

Atlanta School Board prepares a fresh assault on public education

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Last Monday, in a much-anticipated meeting, the Atlanta School Board gave its approval to a deceptively named plan entitled “Vision of Excellent Schools.” Couched behind the sanguine name is a plan to close or merge “non-performing” schools and funnel public funds to charter schools under private management. Even before the new measure, the city has the most charter schools of any Georgia school district.

The threat to once again seize on low test scores, the inevitable result of increasing poverty and budget cuts, as pretexts to take the hatchet to the city’s public school system is serious. For at least a decade, education in the state of Georgia has been systematically starved of resources. Statistics reported yesterday by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities show per-student funding in the state down by a catastrophic 15 percent since 2008, while teacher pay has fallen by 8.2 percent.

The Atlanta school board split 5 to 3 on the plan, an indication of its nervousness given the widespread opposition of parents and students who are already reeling from school closings and mergers over the past decade.

The Atlanta Public Schools (APS) is one of the larger school districts in the state, serving 52,000 students with 61 traditional schools, 18 charter schools, and 4,000 teachers. It has been subjected to a long destabilization campaign, which has escalated since 2014 under the autocratic and pro-privatization agenda of school superintendent Meria Carstarphen who motivated the plan for “excellence.”

During her tenure, Carstarphen has ignored strident opposition from students, teachers, and parents, and aggressively closed schools and created overcrowded schools. A major advocate of charter schools, she has handed over public schools to the national charter chain

KIPP [Knowledge Is Power Program] and local charter chains Kindezi Schools and Purpose Built Schools. She has even closed schools rated as “successful” and forced highly experienced teachers to reapply for their jobs.

Indicative of the scorched-earth policy being directed against educators, last year Carstarphen announced that Atlanta’s Perkerson Elementary would be “reconstituted” because of low test scores, meaning that staff would be forced to reapply for their jobs. She warned would-be applicants that “they will have to make the case and show that they can make a difference with those students under the programming that we’re offering.”

While the school board has repeatedly cited monetary savings in closing schools, this has come at the expense of parents and children forced to travel longer distances, endure long hours and attend overcrowded schools.

So intertwined are the charter operators with the Atlanta School Board that a non-profit named RedefinED Atlanta that is allied with charter school operators fully paid for a trip of three members of the school board in January to visit Denver, a school district that has become a haven for private charter operators. This blatant conflict of interest, to put it mildly, was ostensibly to learn Denver’s “best practices” that could be duplicated in the APS system.

While both the Republican-dominated state legislature and then Republican Governor Nathan Deal joined Carstarphen in aggressively pushing for charter schools, the attacks on public education have been bipartisan and nationally driven.

The board chair of the Atlanta Board of Education is Jason Esteves, who also serves as the Treasurer of the state Democratic Party. His second-in-command is

Democrat Eshé Collins. Both received substantial contributions for their election campaigns from out-of-state millionaire charter school supporters. By all appearances, they are part of a group of local officials who were essentially “plugged-in” by Teach for America and its Leadership for Educational Equality, a national network of well-funded organizations devoted to privatization. For example, former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg’s daughter, Emma Bloomberg, donated \$2,500 to Esteves. (Under Bloomberg’s control, more than 100 charter schools were established in New York.)

In Georgia, charter schools mushroomed following the passage of a highly controversial constitutional amendment in 2012 that gave a state-level agency the right to override opposition from local school boards and directly approve charter schools. Millions of dollars were poured into this referendum campaign by privatization advocates—the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; parents of Jeff Bezos, the founder and chief executive of Amazon; and the Walton family. The language of the referendum, written by former governor [a Democrat, then a Republican] Deal was designed to deliberately confuse voters. Since that time, the state has created 45 charter school districts.

In May 2018, Deal signed into law a provision granting an estimated \$17 million in additional funding for state-authorized charter schools, while state funding for traditional public schools continued to be slashed.

Teachers in the state have no right to collective bargaining on their pay, working conditions or classroom sizes. Strikes by teachers and other public workers are outlawed. Teachers are especially angry at the pressure being exerted on them from the number of inane standardized tests they have to administer from elementary schools to high schools.

In 2015, four former elementary school teachers, two principals and five administrators were convicted of trumped-up criminal charges of “racketeering,” a law originally directed at gangsters. These educators were made scapegoats for “cheating” by supposedly inflating scores of their students on standardized tests. The case highlighted the relentless promotion of standardized tests by the Obama administration and both big business parties to justify the attacks on the jobs, living standards and work conditions of public school teachers along with the further diversion of resources to for-

profit charter operations.

There is a vast undercurrent of anger and dissatisfaction among Georgia teachers over their deteriorating working conditions, including increased class sizes and run-down schools. It is a matter of time before Georgia teachers will also be compelled to join their fellow teachers and students who are rebelling in numerous states and indeed internationally in defense of the democratic right to free and fully funded public education.



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