

Pro-business frontman in Detroit schools awarded “Urban superintendent of the year”

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Are you a Detroit educator? Contact us on the form below to discuss conditions at your school and how to join the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to protect lives against Covid-19 and other unhealthy conditions, and fight budget cutting and social inequality.

Nikolai Vitti, superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), was named 2022 Urban Superintendent of the Year by the Council of the Great City Schools last month. The council is made up of school superintendents and school board members from the country’s 78 largest urban school districts, which serve 7.8 million students.

The award “recognizes outstanding contributions in urban education leadership” and is co-sponsored by the Scholastic children’s book publishing company. Recipients get \$1,000 to give to a student towards college education.

Vitti is not being awarded because he has led any turnaround of the largely impoverished school district, which continues to lose students and faces a severe shortage of teachers and support staff after decades of savage budget cuts, school closures and expansion of for-profit charter schools. There is little that differentiates him from previous superintendents who guarded corporate interests while dismantling what had once been considered one of the best school systems in the US.

If Vitti is being honored by his predominantly fellow Democratic Party school executives it is because he has, at least up to now, been successful in suppressing further opposition by educators and working-class parents and students to continued austerity and social inequality. To do this, Vitti has relied on the Detroit Federation of Teachers union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left promoters.

After leaving his job as superintendent of the Duval County, Florida schools, Vitti was put in charge of the Detroit public school system in May 2017. This was only months after a wave of militant job actions by Detroit teachers against the brutal bankruptcy restructuring plan by a financial emergency manager appointed by Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder.

In 2016, teachers launched a wave of wildcat sickout strikes in defiance of the DFT to oppose pay cuts and deteriorating school buildings. This would be the prelude to the wave of

teacher rebellions in 2018-2019 that erupted in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, and Los Angeles, Chicago and other cities. The shutdown of these struggles by the union bureaucracy, paved the way for a counter-offensive against public education.

Working with the DFT bureaucracy, Vitti imposed a long-resisted merit pay system on new hires in 2017. New teachers’ salaries, which started at a little more than \$51,000 a year, were now based on standardized test scores and other arbitrary measurements. This shifted the burden of educational problems—caused by decades of bipartisan budget cuts and the explosive growth of poverty—onto the shoulders of teachers.

Merit pay has long been at the heart of every corporate-backed attack on public education, starting with the voucher proposals of free-market guru Milton Friedman, the “school choice” scam of Bill Clinton, Bush’s No Child Left Behind, and Obama’s Race to the Top. The scheme has also been championed by billionaire opponents of public education like Bill Gates and Trump’s education secretary Betsy DeVos.

Facing increasing opposition to a financial emergency manager—who had veto power over the elected school board--Detroit’s Democratic Party Mayor Mike Duggan established the Community Education Commission (CEC) in 2018. Vitti was selected to sit on this body, along with representatives of the DFT, the pro-charter Skillman Foundation, and auto parts maker Lear Corporation. This set the stage for the ending of state oversight and a return to the facade of “local control.”

The pandemic and the reopening of schools

Vitti also played a central role in the reopening of schools even as Detroit made national headlines because of the spread of Covid-19 infections and deaths. In mid-May 2020, non-essential businesses were reopened after being forced to close by a wave of wildcat strikes by autoworkers when the pandemic first hit Detroit in March, 2020.

Big business exerted immense pressure to get children back

in school so their parents could get back to work producing profits. In September of 2020, however, 91 percent of DPSCD teachers voted for a safety strike to keep the children and the city of Detroit as safe as possible since it had been scientifically proven that COVID-19 was aerosolized and schools were super spreaders.

Once again, the DFT worked with Vitti to prevent a strike and begin opening the schools. Encountering resistance from educators, parents and students, Vitti was forced to keep the 2020-2021 school year mostly remote with about 20 percent of students entering buildings and teachers receiving “hazard pay” to teach students.

In the ensuing months, however, school officials in Detroit, Chicago and other Democratic-run big city districts, worked with the unions to beat back opposition and reopen schools. With the coming to power of the Biden administration, schools dropped all mitigation measures as the Democratic president adopted Trump’s deadly “herd immunity” policy.

By June 30, 2022 all mitigation measures had been lifted in DPSCD. The 2022-23 school year has seen an increase in illness and high absentee rates with only the sickest children remaining home due to pre-Covid punitive measures the district has restored to victimize the families of absent students.

While Vitti has gained praise from the corporate, political and media establishment, educators have an entirely different appraisal.

A DPSCD teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, Vitti “talks the talk” but “never takes ownership” for the district’s ongoing crisis. “He puts it on everyone else: ‘The schools are failing because the teachers don’t work hard enough.’ He does not allocate funds equally. I am in a building that does not have air conditioning in 2022! When it is 80+ degrees in my classroom it is too hot to teach and too hot to learn.

“Chronic absenteeism is also an issue. And at my school discipline is not being handled and there’s a lot of problems with that and it’s making it very exhausting to teach.

“A teacher I know is in a ‘Cohort 4’ school. They are apparently the lowest performing schools and, of course, it’s because the teachers must not be doing their jobs, and not the fact that they are in the highest poverty areas in the district.

“Every time you turn around, they’re adding more things they want us to do with the curriculum. When the lessons are already very tight timewise! Things have got to change or DPS is not going to be able to function because they will not have enough staff to keep the buildings open. Maybe it’s time for a sickout or two.”

School restructuring, the “school-to-sweatshop pipeline” and arresting parents for student absenteeism

In May 2022, the school board began implementing a Master Facilities Plan (MFP) for 87 of the district’s schools. This includes building five new schools and providing others with new ventilation systems. The plan, however, fails to upgrade all of the district’s HVAC systems for air conditioning and protection from the aerosolized COVID-19 virus, RSV and the flu.

Financed by a one-time infusion of \$700 million from Michigan’s \$6 billion federal COVID relief money, even the authors admit, “With continued rising costs, our Facility Master Plan proposes the most immediate investment needs totaling \$700M out of a \$2.1 billion need.”

Another initiative Vitti is taking uses the schools to prepare a cheap labor force to the auto industry, which faces a critical worker shortage due to the deaths, sickness, and debility caused by the unchecked spread of the pandemic.

Last month, DPSCD joined local businesses in a Manufacturing Day event for 490 students. This coincided with the visit of AFT President Randi Weingarten and DFT President Terrence Martin to a local school to promote what can only be called their “school to sweatshop pipeline.”

With the push to reopen schools to keep parents at work and profits flowing, students must be forced to attend regardless of the pandemic, Long Covid or the health and well-being of the population. To this end, it is noteworthy to see Vitti’s comments in a recent *Detroit Free Press* article, which cites research showing that absenteeism is not the product of parental neglect, but of sickness, evictions, lack of transportation and other problems caused by poverty.

Ignoring all of that Vitti declares that parents of absent students should be thrown in prison. “Our role is to create an environment where students want to come, but there is a point where there has to be more accountability and I think that is a city, really, a county function at the prosecutor’s level.”

This sums up the real outlook of the Urban Superintendent of the Year.

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