

Anger over Detroit plan to close 51 schools

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In January, Detroit School Board officials announced the closure of 51 schools, amounting to nearly a quarter of the buildings in the district, which serves 119,000 students. The school closings follow a bitter strike by Detroit teachers last September, in which the Democratic-controlled city administration and state government, as well as the media, denounced teachers for imperiling the interests of the city's students.

Of the 51 schools proposed for closure, 38 are elementary or kindergarten to eighth-grade schools, 6 are middle schools, and 7 are comprehensive or alternative high schools. The plan calls for 47 school to close in the summer of 2007 and the remaining 4 in the summer of 2008. The Detroit school superintendent, William F. Coleman III, acknowledged, "The level of closures proposed in this plan is unprecedented in the United States and will no doubt exact a heavy toll on all of us."

School board officials claim that the "reconsolidation" plan will result in a savings of \$21 million annually out of a \$1.5 billion budget, but they also stated that an initial \$22 million cost to close the schools would wipe out any savings for 2007.

The cost reductions will do little to offset the financial crisis facing the district, which has faced perpetual deficits due to reduced revenues from the auto industry. The Detroit-based auto giants have been granted tax cuts and other subsidies over the last three decades, even as they slashed hundreds of thousands of area jobs. School officials and the media have said little if anything, for example, about the \$210 million loan the district must repay to the state of Michigan for covering previous budget deficits. The state itself is facing a \$3 billion deficit chiefly due to a decrease in business revenue.

The district's entire \$1 billion state foundation allowance currently goes to a state trustee, who this year will withhold nearly one quarter of it to ensure

payment of the district's overall debt to the state and the banks. According to the district's 2006 financial statements, its debt service that year totaled \$117.5 million.

This is the first round of an overall plan by the school board to close more than 100 schools. At the current juncture, the proposed closures would bring the total number of schools closed to date to 86 since the institution of a 2005 state-mandated deficit elimination plan, which projects a total of 110 shutdowns out of the district's 232 schools by 2010. The district further said it will need only 8 high schools by 2011, instead of the current 26, according to its "Preliminary Facilities Realignment Plan," available on the DPS website.

The school closings have provoked enormous anger among parents, teachers and students, who have long suffered from dilapidated schools, overcrowded classrooms and the lack of supplies. At the first meeting after the announcement, school officials barred opponents of the school closings from entering, and security guards clashed with parents and students. Afterwards, the board hastily organized a series of hearings, but gave the public little advance notice, apparently in hopes of limiting the turnout.

Nevertheless, the hearings were well attended, with hundreds of parents, teachers and students organized in contingents, carrying banners and posters identifying their schools and expressing opposition to the proposed closures.

Demonstrating their fear and contempt for the working class, school officials posted Detroit police and armed guards around and inside the school board meetings as parents, students and teachers made their way into the buildings. Once inside, the public had to pass through metal detectors. Before participants could enter the auditorium, organizers instructed them to fill out questionnaires with their name, address, and telephone number and to check a box if their child

attended one of the schools affected by the closing.

In a further effort to vet the questions from the floor, organizers also asked those who wished to speak on the school closings to explain the “gist” of their comment. At one point, one of those involved in the organization of the supposedly democratic event acknowledged that she had thought about hiring an outside company to manage the questionnaire.

The school board attempted to conduct the public hearings like a business presentation. School representatives addressed the audience as if they were stockholders who had simply lost a few dozen shares, rather than people who have already been devastated by job losses and declining living standards and were now being asked to sacrifice their children’s future to balance a budget.

The chairman laid down the ground rules to insure that there was no disruption of the speeches by board members and the subsequent PowerPoint presentation. The facilitator explained there would be only five minutes for presentations by school delegations and two minutes for individuals who wanted to comment on the school closings near the end of the three-hour scheduled meeting.

The school board is made up of well-heeled and well-connected officials, including school superintendent Coleman, who makes \$180,000 a year leading a school district in one of America’s poorest cities. The general argument of the school board was that the school closings were necessary because so many children had left the district. Several speakers noted, however, that the loss of students was a self-fulfilling prophecy for a school board whose destructive policies were driving students out of the district. In addition, school officials repeated the refrain that there is no money for the schools, despite the fact that hundreds of millions have been spent on the construction of sports stadiums and casinos in the city, not to mention the hundreds of billions squandered by the Bush administration on the war in Iraq.

At one of the public hearings held January 26 at Southwestern High School, WSWs reporters spoke with parents and student about the school board’s proposals. Sheila Kinney, a grandmother of three students, said, “There is no room inside. They [security guards] have turned people away. More people are supposed to make a difference. I have one grandchild

who has special needs. He has a speech problem and his attention is hard to hold. Mark Twain is a passing school. It has great tutoring. If Mark Twain closes, more kids in first and second grade will be in class with sixth and seventh graders.”

Jeremy, a 12th grader from Chadsey High, said “Even though I am about to graduate, I am offended because I have two sisters in the system. The school closing will hurt them because my family will have to travel longer [to get to another school].”

Talecia Green, a high school graduate from the Detroit School of Performing Arts and now a Chicago resident, said, “We place our faith in the school CEO whose job is to say something sooner rather than just state that there is crisis and close schools. The school board has already made their decision. The people should decide, not the politicians.”

Christian Williams, a 14-year-old freshman at Cass Tech High, said that conditions in the school system had reached such a point that he was forced to speak out against what he saw as the destruction of education for his generation. “I wrote a seven-page paper for my English class called, ‘What makes a good school? How much do you really care?’

“I began my paper by saying the first thing you must have is a good administration that cares about educating students. At my school, we have parents and teachers who are willing to support education. The biggest fighters for education are the teachers, and we have some very good ones at my school. But the teachers need more money, they need more supplies in the classroom. But instead, at my school, where I guess millions were spent to make a recent addition to the school, we don’t have toilet paper and there are no napkins or paper towels in the bathrooms. We don’t even have books in many classrooms.”



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