

"Dead last" in school funding

New punitive “accountability” measures being imposed on Michigan teachers

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29 January 2019

Michigan, the home state of Trump’s Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, is reeling from more than a decade of de-funding its public schools. This week, researchers at Michigan State University have issued a report showing that Michigan’s revenue growth for K-12 schools is “dead last” in the nation. In 2015, schools received only 85 percent of the revenues they had 10 years prior. The report’s authors point out, “no other state is close to a decline of this magnitude.”

The researchers estimate Michigan would need roughly \$3.6 billion in additional revenue to provide an adequate education for its students, requiring substantial additional funds for students in poverty, non-native English speakers and special education students.

Meanwhile, state lawmakers have enacted a series of new “accountability” measures to take effect for the 2019-20 school year. The DeVos family and their substantial lobbying resources have long played an outsized role in setting the agenda within the Michigan legislature and the governor’s office.

At the end of December in his lame-duck session, Governor Rick Snyder enacted an A-F grading system for the state’s schools. The measure requires every school to be rated and labeled based on student “proficiency,” student “growth,” absenteeism, and graduation rates. The A-F law also includes merit pay for teachers. The Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) will, for example, “implement a method of compensation that focuses on job performance and job accomplishments as the primary fact in determining compensation, to apply to all teachers and administrators hired by the district ... [to] take effect September 1, 2019.”

As Snyder implemented statewide A-F grading and

merit pay, he also made the decision to drain \$180 million out of the School Aid Fund [Constitutionally mandated monies for K-12 education], and transfer it to other non-education programs.

For its part, the teachers’ unions are deeply implicated in these attacks, in line with the mantra of “school reform with us, not without us” advocated by the American Federation of Teachers. The Michigan Federation of Teachers sits on the foundation-funded Community Education Commission which developed the A-F schools grading system foisted on Detroit schools in the aftermath of the dissolution of the original school district.

A-F grading was first implemented in 1999 by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, one of the nation’s foremost advocates of private and charter schools. More than 10 percent of all students in Florida now attend charter schools, one of the highest percentages in the nation. Testing and privatization go hand in hand.

Michigan has also implemented a “Read by Third Grade” law, set to take effect next school year, which requires the retention of students who do not meet grade-level expectations. Michigan joins about 16 other states in implementing the retention policy. In 2015-16, less than half of Michigan third-graders scored “proficient” on the M-Step, the state’s standardized testing system—a measure of the terrible growth of poverty in the state.

The de-funding of schools and the increase in all forms of “measurement” and “accountability” are two sides of the same coin. The big business interests which seek to privatize education and cash in on the “education market” seek to justify it with self-interested claims that public education is a failure. It

has, moreover, been used to degrade the salaries and benefits of teachers who are being forced to compete with each other over various piecemeal performance bonuses, almost all tied to standardized tests. These anti-education measures were vastly accelerated under Obama's federal budget cuts to education and his Hunger Games-style competition for grants, Race to the Top.

For example, elementary schools in the DPSCD now subject children to online iReady math and reading tests beginning as early as kindergarten. Both native English speakers and English Language Learners are measured on "growth in math and English," and the results comprise 40 percent of their teacher's performance evaluation.

All of the "measurable standards" in A-F school grading and other similar schemes indicate neither the potential of students nor the proficiency of teachers. They measure poverty, lack of adequate support staff, poor school infrastructure and not enough supplies. They measure declining health, struggling families and the overarching growth of social inequality.

All of the A-F indices are additionally compounded by neighborhood inequality. It is the school district's budget for math and reading specialists, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, counselors, reduced class sizes, nurses and social workers which play a major role in determining the outcomes mandated by A-F.

Consider, for example, the required cataloging of "chronic absenteeism," a number which can be used to close a neighborhood school. A student is considered chronically absent after missing 15 or more days, out of 180, from school.

According to the Center for Disease Control, 16 percent, or 7 million children were chronically absent from school in 2015-16. Absences increase with poverty across both rural and urban settings. For example, in the hard-hit former coal-mining stronghold of Logan County, West Virginia over 52 percent of children are chronically absent from school. In the mining and quarrying county of Pershing, Nevada over 66 percent of children miss more than 15 days per year. Detroit had a 58 percent absentee rate and Battle Creek, Michigan had more than 50 percent. Overall, Michigan was third worst in the US, with a 30 percent overall chronic absentee rate.

Schools across the United States found that having showers, washers and dryers significantly increases student attendance. Many families do not have access to washers and dryers. Even if they do, they may not have money for detergent, electricity may be cut off, or families have to choose between washing clothes, eating, or rent. Children who are dirty, especially older children, may be too embarrassed to come to school.

In other words, A-F grading is a subterfuge, not a scientific or objective measure. It claims to assist parents in choosing the best school, meanwhile it creates the conditions to shut down public education. It is one of a broad array of privatization devices—parent triggers, "opportunity" scholarships, various forms of vouchers and all manner of "failing schools" designations designed to open the door for mass privatization.

The full funding for public education has become a rallying cry among educators from coast to coast as well as internationally. Millions of people are determined that their children receive good, high quality education and support the strikes and struggles of teachers.

The \$3.6 billion which researchers indicate that Michigan requires to upgrade schools throughout the state could be paid for, without a problem, by the DeVos family [estimated net worth \$5.1 billion]. Yet they and the entire financial elite are determined to eliminate public education and any other social right that impinges on their obscene wealth. Capitalism, a system which cannot provide a future for the youth, deserves to perish and be replaced with a society organized for social need, socialism.



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