
Michigan

Battle rages over school privatization

by Suzanne Rose

The school board in Pinckney, Michigan was scheduled to vote on April 1 on whether to turn over the schools in the district to a private company to be run on a for-profit basis. The company is the Minneapolis-based Education Alternatives, Inc. (EAI). The privatization has been hotly contested, as 200 students at Pinckney High School walked out of class, with the encouragement of their teachers, and conducted a demonstration against the action on March 9. "You can't sell us," they chanted.

Privatization of schools in one form or another is a growing national trend, due to the collapse of the tax funds available for education. EAI, which is running schools in just a few locations, is among the most radical of alternatives sought by impoverished districts facing the budget axe. EAI promises to reduce operating and administration spending by 25% in the schools it runs.

But the real results are quite different. On March 30, the American Federation of Teachers held a press conference in Washington, D.C. to attack the results of EAI's operation of nine Baltimore schools. Test scores in the schools went down, they charged, and teachers were eliminated to save money. "In Baltimore we have a for-profit company that is getting their profit no matter what, and no matter what happens to our students," they charged. In Washington, D.C. parents successfully blocked the superintendent's attempt to privatize some of the city's poorest schools by bringing in EAI recently.

Gestapo tactics

The battle in Michigan was particularly intense, as associates of Lyndon LaRouche and the Schiller Institute distributed literature and organized a well-attended strategy meeting, whose focus was to bring in broader support by linking up the fight with taxpayers and teachers on the question of funding the schools through an economic recovery. In response to this, agents of the Anti-Defamation League launched a gestapo campaign to contain the parents and students within a political framework guaranteed to fail. They circulated the lie that the Schiller Institute representatives were racist anti-Semites. The school superintendent was induced by promoters of privatization to hire security guards to keep the students away from the Schiller Institute and to

keep the Schiller Institute out of the school board meeting. A special closed door meeting of the community, led by local community activists including University of Michigan School of Education employee Tasha Lebow, was held to brainwash residents against the Schiller Institute, to keep them from attending another planned strategy meeting scheduled for March 18. These activists aimed to keep the protest on the political level of confronting the board with their concerns about EAI. They told the media that they did not oppose privatization "in principle."

The town temporarily bowed to the tactics of this gestapo, which indicates that even if the board votes down the privatization proposal on April 1, the mentality which led citizens to consider sacrificing their children to the budget knife will remain, and produce equally insane solutions in the future, unless the citizens rally around the economic recovery measures proposed by LaRouche.

Michigan's New Age 'reforms'

The problems besetting Michigan schools are rooted in the worldwide depression collapse of the physical economy, and the decision of elites to implement New Age education reforms, usually under the name of "outcome-based education." The Pinckney school board's decision to opt for the privatization of their schools was made with the full backing and encouragement of Gov. John Engler, and the think-tank with which he is associated, the Mackinac Institute. Pinckney is considered a precedent-setter for the state. Engler has made no secret of the fact that he thinks privatizing the state's schools is the solution to Michigan's financial woes. In October, he proposed turning every school in the state into a charter school—a school which is exempt from state and local regulations.

Michigan has been subjected to New Age "education reforms" since 1990, when Public Act 25 was adopted by the legislature mandating outcome-based education by the local school districts, giving them three years to comply. If districts don't comply, they can be taken over by the state. The Michigan Core Curriculum, the model for local districts, emphasizes learner outcomes oriented toward New Age values and behavior modification.

Into this degraded learning atmosphere steps EAI, a company with ties to both the computer software industry and the entertainment industry, whose principal investors include John Walton of Wal-Mart Stores and a slew of speculators who hope to loot the education budget.

The way was paved also by Governor Engler's unprecedented move last July to pass legislation terminating the local property tax as the primary means of school funding. In an atmosphere of total uncertainty about the future of school financing, Engler proposed in October further education "reforms," including an expansion of charter schools and other measures, currently bottled up in the legislature, which would destroy the teachers' union.