

Hundreds of students forced out of Chicago area school for unpaid fees

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Reflecting the worsening impact of the economic crisis on working class families in the Chicago area, on March 9 hundreds of students were pulled out of classes at a single high school on the city's Southside due to outstanding tuition bills. Of the 300 students sent home, at least 100 were being kept out of school until their tuition was paid up or an agreement was reached between parents and Marian Catholic High School, the *Chicago Tribune* reported March 11.

The Chicago Heights school reported a total of \$450,000 in outstanding student tuition. Delinquent payments were reportedly between \$750 (one month's tuition) and \$5,000.

Despite the Internet and phone outages over the weekend, which prevented parents from making last-minute payments before the March 9 deadline, the students were callously pulled from classes in front of their peers. The humiliated students then had to form a line at the offices until their parents could be contacted. In some cases, students were only behind on a single \$750 installment of the \$8,000 yearly tuition at Marian.

While it is not uncommon for families with students at parochial schools to fall on hard times, the situation was noteworthy for its scale and the school's drastic response. "Never before had we ever had so many parents struggle with so much difficulty in paying," Marian Catholic President Judine Hilbing told the *Chicago Tribune*. "It was very uncomfortable," she told the paper. "Not having access to the technology almost made it impossible. We are very apologetic to the parents. We tried to treat them with respect and dignity, but it was difficult."

The scene at Marian this week offers insight into the impoverishment of what was once a better-off layer of the working class in the Chicago area.

Amid the deteriorating Chicago Public Schools, and the increased violence which has come to characterize their social environment, a significant layer of Chicago's working class families sacrifice and spend what little disposable income they have on a private education for their children. This tradition is proving untenable amid the current economic crisis.

In an effort to mitigate a rapid decline projected in Catholic school enrollment this year, the Chicago Archdiocese announced last month the availability of \$1 million emergency aid fund for families that lost jobs this school year. Significantly, within days, requests for financial help overwhelmed the Archdiocese. The initial \$1,000 payments had to subsequently be reduced to a \$500 tuition subsidy.

In addition, the Archdiocese of Chicago has issued a pay freeze, scheduled to begin at the start of next fiscal year on July 1, for most of its 16,000 employees. The freeze is expected to affect almost 90 percent of the Archdiocese's 3,800 elementary school teachers and administrators. Less affected will be the area's 39 Catholic high schools associated with the Archdiocese. Because these high schools are typically run by individual religious orders, only six are mandated to follow the pay freeze.

According to Brian Gray, a spokesman for the National Catholic Educational Association, enrollment in Catholic institutions has been steadily declining on its own about 3 percent per year. While the full force of the deepening economic crisis is yet to be seen, enrollment will undoubtedly surpass these rates.



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