

BOB BRAUN'S LEDGER

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May 15, 2016

HUNDREDS RALLY IN TRENTON AGAINST SCHOOL AID CUTS AND CHARTER SCHOOLS



Jitu Brown—Sabotaging public schools to help charters is “evil.”

More than 500 teachers, parents, public officials, and community activists rallied in front of the Statehouse in Trenton Sunday—and listened to blistering attacks on the failure of New Jersey’s leaders to fund public education and prevent the draining of public funds from traditional schools by privately-operated charter schools.

The denunciations of the Christie administration and legislators of both parties who support his school policies often became heated—and the angriest attacks drew the loudest cheers.

“We know how to create successful schools,” said Jitu Brown, a Chicago community organizer who has spoken frequently in New Jersey. “They just don’t want to do it for black and brown children.”

Denouncing the “illusion of school choice,” he accused Christie and other supporters of charter schools of “deliberately sabotaging” public schools so they would fail and then replacing them with privatized charter schools.

“The return on our investment has been the sabotaging of the education of our children,” said Brown, who led a hunger strike in Chicago in support of traditional neighborhood schools. “What could be more evil than that?”

He said such policies proved that, “White people in America...have never been able to reconcile their hatred of black people.”



Keith Howell and parents from Camden—the public schools are “set up” to fail. (Bob Braun photo)

A delegation of speakers from the Camden schools—where Christie and Democratic political boss George Norcross have promoted extensive use of charter schools to replace traditional public schools—also denounced charters. So did the leadership of a police union in Trenton.

The rally, initially organized by leaders of the Trenton Education Association (TEA), demonstrated widespread community opposition to the spread of charter schools and other reforms, including use of Teach for America (TFA) graduates who have replaced veteran teachers in many urban districts, including Camden.

Keith Howell, a social science teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Camden, said the state-controlled district was using a new teacher tenure law to drive out senior teachers. He explained that the new law leads to tenure charges if instructors receive two annual evaluations of “less than effective.”

“It’s a set-up to help the TFA,” he said and then denounced charter schools for their regimentation and use of expulsion and suspension to send children back to the public schools. Top TFA officials have supported charter schools.

“Children have to walk in straight lines and not to talk to each other—they are being trained to be the minimum wage workers of tomorrow,” said Howell who, after 22 years in the schools, received his first less than effective evaluation.

Parents and others from Camden repeatedly called the “reforms” pushed by Christie and Norcross as acts “of colonizers, not reformers.”



Naomi Johnson-LaFleur: Trenton schools lost \$37 million to charters

Rally organizers had intended the demonstration to concentrate on the lack of full funding of the school aid formula, a problem especially difficult for Trenton teachers. Naomi Johnson-LaFleur, the TEA president, said Trenton has received “flat funding’ for the last four years and the district laid off 231 school employees.

But Johnson quickly made the connection between the lack of full funding and privatization—the district, she said, was forced to channel \$37 million in funds for public school children to cover the costs of an increase of 298 children in charter schools.

But privatization just doesn’t mean charter schools, says Nicole Whitfield, the head of an organization that advocates for special education children and parents in Trenton.

“Most of the most serious funding issues have to do with special education,” said Whitfield, who contended that many services for special needs children have been outsourced to private companies.

To do that, she explained, “the district is forcing parents to accept improper IEPs.” IEPs—or individualized education plans—represent the legally-enforceable plans teachers and other specialists are supposed to draw up for, and follow, while educating special needs children.

In a number of urban districts, including Newark, administrators have pressured teachers into telling parents they should agree to changes in their children’s IEPs in ways that save the school districts money.



Darren Freedom Green: "This place should be packed!"

One of the most eloquent defenders of the rights of special education children at Sunday's rally was Darren Freedom Green, a Trenton community activist who said virtually all urban children faced the problem of "special needs."

"I have children tell me they hope that, when they get home, they won't see their belongings out on the street—because, for poor children, eviction is a special need they have to endure," he said.

Green also raised the question of why, on a Sunday, so few parents showed up for the rally.

"In a school district with 16,000 children, this place should be packed," he said.

But it wasn't only the absence of Trenton parents that was notable. Newark was represented only by about 50 activists, most members of two community organizations, PULSE and People's Organization for Progress (POP).



Johnnie Lattner and Sharon Smith of Newark's PULSE at Trenton rally Sunday "I don't understand it," said Johnnie Lattner, a co-founder of PULSE, or Parents United for Local School Education.

While unions representing teachers in Camden, Jersey City, Paterson and Trenton were represented, the Newark Teachers Union's leadership wasn't there. The NTU is a local of the American Federation of Teachers, while the other big-city unions are affiliates of the New Jersey Education Association.

A more obvious absence was that of Newark Mayor Ras Baraka whose views about charter schools are complicated. The emcee of the program called Baraka to the podium but no one showed up—and the host said he would speak "once his bus arrived."

But there would be no additional bus from Newark—and no Baraka. The Newark mayor, elected by anti-charter forces in 2014, has since supported charter schools.

On the same Sunday, Newark also was finishing its three-day celebration of the 350th anniversary of the city's founding. And, at the same time, a few miles up the Turnpike, President Barack Obama was giving the commencement address at the Rutgers University.



NJEA officers Marie Blistan and Sean Spiller denounce Christie—but there is ambiguity in the union's positions about charters. Two rising stars of the NJEA leadership—Marie Blistan and Sean Spiller—spoke at the rally. Blistan called Christie's policies “an absolute disgrace” and Spiller promised his organization would “reverse the trend” of inequities in school funding.

But the policies of the NJEA itself illustrate the ambiguities affecting those who would fight against privatization and for increased school aid to traditional public schools. The statewide teachers union has endorsed politicians like US Sen. Cory Booker, a champion of charters and voucher schools, and Donald Norcross, the brother of George Norcross and another charter supporter. The NJEA also endorsed the expansion of charter schools in Camden and the adoption of the new tenure law that many speakers denounced.



Camden's Gray Frazier—now touring with the Sanders campaign
“It's confusing out there, but we're watching,” said Gary Frazier, a Camden community activist who says he has “trouble” following the positions of people who say they are defending public education. He came to the rally with a bus chartered by a group known as “Black Men for Bernie,” men of color who support the insurgent Bernie Sanders for

president.

“The truth is coming,” said Frazier.