

Amid scandal and federal investigations, Nashville, Tennessee charter school closes in the middle of the school year

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With just six weeks left in the school year, New Vision Academy, a Nashville, Tennessee, charter school, has made the abrupt decision to close. The decision followed a year of local, state and federal investigations into financial irregularities and noncompliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The March 8 closure is not only a flagrant attack on the right to education for the school's 158 students and their parents, but an all-too-frequent scenario involving the nations' privately run charter schools.

Nashville families were left stranded, scrambling to enroll their children in another school by March 18—a mere 10 days' notice. A very similar incident occurred last year in Ohio, when one of the largest online charter schools in the US, Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow (ECOT), suddenly shut down, impacting as many as 12,000 students and forcing seniors to frantically search for a way to graduate on time.

The investigation into New Vision began last year after teachers at the school compiled an anonymous whistleblower report. In addition to financial irregularities and ADA noncompliance, teachers accused New Vision of failing to provide adequate instruction time for English-language-learning students and students with learning disabilities. Teachers who had spoken with the *Tennessean* about the report were immediately terminated by the school.

New Vision's decision to shut down this month came after the Nashville school district found that the school was cramming as many as 20 students in classrooms designed for 8, a direct violation of the fire code. The Office of Charter Schools—not New Vision—notified parents of the school's decision in a letter sent home

with students on March 6, just two days before the school was set to close.

On March 7, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) officials held a meeting for parents following the school's decision. More than 100 parents and students attended the meeting, expressing their frustration and anger over the closure.

The school's founder and executive director, Tim Malone, could not be bothered to attend the meeting. Malone and his wife, LaKesha, who is also an executive at New Vision, have a combined salary of \$562,000. One parent, Silvia Giron, said of Malone, "It is frustrating. He should have been here and he should have been man enough to say 'I screwed up'."

The closure of New Vision is by no means a fluke. A 2015 report by the liberal watchdog group The Center for Media and Democracy (CMD) concluded that approximately 2,500 charter schools shut down across the US between 2001 and 2013, affecting 288,000 students, and noted that "the failure rate for charter schools is much higher than for traditional public schools." As well, the report points out that school closures leave a lasting impact on students' success rates and can contribute to higher rates of youth incarceration.

New Vision's financial irregularities are no anomaly, either. On Jan 9, 2019, it was reported that up to 100 charter schools in Arizona could close as a result of financial mishandling. Another report by CMD titled "Charter School Black Hole" demonstrated that charter schools and their state and federal "overseers" could not account for the \$3.7 billion they had received since 1995. The CMD report also found that millions of dollars went toward "ghost schools," charters that

either never opened or briefly opened and then shut.

Tennessee established charter schools, which are privately owned and operated yet receive public funding and little oversight, in 2002, with the Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act. Since then, both Democratic and Republican administrations have sought to expand the charter school sector while carrying out assaults on public education and other social rights. In 2011, former Republican Governor Bill Haslam announced a multimillion-dollar project to create 40 privately run charter schools in the state. Prior to that, the legislature had raised the limit on charter operations from 50 to 90. In a move directed against teachers in impoverished school districts, Haslam's predecessor, Democratic Governor Phil Bredesen, instituted a law in 2010 tying 50 percent of teachers' job reviews to student improvement.

Haslam's successor, newly elected Republican Governor Bill Lee, has made clear that he intends to escalate the attack on public education. He has proposed the creation of a \$25 million education savings account (ESA) program in Tennessee, a type of voucher scheme in which public funds are siphoned into a spending account that can be used to send children to private schools. Lee would also seek an additional \$12 million for charters to purchase new property and upgrades. In a hypocritical gesture, the governor stated he would provide \$25 million to public schools in the first year of the ESA program as a poor substitute for the millions they will lose.

Since Lee's State of the State address, new details have emerged on the governor's plan. In an amended version, which was expected to be filed on March 15, the program would require at least \$75 million for its first year. By 2024, the program would cost taxpayers as much as \$125 million. The former CEO of a highly profitable electrical and plumbing business, Lee is also seeking to expand workforce development—i.e., the subordination of working-class education to the immediate needs of the moneyed elite.

Lee's proposal is part and parcel of the ongoing assault on public education in the US. In its recently unveiled budget proposal for 2020, the Trump administration is seeking to cut public education by \$7 billion while expanding funding for charter schools and creating "tax credit scholarships."

Trump is continuing and deepening the pro-

privatization policies established under Democrat Barack Obama while doubling down on the predatory wishes of billionaires such as his Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, Bill Gates, the Koch brothers, and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings. This cabal is deeply involved in the politics and profits of charterization. Hastings, for one, is the co-founder of the charter chain Aspire Public Schools, which is considering shutting down its Memphis, Tennessee, operations.

The governor's ESA proposal is also similar to schemes introduced in West Virginia and Kentucky, among other states, which have been denounced by teachers as "backdoor vouchers" attempting to collapse the student populations of underfunded public schools in favor of private, religious, and for-profit operations. The ESA legislations in West Virginia and Kentucky were among the policies that prompted teachers to conduct sick-outs over the past two months.

Workers are keenly aware of the fact that charter schools and voucher schemes serve to undermine and erode public education. Teachers have repeatedly struck against the growing incursion of charter operations around the country, but have been betrayed in this struggle by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, which seek not to oppose privatization, but to gain the dues franchise among this highly exploited workforce.

The first step in opposing the growth of privatization is for teachers to launch rank-and-file committees, uniting students, parents and all defenders of public education, independently of the unions, the Democrats and Republicans. Contact the *WSWS Teachers Newsletter* to get involved!



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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