# Montgomery, Alabama schools moves forward with plans to convert public schools into privately-operated charter schools

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*Educators, parents and students in Alabama and throughout the South should make plans to attend a special meeting of the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee this Saturday to discuss the politically-compromised CDC guidelines, the science of the pandemic and the fight against the reopening of schools.* Register here and share widely with your coworkers, family and friends*!*

In the midst of the pandemic and educator deaths, the Montgomery, Alabama Public Schools is pushing forward a plan for the privatization of schools.

On February 1, Superintendent Ann Roy Moore announced that Phalen Leadership Academies (PLA), based in Indianapolis, Indiana, would take over Davis Elementary for the fall 2021 school year, converting it into a charter school. Charter schools are funded by public tax dollars, but privately run. Nixon Elementary and Bellingrath Middle will follow suit in 2022. Plans are afoot for further "startup" charters as well.

The announcement comes as at least eight local teachers, and thirty statewide, have died from COVID-19. District teachers are engaged in a fight against school reopenings and dilapidated school buildings, which commonly have rodent, insect and bat infestations. Teachers throughout MPS give accounts of classrooms filled with mold. They are forced to use inadequate technology and substandard personal protective equipment.

Funds granted to charter schools could have instead been channeled towards upgrading dilapidated facilities and providing more services. The "partnership" that State Superintendent Eric Mackey and others propose is the partnership between business and school board to gut state education funding further.

The state's ruling elite is using the crisis in Montgomery as a wedge to open up the entire state to charters. At present, there are only two other charters in Alabama, one in Mobile and one in Livingston.

"We are fighting a war on four fronts," as one educator put it to the *World Socialist Web Site.*

In justifying the decision, the school district pointed to poor test scores at the three schools. Davis, Nixon and Bellingrath were placed under state supervision in 2017 on the grounds of "deficiencies in finances, operations, transportation, and student performance," according to the ALSDE.

This is the common tactic used to justify converting public schools into privately-run charters. Since Obama's Race to the Top program, low test scores on mind-numbing standardized tests have been the cover for turning underfunded public schools into a profit opportunity.

The federal government's Department of Education's Office of Innovation is providing the seed money for the venture, granting the charter advocacy organization New Schools for Alabama $25 million to create 15 charters over five years. Davis Elementary, in turn, will be handed $1.5 million from the group.

"I believe the same groups that claim to want to help our students are taking resources away from them," explained a teacher at one of the schools slated for charterization. "The organization that is sponsoring the conversion charter school received a hefty grant from the city to work with students during the summer months. It's wonderful to work with all students, but why not take that money and work with the students in that community? Those students and their families have been forgotten.

"Yes, they will be able to go to other schools because Davis has been on the failing schools' list for a while. I feel that people don't understand we are not failures; our students have many things to deal with in their lives … We need mental health resources and advocates to work with our families."

PLA has come under fire for hiring poorly-trained teachers who resort to humiliation and intimidation to maintain discipline. Last year, a parent at George and Veronica Phalen Leadership Academy in Indianapolis complained that

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her child's teacher told their class a grisly story about disobedient children whose feet were held in boiling water.

A number of PLA teachers have posted negative reviews about their experiences on job website Indeed.com. A teacher from Detroit wrote in 2019 about “atrocious” and unaffordable insurance premiums. They noted that most of the teachers at the school were either not certified or newly certified. In addition, the school administrators lacked the credentials required by the state of Michigan. The teacher pointed to “extremely high turnover” of staff, adding, “The school always seems as if it's the first day as for being organized, having a plan of how to deal with behaviors, how the flow/schedule of classes...things never seem to settle...”

The teacher concludes by saying, “All teachers seem overwhelmed and patiently waiting their escape.”

A teacher in Fort Wayne, Indiana, wrote in 2018 about the “unreliable IT infrastructure” at a PLA school. “In the classroom, I often felt like a participant in an experiment about to go terribly wrong.

“I think that some administrators are overwhelmed while others are sorely underqualified,” wrote a PLA educator in Indianapolis. “Staff are mainly disgruntled.”

Behind the drive to open up the “education market” via charter schools are major financial interests. The founder of Phalen Academies, a graduate of Yale and Harvard Law School, received the Mind Trust's Education Entrepreneur Fellowship in 2009, a billionaire-funded “education reform,” e.g., charter-school advocacy organization. Earl Martin Phalen's business, called an Education Management Organization (EMO), secures contracts for “turnaround schools,” handling their money, hiring policies, and curriculum. A black entrepreneur, Phalen has made a specialty of targeting impoverished, heavily minority districts around the US, including Gary, Indiana, Detroit, Michigan and Cincinnati, Ohio.

As with charter schools generally, Phalen's claims of education “excellence” are rarely, if ever, truthful. In fact, PLA's test scores in Indiana remain far below the state average, according to schooldigger.com.

In late January, four MPS teachers died in one week from coronavirus infections.

The school board did not discuss these deaths when it met that week, nor did it address the growing anger among teachers about the hazardous health conditions in their classroom. They focused instead upon the application of another charter school, I Dream Big Academies.

The day after the meeting, MPS alumna and Montgomery resident Shayla Jackson explained her concerns about I Dream Big live on Facebook. “[the I Dream Big Schools representative] basically said they're starting a charter school because Montgomery schools are poor, your children need to be in a rich environment, they have chronic absenteeism, and overall, they have a vocational aspect they can get them to,” Jackson told her viewers.

She listed many of the gaps in the logic of charter school supporters. “Charter school education only lasts as long as it's funded… when the money runs out, the school runs out,” she said. “They're going to take your poor child… out of a poor environment, they're going to nurture them and mentor them, but If they get four [disciplinary] events... they're going to indefinitely suspend them. That means that they're going to put them out. But they're worried about chronic absenteeism.”

The MPS board denied I Dream Big's application, but two weeks later, Moore announced PLA's slated takeover of Davis. Two weeks after that, the Alabama Senate unanimously passed a bill introduced by Republican Senator Will Barfoot to enable the creation of charter schools catering either primarily or exclusively to military dependents.

Educators and parents must recognize these conversions as the attacks that they are, and the entire working class must come together to oppose the destruction of public education at the hands of charter and education business profiteers.

We urge all educators and parents seeking to defend public education and the social right to high-quality education for all to join the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. Please make plans to attend our special meeting this Saturday to discuss the politically-compromised CDC guidelines, the science of the pandemic and the fight against the deadly reopening of face-to-face education. Dr. Benjamin Mateus, a science reporter for the WSWS and practicing physician, will speak and address questions.

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