

# Budget cuts devastate schools, police force in nation's capital

In our issue of Oct. 17, *EIR* presented an *Investigation*, "Bankers' Dictatorship Makes Washington a Death Camp," showing how the takeover of Washington, D.C. by a non-elected Financial Control Board, will compound the economic and financial problems that it was ostensibly designed to solve. The main problem the city faces, is the false axiomatic assumption, shared by people on both "left" and "right" of the political spectrum, that the city administration has been "spending too much money."

In this issue, we fill out the picture further, with two additional interviews.

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## Interview: Wilma Harvey

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### Elected board of education stripped of powers

*Wilma Harvey is a member of the Board of Education of Washington, D.C. She was interviewed by Dennis Speed.*

**EIR:** Could you give us an idea of the effect of budget cuts on the D.C. school system over an extended period of time, greater than the last two years?

**Harvey:** I've been affiliated with the Board of Education, as a board member and as a staffer, for almost 14 years. Prior to that, we had over 105,000 children in the District of Columbia public schools. We had a budget of some \$600 million, and we are now down to \$426 million. We have seen a major exodus of students from our school system. We are now down to approximately 78,000. I think that the District of Columbia public schools have been plagued with the same problems that any urban school system is plagued with.

For example, we have students who come to us with sundry social ills that impact upon their learning. Most of our children are on free or reduced lunch. The majority are African-Americans; the next percentage would be Hispanic, and then we have a small group of other groups of children. I think that there has been a breakdown of the various networks that support the schools. They are no longer there. Children who come to school, because of the violence in the neighborhoods,

are more aggressive. We find children who have been prenatally exposed to both drugs and alcohol. As a result of that, their attention spans are lower.

Because of the lowering of the salary ranks, we have not been competitive with the surrounding jurisdictions over the past 20 years. We have not been able to attract the kind of teaching staff that we need. We have not been able to attract new principals into the school system over the past twenty years. The D.C. public schools have been accused of being so heavily administrated, that there is a tremendous downsizing of the central staff. . . . So the school system, in some ways, has gone through some major breakdowns.

There's the constant threat of vouchers. Citizens in the District, in a referendum, overwhelmingly voted against vouchers. But because of the overall Congressional mandate that has been imposed on education in this city, the choices are limited. Our budget is very much linked to the Congressional appropriations. Since they brought in the Emergency Trustee Board, they basically do all the policymaking, and oversight, of the operation of public education in this city.

**EIR:** Is the Trustee Board the same as the Financial Control Board?

**Harvey:** The Financial Control Board is called the Authority. What the Authority did, was to establish what they call an "Emergency Board of Trustees." In establishing this, they took away the powers of the elected Board of Education, and made it advisory to the Board of Trustees. The Board of Trustees now has the responsibility of making policy, and oversight responsibility for the 146 schools of the District. The Board of Trustees was appointed by the Control Board.

On the Emergency Board of Trustees, we have one sitting member, and that is the president of the Board. We have, as the Board of Education, been relegated to community outreach, and trying to make the community as aware as we can of issues that impact their children.

**EIR:** The Board of Education is a salaried position, right?

**Harvey:** Yes. The Board's salaries were cut in half, from \$29,000 to \$15,000.

**EIR:** You couldn't make it on that before. You were already making a sacrifice to be on the Board, if one presumes that that was your full-time job.

**Harvey:** Not only did they cut the Board's salary in half, but they took away all office staff for ward and at-large board members. I am the Ward 1 Board of Education office. I have no staff to help me with constituency concerns. People can't communicate with me through my office, as was done in the past. The only thing that is remaining at the *elected* Board, is an acting executive secretary, with two assistants. These people take care of all the responsibilities we have at the Board. Just recently, the Board of Trustees allocated some monies to the Board of Education to bring staff people to deal with the only remaining function we have, and that is the chartering of schools.

**EIR:** Exactly what did the Board do before?

**Harvey:** We made policy, we did oversight, we did budgeting, we did everything that the Board of Trustees now does. We had full responsibility as policymakers, and we also had full responsibility for submitting our budget to the City Council. We had the authority to hire the superintendent, to fire him, also. All of that has been taken away. . . . So we are really just an advisory group of people, and you cannot advise people on what impact their policies and their decisions are having, if you are not included in the process of developing the policies as well.

**EIR:** You don't regularly meet with the Board of Trustees?

**Harvey:** We have had some meetings, but they are not substantive. For example, suppose there is to be a change in the policy; we don't have that kind of dialogue.

**EIR:** So, if they want to change the policy, they'll change it, and if you know about it, you know, and if you don't, you don't.

**Harvey:** That's right.

**EIR:** Did you also decide curriculum?

**Harvey:** Yes, we did. We no longer have that authority. We decided curriculum, we decided the evaluation of teachers, principals, we set policy that had an impact on the entire educational process. All that has now been turned over to the Board of Trustees. The only thing we have power over right now is issuing charters to schools.

We have approved charters for six schools, but right now, there are two operating. One is called the Options School, and the other is called the Marcus Garvey School.

**EIR:** If I am approved to operate a charter school in the District, once I get that charter, am I accountable, other than some reporting to you, to the Board of Trustees?

**Harvey:** No, you are not.

**EIR:** So, what's the effective difference between that, and privatization?

**Harvey:** Basically, it's a form of privatization.

**EIR:** And that's what you, who used to make policy for 100,000 children in the public schools, now have power over.

**Harvey:** We have a tremendous problem with our capital budget. Our buildings are an average of 50 years old. As a result of that, the school system has gone through the last four years of court mandates, in which the city has been sued for fire code violations. The system has been in a state of serious chaos over the last ten years, and there's been a continual deterioration of that process, based on the infrastructure. I can only see the return of public education when we can repair some of the infrastructure which is dilapidated, if not completely broken. . . .

We're going to have to give parents *true* parental choice, across the board. There is always the question of equity, and that is very clear in the District of Columbia.

If you go into areas west of the park, you see a different school system than what you see in parts of Washington east of the river. Socio-economic background is a factor. The ward I represent has a very diverse population—African-American, Vietnamese, African, Spanish—you name it. As a result, we have a very complex system. And there are a lot of things that must be done in order to attract, back to public education, the parents that we have lost. And many of the Congressional overseers, for lack of a better phrase, tend to want to push vouchers down the throats of the District of Columbia, and we do see an ever-growing increase in the number of charter schools.

Then there's the voucher system. In 1989, the voters rejected vouchers in a referendum. What the voucher system does, is it gives you about \$3,200 per year per child. If you look at the average private school, it costs \$4,000-4,500 to get into these schools. Parents are expected to pay the difference. If they can't pay the difference, or if children misbehave, then, they are "referred back" to the public school system. I think vouchers are a way for a lot of individuals to get around public education, by participating in private education with public funds.

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## Interview: Ron Hampton

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### D.C. police department no longer serves the citizens

*Mr. Hampton, who is now retired, was formerly the head of the National Black Policemen's Association. He was interviewed by Dennis Speed.*

**EIR:** How would you characterize the present situation in D.C. for law enforcement?

**Hampton:** My sense is that, as a result of the Financial Authority, and of the fact that the mayor's power was stripped