

Governor-appointed official moves to dismantle Detroit public schools

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Monday, September 26, was the first day of work for John Covington, the former Kansas City schools superintendent who was selected by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to head a proposed new school district in Detroit that will encompass so-called failed schools.

Covington will receive a salary of \$225,000, plus a \$175,000 signing bonus. In addition, he is reportedly eligible to garner performance-based incentives that could push his payoff to more than \$1.5 million a year. This grotesque sum—paid by state, private foundation and corporate sources—is being given to a man who will oversee schools in an impoverished district where the median household income is \$26,000 and students are so poor they all get free breakfast and lunch.

His main task is to destroy the jobs, workplace protections and living standards of teachers and other public school employees who have lost tens of thousands of dollars in wage and benefit concessions over the last decade. In doing so, he is counting on the continued collaboration of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and other unions.

Covington will head the EAS (Education Achievement System), created last June by the Republican governor—a former venture capitalist and computer corporation executive—and Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts—a former General Motors executive. The purpose of the plan is to further dismantle the public school system and hand over its assets to privately run charter corporations.

Covington abruptly resigned his post in Kansas City to take the higher paying Michigan job.

During his tenure there he moved to “right-size” the district, closing half of the city’s schools and reassigning more than half of its employees. Last week, it was revealed that that the KC school district was

stripped of its academic accreditation, just a few weeks after Covington—the supposed “savior” of the district—departed.

The EAS scheme has received complete support from the Obama administration and its education secretary, Arne Duncan. While initiated as a pilot program in Detroit for the 2012-2013 school year, it will eventually include the lowest-performing schools throughout the state. Duncan was quick to praise the appointment of Covington, saying the EAS head was “deeply committed,” and adding, “When you have dramatic change, you have to have that kind of leader.”

According to the governor, schools in the EAS will have five years to either improve and reenter the public school district or be reconstituted as charter schools. The latter is the more likely prospect, given that the initiators and supporters for the new district are advocates for the unfettered spread of for-profit charter schools, along with the privatization of education in general.

The hiring of Covington signifies a further step in the dismantling of public education in Detroit. After the first three weeks of the new school year many classrooms remain grossly overcrowded, with vacancies in key subjects unfilled. EFM Roberts has stubbornly refused to hire the necessary personnel and provide adequate resources. Coming after decades of vicious budget cuts and school employee layoffs, this only ensures that many more schools will be dumped into the category of “failing” and put on the auction block.

The EAS plan was modeled on the forced bankruptcy and restructuring of General Motors by the Obama administration and its Wall Street appointees on the Auto Task Force in 2009. Factories that were deemed profitable were put into the “Good GM”—with

employees forced to take deep concessions in order to retain their jobs. Meanwhile, less profitable plants were dumped into the “Bad GM,” where they were either closed or hived off to new owners who demanded wage cuts of 50 percent to keep the factories open.

Covington has been hired as a highly paid hatchet man to impose this “market-driven” model on the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). The announcement that as many as 40 percent of teachers currently employed at DPS will lose their jobs at the end of the school year is consistent with these plans. In all likelihood, the 1,800 teachers at these schools designated for transfer to the EAS district will be laid off or coerced into retirement. Those remaining will be required to reapply for their jobs, and be forced to accept further pay and benefit cuts as a condition of employment.

There is, in addition, the danger that many of these schools will simply close, as families stampede to place their students into the “successful” DPS schools or in another district. The result will be that many veteran Detroit teachers may never see the inside of a DPS school after this year.

Covington is a supporter of the education “reforms” pushed by the Obama administration and other big-business opponents of public education: the closing of neighborhood schools, merit pay for teachers, a longer school day and year, and the creation of autonomous schools in which principals will have the ability to hire and fire teachers at will, a practice already in place at charter schools. “We need to change the paradigm,” Covington declared.

His appointment is far from accidental. He is a graduate of the Eli Broad Superintendent Academy, a conservative, and essentially anti-public schools institution, founded by the California billionaire Eli Broad and former Michigan Governor John Engler, a Republican. The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, along with those of Bill and Melinda Gates, Kresge, and others, have spearheaded the drive to privatize education.

The foundations have also used their immense funds to buy off the trade unions. Recently, Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, boasted that she had received \$6.3 million from the Gates Foundation. In addition, the AFT will likely remain the “bargaining agent” (dues collector) for teachers within charter schools set up by Gates so it

can implement his anti-teacher agenda.

Detroit Federation of Teachers President Keith Johnson, who has a long record of collaborating with the bipartisan attack on teachers and public education, issued the mildest complaint over Covington’s appointment. What was needed, the DFT president said, was a “comprehensive analysis” of the “primary inhibitors keeping students from testing at a level that’s desirable and acceptable.”

What nonsense! The “primary inhibitors” to the education of Detroit’s children are no mystery: they are endemic poverty and decades of budget cuts by Democrats and Republicans and their corporate backers, who are indifferent to the devastating consequences their pro-business policies have reaped upon the city’s youth and working class families. To the list of “primary inhibitors” one must also add the complicity of the DFT and other unions, which have suppressed every struggle by the working class to defend public education.



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