

North Carolina legislature poised to establish three-year high school option, vastly expand privatization of public education

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4 May 2023

On April 26, a North Carolina Senate education committee approved a bill that will require all public high schools in the state to create a three-year track to graduate. The “Choose Your School, Choose Your Future” bill will also triple the size of the state’s school voucher program, shifting hundreds of millions of dollars annually from public schools to religious and other private institutions. The bill is expected to become law once it is voted upon, with Republicans in the state holding a veto-proof majority in both the state’s House of Representatives and Senate.

The bill serves at least four aims of the factions of the ruling class represented by the Republican Party: the decimation of public education; the shifting of ever-more students into reactionary, religious-based education; the further undermining of the “wall of separation” between church and state as enshrined in the First Amendment; and ensuring an increased supply of young people for the workforce in order to suppress wages and increase the profits of multinational corporations.

To meet the new graduation requirement, North Carolina school systems must create a course plan that allows students to complete the state minimum of 22 credits in three years. Districts in the state would not be permitted to exceed this 22-credit threshold for graduation. Numerous jurisdictions currently exceed this requirement, with at least one district requiring as many as 28 credits to graduate. Notably, the required three-year option will not apply to private schools in the state, despite the fact that many receive public funding through the state’s voucher program.

The bill’s other major initiative codifies a vast expansion of the privatization of education in the state and will redirect public education funding into the hands of the wealthiest to subsidize private school tuition. Notably, the legislation drops all income caps for families receiving public funds to use at private institutions and also eliminates the requirement that students applying for vouchers currently attend public schools. With these new provisions, wealthy families who already send their children to elite private institutions, with tuitions upwards of \$25,000 a year, will receive thousands of dollars in public funds to continue to send them to private school.

When the state’s school voucher program began in 2014, eligibility was limited to students who qualified for free or reduced lunch with a family income up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level. For the current school year, eligibility was expanded to a family making 200 percent of the amount needed to qualify for subsidized meals. Moving forward, all such caps are to be eliminated.

The new bill also dramatically increases public funding for the voucher program, starving public schools of hundreds of millions of dollars annually. The program currently has \$191.5 million allocated to it. Under the terms of the new legislation, it will increase by \$1.3 billion combined over the next seven years. By 2032, the program will have an annual budget of over \$500 million. Upon passage, it will also be the only education program in the state with guaranteed funding increases.

The amount of the voucher to individual families will vary based on income. The lowest-income families will be eligible to receive the equivalent of the state average of per pupil funding. For the current school year that amounts to \$7,213 per year. The wealthiest families will be entitled to 45 percent of this, or \$3,246.

The new bill is simply a redirection of the already meager funding for public schools to the direct benefit of North Carolina’s wealthy elite and the private schools that cater to them. It also will enrich those running low-quality religious and other private institutions, as desperate parents seek to escape the ever worsening and underfunded public school system.

Working class parents will be left with the “choice” (the favorite educational buzzword of the right) of sending their children to resource-poor public schools or poorly performing religious-based private schools. Notably, in North Carolina there is no requirement that private schools with voucher students meet any threshold of academic quality. There is no accreditation requirement, no state oversight of curriculum or graduation standards and no requirement for licensed teachers.

Religious schools make up the overwhelming majority of institutions enrolling voucher participants. According to an analysis of the North Carolina voucher program by Duke Law School, between the start of the voucher program in 2014 and

2020, over 90 percent of voucher students attended religious schools. Disturbingly, more than 77 percent of North Carolina students who obtained vouchers are attending schools using a curriculum emphasizing a literal biblical world view.

According to the League of Women Voters (LWV), a majority of North Carolina Christian schools use the Abeka Curriculum, published by Pensacola Christian College. The LWV found that the Abeka science curriculum “presents the universe as the direct creation of God and refutes the man-made idea of evolution. Further, the books present God as the Great Designer and Lawgiver ... [and] give a solid foundation in all areas of science—a foundation firmly anchored to Scriptural truth.” In 2018, *Newsweek* found that the curriculums from three Christian publishers, including Abeka, teach children that humans roamed the earth at the same time as dinosaurs.

Such false, religious-based curriculums are widespread nationwide. In 2017, Huffington Post found that over a third of all private schools receiving public funds through voucher programs were using curriculum from either Abeka, Bob Jones University Press or Accelerated Christian Education, about 2,400 schools in all. This does not include private schools without voucher recipients who are using such curriculums.

Unsurprisingly, as the Economic Policy Institute noted on April 20, “There is an extensive body of research finding that voucher programs do not improve student achievement. Recent studies in four states all showed that students who used vouchers experienced worse academic outcomes than their peers, and a study of voucher programs in Milwaukee found that voucher students performed better after transferring from private to public schools.”

The diversion of such vast public sums into religious-based education in North Carolina comes in the wake of a November 2022 state Supreme Court ruling which ordered the state to spend an additional \$1.75 billion on public education. This ruling came after three decades of litigation pursued by low-income school districts against the state, arguing that North Carolina was not meeting the rights of children “to the privilege of education,” as proclaimed in the state constitution. Subsequent to the November ruling, however, Republicans gained two seats on the state Supreme Court and, in early March, reversed the November 2022 ruling.

The mandatory three-year high school graduation option in the North Carolina bill comes at a time when the ruling class is intent on overcoming a labor supply shortage of its own making, through its complete failure to protect the population from the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated economic dislocation. A growing number of Republican-led states are introducing and passing legislation loosening child labor laws geared toward funneling more youth into low-wage jobs.

The Federal Reserve has spent the last year continually raising interest rates in an attempt to beat back wage demands by workers. The rising interest rates have slowed the economy

and led to a widespread jobs massacre. Increasing the pool of exploitable young workers, as the North Carolina three-year high school graduation option undoubtedly will do, is another aspect of the ruling class’s attempt to tamp down wage growth.

The most recently published minutes of the Federal Reserve, from the March meeting, noted continuing concerns about the number of job openings: “The private-sector job openings rate in January ... was little changed, on balance, since November and remained high.”

The Fed expressed equal concern at nominal wage growth, even though it remains below the rate of inflation, stating, “Recent indicators of nominal wage growth had slowed but continued to be elevated. In February, the 3-month change in average hourly earnings for all employees was at an annual rate of 3.6 percent, slower than its 12-month pace of 4.6 percent.”

Along with the North Carolina bill, employers such as UPS have established “School to Work” programs, in which high school seniors work at UPS during school hours in exchange for school credits toward graduation. According to UPS, students enrolled in the program “attend high school for 2-3 hours each morning to complete graduation requirements” and then “[w]ork at UPS from approximately 11:30 a.m.–3:30 p.m.”

Not to be outdone by the state and major corporations in funneling youth into low-paying jobs at the expense of their education, the American Federation of Teachers passed a resolution last summer noting severe job shortages and calling on the formation of a German-style tripartite arrangement between the state, corporations and unions to funnel high school students into internships and apprenticeships, “in partnership with local employers, union apprenticeship programs and community colleges.”



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