

Seventeen charter schools closed in Columbus, Ohio

By Sheila Brehm
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Calls for oversight into Ohio charter schools have been renewed this week, after an unprecedented 17 charter schools closed in Columbus, Ohio, in one year. Eleven of those closures took place this fall, forcing more than 250 students to scramble at the last minute to find new schools. The majority of the shuttered schools were open only a few months, and some only a few weeks. Although the educational viability of these schools was highly suspect—numerous charters have been involved in questionable practices—the state of Ohio used \$1.6 million in public taxpayer money just to keep nine of these schools open only from August through October or November.

Funded through money looted from public education, charter schools are a cash cow for big business. Many of the charters have been characterized by fraud, financial irregularities, school closings, dismal report card ratings, and educational deprivation.

In November, Richard Ross, the state superintendent of the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), ordered the shutdown of two brand-new charter schools, the Talented Tenth Leadership Academy for Boys and the Talented Tenth Leadership Academy for Girls. It was a rare move by the state, but the deplorable conditions were so unsafe they could no longer be ignored. Ross characterized the situation as an “educational travesty.” Basic nutrition was denied the students. Lunch was not served on a set schedule, and often it was simply fast food that someone picked up.

Both academies were set up to serve at-risk middle school children. In addition to the lack of nutrition, the visits from the ODE found that students were left without supervision because there were not enough teachers or staff. Not surprisingly, state inspectors also reported a poor level of education.

A third school, 40-student Barnett Academy of

Columbus East, also closed its doors in November, after having opened only weeks before. By the end of October, it failed to pay its employees. The state paid the charter \$84,000 through last October. The school was on schedule to receive \$337,500 for the school year.

Barnett Academy’s former assistant principal, Camille Ward, told the *Columbus Dispatch* that the school provided no health insurance plan, although it was in her contract. She only received \$500 for two weeks’ work in September, or about \$6.25 an hour. Her yearly contractual pay was supposed to be \$50,000. Ward reported the school had a bed bug problem, and that the food vendor quit providing student lunches due to non-payment.

All three schools were sponsored by the North Central Ohio Educational Service Center (ESC), based in Marion. In the case of the ESC, it is both sponsor and operator, and provides staff members and other types of services to the charter school districts, including payroll and financial reporting. The ESC is one of many state-authorized sponsors grabbing the \$780 million in state tax money that flows to Ohio charter schools each year. In return for “being accountable for academic performance,” the sponsors keep up to 3 percent of annual state aid—\$23.4 million a year.

In its capacity of sponsor, the ESC gave the go-ahead to Andre Tucker to open the Talented Tenth academies. If any due diligence had been done, it would have been learned that in the 2011-2012 school year, Tucker opened another charter in Columbus, which also claimed to have a goal of serving at-risk middle school students. It was called the Leadership Academy of Mathematics and Science, and closed during its first year.

The local Columbus newspaper has since reported that Tucker had been charged with felony theft and ordered to pay restitution in Florida, and had money problems with an earlier charter school.

Five of the nine schools that opened and then closed abruptly in the fall were authorized and sponsored by the North Central Ohio ESC. The ESC currently sponsors charters in three counties. Several of the charter schools sponsored by the ESC owe money to the state for funding they received based on inflated enrollment estimates.

Another entity approved by the state to authorize charters is a former orphanage. St. Aloysius Orphanage of Cincinnati approved eight new charter schools for the school year and contracted with Charter School Specialists of Pickerington to manage them. These eight charter schools, named Olympus, applied for funding based on 1,600 students. The ODE approved funding (deducted from public school district budgets) for 700 students rather than 1,600. These charter schools received \$1.17 million of school districts' money as of the end of October.

All eight charter schools, with a combined enrollment of 128 students, have closed. Three of the eight schools had a total of 15 students, for which these charter schools received \$29,200 per student for two months of instruction, or the equivalent of more than \$130,000 per student per school year. The spokesman for the ODE was asked by a *Columbus Dispatch* reporter whether any of the funds could be recovered. The response was that he didn't know if "any individual could be held financially responsible for any overpayment."

St. Aloysius still runs 45 charter schools in Ohio, according to the web site of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. The events surrounding the recently closed schools are shocking, but only the tip of the iceberg.

Resources for public schools are being drained, affecting communities throughout the state. For example, Morgan County in southeast Ohio, home to 15,000 people, has been seriously affected by the siphoning of funds from the public schools to the charters. The local school district lost \$420,000 when 69 students from the district enrolled in an electronic on-line charter school, because funding is based on enrollment. Superintendent Lori Lowe told the *Morgan*

County , "When we lose students to schools, we lose funds. We need that money for our students to buy buses and to keep the lights and heat turned on. We may lose students, but we still have fixed costs, and even though we lose money, our expenses are not reduced," she said.

Ohio's nearly 400 charter schools, designated "community schools," enroll more than 108,000 students. Nearly one third of the charters have closed since 1997, when the establishment of charters became legal in Ohio. Many of those reopened again under different names. By the end of the current fiscal year, Ohio charter schools will have collected a staggering \$5.6 billion in total state aid payments since their inception. The process is accelerating. This school year, Ohio taxpayers will pay a projected \$1 billion into the charter school industry.

The proliferation of charter schools, with the transfer of public resources directly into the hand of for-profit ventures, is part of a deepening assault on public education. The rampant corruption revealed in Ohio is the rule, not the exception, in school privatization.

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