

After the destruction of the Detroit Public Schools

## Michigan officials press to close “failing schools”

By Nancy Hanover  
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On September 1, the Michigan School Reform Office (SRO) released a list of 124 schools ranked in the bottom five percent based on standardized testing, creating fears of state takeover and potential school closures in districts across Michigan.

Federal law requires that five percent of all schools in each state be designated as “priority schools.” The concept was developed by the Obama administration in conjunction with No Child Left Behind waivers. It mandated aggressive state intervention including staff firings, denial of Title I federal funding or closures of “low-achieving” schools. The policy was continued under Obama’s Race To The Top and the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Last year Republican Michigan Governor Rick Snyder placed the supervision of “low performing” schools under his direct control through the School Reform Office. In August, administrators and school board members across the state were told that if their schools were on the list for three straight years, they would be closed in the 2017-18 academic year. Such actions would be the first under the 2009 state law, which first authorized them.

“We’re talking about chronic failures,” Natasha Baker, the head of the SRO said in mid-August, according to the *Detroit Free Press*. “You cannot have a highly skilled work force if folks are not educated and trained. That’s what the public education system is supposed to do for kids regardless of their demographics.”

Baker said Michigan will move “aggressively” to close schools and that the list is due by the end of the calendar year, but “it is nowhere near 100 schools.” This caveat was hardly reassuring to teachers, administrators and students in the named schools.

Meetings are being held between Baker and the targeted districts throughout the state. Dr. Shelly Walker of Benton Harbor Area Schools told fellow administrators, “The striking message was that Natasha indicated that unless there is a (undefined) hardship. .. (and a school) did not come off

the list in 2016 it would be recommended for closure by June 2017,” according to a news account on the Great Lakes Education Project. John Austin, president of the State Board of Education, echoed Baker’s hard line, saying Michigan “has to be serious about shutting down under-performing schools,” according to MLive.

Predictably, the charter school industry smelled substantial business opportunities in the works. Gary Naeyaert, executive director of the DeVos family-funded charter lobby Great Lakes Education Project, described the state’s decision to close chronically failing schools as “long overdue.”

Baker was named as head of Michigan’s State Reform Office with politically suitable pro-charter credentials. She supervised four charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans, then attempted to start a Detroit “public boarding school,” receiving \$110,000 in tax dollars. She never opened the school—it was one of many such “ghost schools” that cashed in on state and federal charter school subsidies.

Eighteen Detroit Public School Community District (DPSCD) schools were on the “priority” list in 2014 and 2015 (as part of the now dissolved Detroit Public Schools) and face potential closure. Following a legal opinion issued last week by Miller Canfield, however, Governor Rick Snyder has pulled back from threatening the new district, saying the state will not mandate immediate closings in the DPSCD. He nonetheless expressed the hope that a newly-elected school board would study closures after November.

The routine use of standardized tests to label traditional public schools as “failing” and shut them down has become government policy under the Obama administration. Endless testing has become a bludgeon in the destruction of public education, clearing a path for the lucrative business models associated with charters and other forms of privatization.

While there has been an incessant attempt to portray the assault on public schools—at least in urban areas—as the

product of racism and Republican legislators, it has been the policies of the Obama administration which have spearheaded the unprecedented assault on public education. Public education is systematically being destroyed for working-class youth.

So-called “white,” “black” and “Hispanic” majority schools all face desperate underfunding throughout the US. With test scores almost entirely correlated to income levels, the most impoverished schools have been relentlessly targeted by Wall Street’s pro-privatization drive. This was the fundamental issue in the decision to utilize the debt of the Detroit Public Schools as a pretext to dissolve the 174-year-old district and pave the way for its privatization.

The highly-placed financial interests driving the process was underscored by a recent release of a memo by the executive director of Detroit’s Financial Commission (FRC), bankruptcy lawyer Ron Rose. The DPSCD, created July 1 with the dissolution of the DPS, was placed under the control of the FRC, the big business board created during the city’s municipal bankruptcy of 2013-14.

The powers and purpose of the FRC were deliberately understated, if not concealed, by the advocates for Governor Snyder’s reorganization of the schools, including state Democrats, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, and the Detroit Federation of Teachers. This cabal instead cynically claimed that the Snyder plan would “return the schools to democratic local control” once the emergency manager was removed.

In his memo, FRC executive director Rose flatly contradicted this assertion, saying the FRB’s statutes gave it control over [not only] “a broad combination of accounting and financial practices, but also policies, procedures, operating decisions, administrative and academic matters that impact financial outcomes.”

Reacting to Rose’s statements, DPSCD emergency manager Judge Stephen Rhodes admitted, “Arguably, every single decision we make has a financial impact. If that’s going to be the view of the FRC, that doesn’t leave very much for me, or very much for the elected school board beginning January 1.”

These statements demonstrate the correctness of the warnings issued by the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* on the fraudulent and self-serving character of the Detroit Federation of Teachers/American Federation of Teachers’ public campaign of support to the state legislation.

The DFT claimed the new set-up would be the answer to the notorious state policy of emergency management. The union joined with the local black Democratic Party establishment to subvert the courageous struggle of teachers against the attacks on public education, portraying the crisis as a racial attack on “black Detroit” that would be overcome with school board elections.

This lie was designed to deflect attention away from the union’s long record of collaboration in the destruction of education. Moreover it sought to cut teachers off from their powerful allies in the working class as whole, including teachers throughout Michigan, and solidify the deal with Lansing.

A recent news media report now provides additional details as to the dirty deal negotiated at the state level. It also gives a whiff of the anticipated results.

According to the *Detroit Free Press*, the charter industry “bought” the legislation they wanted. The article describes the reorganization as a “filthy, moneyed kiss to the charter school industry.” It states that the DeVos family spent \$1.45 million in June and July on Michigan legislators who were considering possible “oversight” of charters within the City of Detroit. Joining their efforts to pave the way for the unfettered growth of charters was billionaire J.C. Huizenga, owner of the state’s largest charter school chain, National Heritage Academies. These “transactional politics” acknowledged services rendered and gutted any provisions to regulate charters.

The legislation has established the precedent that debt-ridden schools can be dissolved, reorganized and/or replaced with private entities.

Seeking to avoid the hated term “emergency manager”, the Michigan SRO is expanding the use of similar financial/political instruments to destroy public schools through the state, affecting workers and young people of all races. In June, four “priority” schools in the Eastpointe school district were put under the control of a state “CEO”. This new position was empowered to impose budget cuts, convert schools into charters, or close schools and sell the buildings in line with the demands of state bondholders and other financial profit interests.

East Detroit Schools (Eastpointe) have filed suit to block the state action. Last week other Detroit suburban districts, Roseville, Warren Consolidated, Van Dyke and Mount Clemens joined the suit. “The School Reform Office is exceeding its authority regarding school closures ... It is a seizure of community assets,” stated the Mount Clemens Community Schools Superintendent.

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