

Detroit schools to be “reconstituted,” as calls for privatization increase

By Walter Gilberti
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Three Detroit high schools and one elementary school are to be “reconstituted” as mandated by the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act. The initiative by schools CEO Connie Calloway, in which the designated schools will be divided up into several small “schools within schools,” opens the door to further state intervention, with the complete reorganization of the public schools system and the firing of teachers and administrators on the horizon.

Calloway’s action comes amidst a growing clamor for privatization and the renewed spread of charter schools in the city, and follows the recent report that Detroit ranks lowest in the country among major US cities in the rate of graduation of its students. According to the figures presented, only 25 percent of ninth graders graduate after four years.

Even if further punitive action by the state of Michigan is not immediate, Detroit teachers face the prospect of a new round of layoffs. Recently, the District notified schools whose enrollments were down after the second semester “fourth Wednesday count” that they had to remove a certain number of teachers from their employment rolls. The problem, however, is that without a 60-day notice before being laid off, these teachers would have had to have been paid for the remainder of the school year, even if they were removed from their classrooms. So while the district has made a certain retreat from its original notice, it is likely that many teachers will receive pink slips as the school year comes to a close.

The startling Detroit graduation statistics are a direct reflection of the economic and social collapse of the city. The news, however, prompted *Detroit News* Editorial Page Editor Nolan Finley to launch a tirade against the district, in which he called for the “bulldozing” of the school system. In an April 6 editorial, Finley demanded that the “Detroit Public Schools should cease to exist as a teaching body.” Finley makes no secret that he is an advocate of privatization, calling for the schools to be run by “private vendors screened, hired and monitored by the district, and free to hire teachers and principals whose jobs depend on producing better results.” In his opinion, even the adequately performing schools should be “spun off.”

Finley cynically called for an “army” of civil rights lawyers to descend upon Detroit to demand the radical change, while

applauding Calloway’s reconstitution initiative. Finley’s outrage and phony pandering to racial politics, however, is colored by a class arrogance that surfaced at the end of the editorial piece, when he stated: “If a 25 percent graduation rate doesn’t make Detroit’s parents angry enough to demand radical change from the education system, nothing will.” And if they don’t, what then ... “bulldoze” the entire city?

The economic and social conditions for a large segment of Detroit’s working class population can only be described as desperate. Whole neighborhoods are in a state of collapse, with the Detroit home foreclosure rate among the highest in the country. Youth gang violence is on the increase, as prospects for decent employment are evaporating. Many schools are located in areas that are unsafe, if not downright dangerous, for students and teachers alike. Teachers’ cars are vandalized routinely, and robberies are frequent.

Many families, forced to relocate due to the housing crisis, or simply seeking a safer environment for their families, move their children from school to school within the district, or to some nearby suburban district, if they can prove residency. Some try the charter schools, but most of these schools, staffed with largely inexperienced and underpaid personnel, are ill equipped to deal with a largely at-risk student population.

Thus, the tendency in Detroit continues to be the maintenance of a few better schools, while the majority of neighborhood schools are left to their own devices—scrambling for supplies, beset with a crumbling infrastructure and beholden to the largesse of private benefactors. At a recent union meeting, a contingent of Mumford High School teachers angrily confronted Detroit Federation of Teachers President Virginia Cantrell over the union’s silence and inaction over the physical deterioration and the lack of safe conditions in the schools.

Following the betrayal of the 16-day teachers strike in 2006, Virginia Cantrell replaced Janna Garrison as DFT Local 231 president. The change, however, has been merely cosmetic. If anything, the present union leadership is even less vocal and open than the one preceding it. Most teachers, who routinely boycott the regular monthly meetings and the tepid protests organized by the Cantrell leadership, sense the futility of fighting against the attacks on public education within the framework of trade unionism.

A year ago the District closed a number of schools, including several high schools. It is a measure of both the corruption and incompetence of the district, as well as the economic desperation felt by many in the city, that some of these schools were simply closed without provisions made for the removal of books, furniture and even students' records. As a result the schools have been ransacked of their supplies, including the removal of valuable copper and other metals, so that even if the schools were to reopen they would require expensive renovation.

Detroit continues to lose population and this loss is reflected in school enrollment, which fell another 10 percent for the 2007-2008 school year, a loss which could cost the district \$90 million in school revenue. As reported last Saturday in the *Detroit News*, over the last six years a startling 50,000 students have left the system.

The reconstitution of the four named schools, which include Cody, Osborne and Henry Ford high schools, means that they will be divided up into four or five smaller schools, so-called "schools within schools." This has been tried before in Detroit, with marginal success at best. Each school will have its own administrators, and will employ teachers who would have to "reapply" for their jobs in order to work in their former building.

Shortly after the imposition of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) by Congress in 2001, representatives of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) signed two "Letters of Understanding" with the school district which agreed that the district has the responsibility to intervene when a school had been determined by the State of Michigan to have failed to make AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress), as stipulated by NCLB. Meeting AYP primarily means improved performance on standardized tests, but a school's graduation rate is also a criterion.

While the letters make clear that any teacher whose performance is deemed to be inadequate for continued employment at a reconstituted school will not be subject to any disciplinary action, there is no doubt about the punitive character of the No Child Left Behind Act, which is explicit about who's to blame for "failing" schools: the teachers and administrators. The broader economic, social and cultural issues that are ravaging American society, and which find their sharpest expression in the cities, are simply out of bounds as an explanation for the crisis of public education.

What is interesting about these letters, which were signed by both current DFT president Virginia Cantrell and former president Janna Garrison, is what they reveal about the long-standing capitulation by the DFT and its parent union the American Federation of Teachers to the NCLB initiative, principally due to the overwhelming support it received from the Democrats, whom both unions continue to enthusiastically support.

It should be noted that the drive for privatization and the

spread of charter schools in Detroit and throughout Michigan takes place under the second term of Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, and that Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, also a Democrat and currently under indictment for lying to a grand jury, has been an open advocate for the spread of charter schools in the city.

The language contained in the "Letters of Understanding" underscores the level of blackmail that is implicit with NCLB. Once a school is deemed to have "failed" to achieve AYP, "corrective actions" can be introduced, which include: professional development, parental involvement, afterschool programs, preschool programs, universal breakfast programs, implementation of technology, to name a few. Why these necessary improvements aren't simply provided as a matter of course to bolster the academic environment in a potentially "failed" school remains an unanswered question.

Teachers remain skeptical and suspicious of the Calloway initiative. At a recent DFT-sponsored demonstration in front of DPS headquarters, a teacher at Cody High School explained that after the closing of McKenzie and Redford High Schools, Cody received some of their students. "There was a gang problem for a while, and our enrollment fell to under 1,000. They called a meeting, basically telling us that our jobs would no longer exist. However, it looks like they're trying to retreat from that. Calloway wants to set up four or five schools each with an enrollment of 400-500 students. It wouldn't be Cody, but a kind of Cody collective. It really doesn't make a lot of sense to me. They're accusing us because of test scores. It's a nationwide thing. I really don't think anything can be done on a local level."

Henry Ford High School also received students from McKenzie and Redford after they closed. "We got maybe 800 students from those schools," an HFHS teacher explained, "so our enrollment was around 2,200. I think that what really triggered the reconstitution were some violent incidents that were blown out of proportion. So now we're in 'phase one' of a new makeover. But you can't simply divide a building, put students in different colored shirts and say you have small schools."

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