

DC public schools lead in reactionary education “reforms”

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The public schools system in Washington, DC, is forging ahead with the reactionary education policies, based on privatization and attacks on teachers, associated with the Obama administration’s Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative.

The Democratic mayor of the city, Adrian Fenty, and Chancellor of Public Education Michelle Rhee have committed to a market-based reform of the District’s public education system. Large swathes of education funding have been handed over to privately run charter schools, while public schools have been shut down and hundreds of teachers and support staff have been sacked.

The public school system in the nation’s capital is one of the worst performing in the United States, largely due to decades of inadequate funding, crumbling classrooms, and the poverty afflicting many of the students’ families.

The city is one of huge social inequality. Despite having one of highest concentrations of millionaires in the United States, annual household income for Washington’s majority African American population stands at just \$39,000, while one-in-five households live on or below the federal poverty rate, which stands at the abysmally low level of \$21,800 for a family of four. The number of families in the city living in poverty rose by 19 percent in 2009, following a 17 percent rise in 2008.

The District has an official unemployment rate of 12 percent, though many more are underemployed or have given up looking for work. Homelessness in the city has rocketed in the past two years, with one local shelter reporting that it was housing 200 families in units designed to accommodate just 35.

The Democratic Party in the city, which has presided for decades over this deepening social and educational

crisis, is now holding them up as proof of the failure of public education.

On winning office three years ago Fenty took direct control of the public school system, which had previously been under the authority of a board of education that included elected members and two school students.

Having rid school governance of these vestiges of democratic control, the mayor then appointed Rhee, a former adviser to the Bush administration, to the new post of chancellor in order to push through a “reform” agenda that has included closing 25 public schools and laying-off hundreds of instructors and clerical staff. In 2008 Rhee fired 250 teachers and 500 other support staff, followed by the dismissal of another 230 teachers last year. This month, 18 staff in the department of special educational were fired as part of a “cost control” review.

Due to budget cuts, the city’s education department has a shortfall of \$44 million this year, and more cuts are expected. As usual, the union bureaucracy has done everything to cooperate with these attacks on its members and the children they educate.

The president of the Washington Teachers Union, George Parker, has stated that the organization is close to agreeing to a five-year deal with the local government over pay and conditions. According to Parker, teachers will receive a 20 percent pay increase phased over five years—a rate that barely keeps pace with inflation—in exchange for the introduction of performance-related pay and handing greater powers to the chancellor of public schools to fire or relocate teachers.

Dozens of charter schools have been opened across the city, run either by charities or for-profit businesses, diverting funds from the public school system. Plans

are under way for the District to hand over part of its preschool provision to Educare, a charity run by the daughter of billionaire investor and Obama adviser Warren Buffett. The move is expected to lead to other private entities running the city's early-childhood education centers.

These measures will further deepen inequalities in education, with schools and teachers forced to compete for dwindling resources. This can only lead to further attacks on teachers' pay and conditions, and the dumping of the majority of pupils into even more under-resourced schools.

As a reward for these efforts, the city is in line to receive funds from the Obama administration's \$4.3 billion Race to the Top initiative, through which states are forced to compete for federal stimulus funds. In order to qualify for a small portion of this relatively meager sum, public schools systems must show that they have introduced merit pay for teachers based on standardized test results and expanded the number of privately run charter schools.

Acknowledging the right-wing character of the RTTT program, Chancellor Rhee states on her official website:

"For the first time I can remember, a Democratic administration is fully embracing ideas like competition, merit pay for teachers and principals, choices for parents through charter schools, and accountability for charter performance. The president not only added \$4 billion to the education budget, but he also factored competition into the allocation."

But the city's government may go even further in pushing this reactionary agenda. A March 23 editorial in the *Washington Post* urged Mayor Fenty to maintain and expand the use of school vouchers in the District through a scheme introduced in 2005 that provides funds from the general education budget to send a small number of children to private schools. Using its legislative authority in the District, the US Congress voted this month to close the voucher system to new students.

Long a demand of the Republican right, the voucher system is a boon for private education, often run for profit or by religious groups, at the direct expense of public schools. Denouncing the move by the Democratic-controlled Congress as a sop to teachers unions, the *Post* admitted that the system meant that

public schools "would lose out." The editors demanded that Fenty and Rhee promote "school change"—i.e., privatization—at an even faster pace than the Obama administration.

The crisis in public education exacerbated by the recession is also increasingly evident in the wealthier suburbs of Washington. Nearby public school districts in Maryland and Virginia, which have until recently recorded some of the best test score results in the country, have reported massive budget shortfalls and have started to implement large-scale layoffs.

Schools in the northern Washington suburb of Prince William County, Maryland, slashed 200 jobs last Wednesday, following a \$48 million cut in school board funding. Class sizes in many schools will increase to close to the maximum permitted under Maryland law. In the run-up to the announcement, parents were warned that as many as 700 posts would be eliminated and that charges would be introduced for children participating in school sports.

The Maryland Senate passed a budget the same day that will require all teachers, as well as librarians and community college educators, to pay 1 percent of their pay towards the state's pension fund.

Further cuts in jobs and extracurricular programs are expected in the city and the suburban public school boards when federal stimulus monies enacted last year expire in 2011.



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