

The further hemorrhaging of Detroit—city to shut 34 public schools

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Detroit parents, students and teachers reacted with shock and anger to Thursday's announcement that 34 of the city's public schools will close their doors this June. More than 10,000 of the district's 140,000 students will be uprooted and shifted to different schools when the academic year ends and the facilities are shut down.

The closures are part of a plan to cut more than \$560 million in expenses from the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) budget over the next five years. District officials predict that enrollment will drop by about 40,000 students during this period and say another 60 to 75 schools will need to be closed. It is estimated this latest round of cuts will save about \$10 million next year.

Detroit is a city under assault. City workers and residents are still reeling from Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's announcement last month that massive cuts were on the agenda to counteract a projected \$230 million shortfall in the city's budget for fiscal year 2005-2006, which begins July 1. The mayor outlined a sweeping plan to cut jobs, pay and benefits for city employees, reduce city services and increase taxes targeting working families and small businesses.

School officials have not indicated how many school employees will lose their jobs as a result of the new school closures. When the cuts were initially broached last November, 4,000 jobs were projected to be at stake.

Higher education in Michigan is also under attack. As part of her proposed state budget for the fiscal year beginning October 1, Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm announced on Thursday a \$30 million cut in aid to the state's public universities.

Detroit Public Schools CEO Kenneth Burnley defended the new school closures as a sound business decision. "We now have half as many students as we did in 1970 and nearly the same number of buildings," Burnley said. "From a cost standpoint, it doesn't make sense. With these school closings, our district will become more

efficient and more effective."

For the tens of thousands of students and their parents affected by the closings, however, lives will be turned upside down. Twenty-three of the schools to be shut are elementary schools, with students generally aged 10 and younger, who will now be forced to travel farther from their neighborhoods to attend classes.

Chadsey High, which opened in 1931 on the city's west side, is the one high school scheduled to be shut down, sending its nearly 900 students elsewhere. Chadsey students, many of whose parents and grandparents attended the school, will now be scattered among Detroit's remaining high schools, unable to graduate with their long-time classmates.

In a bitter twist, 15 of the 34 of the schools slated for closure have been targeted because they have not met federal testing standards. Following in the spirit of the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" initiative, the DPS has responded to these schools' failure to meet these academic standards—not by providing more funding and resources—but by punishing them with closure.

On the other hand, 13 of the schools facing shutdown have shown improvement. (Data was unavailable for the remaining six schools.) Students at Vandenberg Elementary on the city's northwest side have passed the federal standards and last year showed 87 percent proficiency in math for fourth graders. But Vandenberg's enrollment has fallen from 450 a decade ago to just 255 this year, and for this reason hasn't been spared the ax.

As Vandenberg Elementary Principal Shirley Daggs-Monroe commented to the *Detroit News*, "The criteria for closing were all about enrollment, not about yearly academic progress, not about a building that is still in good shape, not about a quality program." Indeed, the decision to close the schools has nothing to do with designing a plan to provide quality education for Detroit school children, but is all about the "bottom line."

Supporters of the cuts say the school system has no choice. Detroit has lost 40,000 students over the past decade, falling from a peak of close to 300,000 in the late 1960s to the current 140,000. City school enrollment was last that low in the early 1920s. The issue no one wants to address in the present situation, however, is why students are leaving Detroit schools at such a rapid rate.

The crisis in the DPS system is a direct function of the decay of the city's infrastructure, resulting from decades of economic decline. Once the car manufacturing capital of the world, the "Motor City" is now dotted with closed auto plants and empty spaces where they once stood. This drop in manufacturing has seen a corresponding decrease in population, from close to 2 million in the 1950s to 900,000 today. In 1998, a consultant found 36,000 abandoned structures in Detroit, 8.8 percent of the total units in the city, of which 10,000 were considered "open and dangerous."

No other major city in America has suffered the same degree of decay and devastation. Detroit presents the ugliest face of American capitalism.

The population that remains in the city has become more and more marginalized. Michigan has the highest official unemployment rate of any state, climbing to 7.3 percent in December 2004. Within Detroit city limits, jobless rates are in the double digits, for youth the highest of all, and those jobs that remain are increasingly within the service sector. In midtown Detroit, nearly 40 percent of the population earn under \$10,000; almost 75 percent in that same area make less than \$30,000 annually.

Better-paying auto jobs have been replaced with jobs in retail and other low-paid industries. Many workers must travel to the suburbs to find jobs, at small manufacturing plants or at Detroit Metro Airport or other employers.

The budget cuts announced last month by Kwame Kilpatrick will target the jobs and benefits of city workers, traditionally one of the better-paid sections of the workforce. The mayor also made clear that the city will not commit the financial resources to subsidize the city's deteriorating bus system, and is considering privatizing city services. Commenting on the state of the city's Public Lighting Department—city residents often wait months for a response to blacked-out street lights—the mayor commented, "We are not a utility company and we don't do it very well."

The mind-set of city authorities in relation to the Detroit Public Schools and its students mirrors this attitude: the city population is declining, student enrollment is plummeting, school standards are failing, the city's

dwindling tax base cannot sustain the present school set-up—and schools must close.

There has also been a concerted effort by Michigan and Detroit politicians and education authorities to undermine the public school system—both in Detroit and statewide. This right-wing agenda favors for-profit charter schools, faith-based institutions and school vouchers. Many Detroit parents, concerned over the alarming deterioration of the Detroit public schools, have placed their children in charter schools. Those who can afford it have moved to the suburbs or enrolled their children in private schools.

By a combination of these factors, nearly 30,000 students have left the Detroit school system in the last eight years. Of those students that remain in the public system, 90 percent are African-American and more than 70 percent come from families living below the official poverty level.

Detroit has becoming ever-more socially polarized, with a growing gulf between the majority of poor Detroiters and the political elite that runs the city. Last month, a series of scandals involving Democratic Mayor Kilpatrick erupted, exposing the corruption of this social layer and their arrogance towards city residents. [See "Detroit mayor rides in luxury as city decays"]

While the schools and city services are allowed to hemorrhage, isolated pockets of "urban revitalization" have been carved out in downtown Detroit. The city has spent millions of tax dollars to bankroll the construction of a professional baseball park and football stadium as well as three gambling casinos. A facelift has been given to the city's theater district.

The operation of these play spots has contributed little to an economic renaissance in the city, providing only some low-wage jobs. City officials are now touting the hosting of the 2005 Major League Baseball All-Star Game and the National Football League's 2006 Superbowl as Detroit's next great hope.



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