

Detroit-area school districts vote to privatize support staff

Angry response from students, parents

A WSWS reporting team
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In response to cuts in state aid to education, a number of school districts in suburban Detroit are moving to privatize support services, to reduce expenses.

Public schools across Michigan are facing a combination of rising costs and inadequate state subsidies. Despite soaring heating and electricity costs, the state of Michigan is holding the increase in per-pupil allocation to one-percent again this year.

A budget deal worked out last year between Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and Democrats and Republicans in the state legislature sought to deal with the massive state deficit by holding subsidies to education to below the rate of inflation. The impact is being compounded by reductions in funding to school districts—calculated on a per pupil basis—due to declines in student enrollment.

School officials in district after district are responding to this crisis by launching major attacks on school employees.

On Tuesday the Southfield Board of Education voted 5-2 to privatize custodial, maintenance, transportation and food services. The board rejected offers of massive concessions by the Michigan Education Support Employees Association, the union for support staff. Some 350 jobs are affected. Wages could be cut by as much as one-quarter for bus drivers earning the top pay rate. The district has already imposed health benefit co-pays for all school workers, at a savings of \$3 million.

Earlier this month, members of the Birmingham Board of Education voted unanimously to privatize school bus and cleaning services and fire up to 150 bus drivers and cleaning personnel at the end of the current school year. School officials have made no secret that the purpose of the privatization is to cut benefits,

pensions and pay.

Birmingham support workers, some with decades on the job, will be forced to reapply for their jobs at GCA Custodial Services and Durham School Services, private vendors hired by the district. Board representatives estimated that the move could save nearly \$3 million each year in direct cuts in health care benefits and wages. Further, it would eliminate charges for pensions and retiree health insurance by taking working employees off the payroll.

Last year the Birmingham schools eliminated 46 full-time equivalent jobs, including seven teachers, in the face of a \$3.9 million deficit.

Northville Public Schools are also looking into the privatization of some of the district's support services. About 150 custodial, transportation and food service jobs are at stake.

Even affluent Bloomfield Hills is discussing privatization, among other moves, after slashing spending in other areas, including \$26,880 from fine arts. Enrollment in 2007-08 was one hundred students lower than expected, resulting in a drop in expected revenue of \$1.24 million, or about \$12,400 in per pupil state aid.

These districts are all considered relatively well-off, receiving substantially more than the state average in per-pupil funding. Southfield, for example, receives the fifth highest grant in the state, \$11,235 per student in 2007, well over the state's \$7,400 base grant.

The WSWS spoke to support staff Tuesday outside the Southfield school board meeting. Wanda Reiner, a support worker with 29 years seniority, said, "The people will lose their homes, they will not be able to send their kids to school in this district.

“The last meeting was so orchestrated. It started at 7 pm and lasted until 11:30. They waited until the end for the public participation period, hoping everyone would go home.”

Tea Shade, a bus driver, remarked, “They want to bring in people for below poverty wages into the schools. That does not make for a safe situation.”

Another worker, Colleen Luther, complained that the board refused to bargain in good faith with the support staff unions. “Every time we gave them an offer they jumped up what they were asking for. They tell us about the deficit, but the amount goes up depending on who you are talking to. Just as they were negotiating with the outside companies, they gave school administrators a raise.”

A worker from Hazel Park, who attended the meeting to show his support for support staff, commented, “If you took a poll of the people in Southfield, a majority would oppose it.”

During the meeting, dozens of parents and support workers rose to speak in opposition to the privatization plans. One parent warned that the privatization plan could be the start “of a plan to establish for-profit education.”

The turnout was much lower than an earlier meeting in Southfield held April 6 that drew hundreds of angry teachers, parents and support staff workers. That meeting, held under a heavy police presence, saw pickets from the nearby Warren school system marching outside in a show of solidarity with support staff.

Leaders of teacher and support staff unions were frightened by this elemental outpouring of working-class solidarity. In the intervening two weeks, they did nothing to mobilize popular support behind the school workers. Instead they presented the board with one concession proposal after another.

School board meetings earlier this month in Birmingham and Northville also drew large numbers of angry school workers and parents.

In Birmingham the board displayed its contempt for teachers and support staff by dragging out the meeting as long as possible. The vote to fire the support workers finally occurred around midnight.

Many of the workers who attended the Birmingham School Board meeting were incensed at this maneuver as well as the decision of the board to stifle their

protests by preceding the public comment period with a 45-minute talk by a guest speaker, Tom White, an officer of the nonprofit group Michigan School Business Officials.

Maureen Martin, president of the Birmingham Education Association, began the public presentation by handing the board petitions from more than one half the district’s teachers, collected in just two days, opposing privatization. However, Martin offered no policy for mobilizing this support. Instead she pleaded with the board, “We pledge our support; we will work with you.”

Bus drivers, high school students, parents and custodial workers joined teachers in denouncing the privatization plans. One high school student likened the move to “firing your family.” He said maybe the board “should be asked to do its job at one half the price,” like they are demanding of workers. He brought up the district’s \$15 million rainy-day fund, saying “I think its raining.”

A parent, William McKenzie, said he wanted to form a committee to oppose the school board if it approved the privatization plan. Bus driver Sophia Shattuck said she was “extremely ashamed” of the board. She said her family could not afford to stay in the district due to the planned pay cuts.



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