE chairman Roger Marcum told a reporter for *Insider Louisville* he believes Pruitt's resignation indicates Governor Bevin will push for a state takeover of JCPS.

Until last year, Kentucky was one of only seven states that did not allow charter schools. On March 22, 2017, Bevin signed the establishment of charter schools into law, but their funding was not secured, and the recent legislative budget failed to fund charter schools.

The back door is now open.

Why is Wayne Lewis, the new commissioner of education, spending two days visiting JCPS? He intends to announce his decision no later than Monday on the result of a state audit of the district, initiated by his predecessor Stephen Pruitt in February 2017. A decision must be made whether or not to place the district under state control. State takeover of a school district the size of JCPS has never been carried out in Kentucky.

State management would allow the commissioner to appoint a district manager who would hold all the powers "currently held by the superintendent and school board. Those responsibilities include control over the district's finances, administration, personnel and operations," according to a report in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* last February. The commissioner would have the power to fire the district superintendent and board officers, and effectively wield dictatorial power over the district for a period up to three years.

Teachers in Kentucky need to study the lessons of the state takeover and dismemberment of the Detroit Public Schools in 2016. The district had been under the most

recent direction of an emergency manager since 2009. After teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, with the enthusiastic support of the Democratic Party and the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the 174-year-old Detroit Public Schools district was dissolved, and Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) emerged under the state-appointed manager, Stephen Rhodes. Rhodes was the US bankruptcy judge who oversaw the terms of the city of Detroit bankruptcy in 2013, which set a precedent for the destruction of public worker pensions and the privatization of public utilities.

The creation of DPSCD allowed for hiring non-certified teachers; gave the state the right to close "failing" schools; established the precedent to hire teachers and administrators based on "performance and accomplishments" not "steps and lanes"; and allowed for further charterization of schools. Over 50 percent of Detroit students now attend a charter school, 80 percent of which are run by for-profit companies. As teachers are well aware, charter schools siphon off both funds and personnel from the public-school system.

The conduct of the struggle must be taken out of the hands of the KEA, which functions not to lead the resistance of teachers but to smother and kill it. In every school and community teachers should elect rank-and-file committees to unite all teachers, appeal for the active support of all workers, and fight for a general strike by teachers and all workers across the US to defend public education and every social right of workers.

Kentucky educators are encouraged to participate in the *World Socialist Web Site* call-in meeting Thursday, April 26, 7:00 p.m. MST (Phoenix), 9:00 pm CDT, 10:00 pm EDT

To join, call (669) 224-3412 and enter access code 313-814-669

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