

Up to 600 teachers face layoffs

Detroit to close another 23 schools this fall

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Robert Bobb, the emergency financial manager of the Detroit Public Schools, followed through on threats to carry out drastic cuts, naming 23 schools targeted for closure. In a separate announcement, the school finance chief said layoff notices are going out for 600 teachers.

An additional 30 schools will be closed in 2010. Michigan's Democratic governor, Jennifer Granholm, appointed Bobb in January, giving him emergency powers to bypass the elected school board and impose cuts needed to eliminate the district's \$305 million deficit. The closures are expected to save \$8 million annually, indicating that further massive cuts, including teacher and staff layoffs will be needed.

The announcement immediately drew angry responses from parents and students throughout Detroit, the most impoverished big city in America. Students in the district have already suffered decades of deteriorating conditions in the public schools, which suffer from lack of adequate supplies, overcrowded classrooms and general decay and neglect. As a result, Detroit has a 75 percent dropout rate, the worst in the nation.

The public schools have long faced chronic underfunding, the product of the collapse of the auto industry, tax handouts to big business and a massive migration from the city, whose population has fallen by half since its peak of 1.8 million in 1950. Enrollment in the district is down to 95,000 today. It was close to 174,000 ten years ago.

The precipitous decline in enrollment has crippled the Detroit's already inadequate school finances, since Michigan bases school aid on the number of pupils in a district. Round after round of school closures and layoffs have accelerated the flight of students from the Detroit system to suburban and charter schools, which has in turn served as the justification for further cutbacks.

The announced closures will affect 7,500 students. The targeted schools include elementary, middle schools and

early childhood centers. One high school, Chadsey, is also on the list. Bobb said he will finalize the closure plan by May 8.

In contrast to the broad opposition of parents, teachers and students, the cutback announcement drew praise from all sections of the political establishment.

The Granholm administration responded favorably, with the state school superintendent issuing a statement praising Bobb for working quickly to deal with the deficit.

Detroit School Board members lined up behind the cuts. Board member Annie Carter, in comments to the *Detroit Free Press*, praised Bobb, calling him "the right person" for the job. "He's not afraid to make the decision that board members could not agree on and could not make." Board Vice President Joyce Hayes-Giles told the *Free Press*, "It has to be done and I fully support it."

Detroit Mayor Ken Cockrell Jr. called the closure of more public schools "unavoidable."

Meanwhile, the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) indicated it would do nothing to oppose more school closures and layoffs. Downplaying the threat of layoffs, DFT President Keith Johnson claimed that most of the threatened 600 job cuts would "be achieved by natural attrition." He called for unity behind the school administration, declaring, "Now is the time for us to wrap our arms around this district and do what is necessary to allow us to move forward and restore confidence in this school district."

On the editorial page of the *Detroit Free Press*, columnist Stephen Henderson published an editorial supporting the cuts. Henderson took Bobb's claim that there were too many buildings further, asking: "If there are simply too many buildings for too few kids in Detroit, aren't there also too many other things for too few people in the city? Doesn't Bobb's assessment and action confirm the fact—amazingly still being argued by some—that Detroit's infrastructure is just too big and that

the only way to make the city sustainable is to shrink it precipitously?”

At the same time he announced the cuts, Bobb formally requested \$200 million out of the \$1.5 billion allocated to the state of Michigan in stabilization funds under the Obama administration’s economic stimulus program. However, under terms set by the Obama administration, this money cannot be used to cover budget deficits. The funds come with the demand that schools implement right-wing “reforms,” including the expansion of charter schools and merit pay for teachers. Included in the Bobb’s request is \$25 million for “security” improvements and funds to help with school closures and consolidation.

Several hundred Detroit parents, students and teachers attended a Detroit Board of Education meeting Thursday night at Henry Ford High School. The WSWS spoke to several of those attending.

Carol Martin, a senior at the high school, told the WSWS, “The closing will have a bad impact. They say they are trying to get young people off the streets. Closing schools just gives kids another reason not to go. There is a very high dropout rate.

“I think the bank bailouts are unnecessary. They don’t have the money to help the schools. The kids should come first. The president should be concerned about education. He should be concerned about the young generation—they are not helping us.”

Cierra, another Ford student, asked, “Why does money have to play a role in education? What comes first, money or education? The most important thing is the kids and their learning. Without the kids, where would we be?”

Darrell, standing next to Cierra, added, “We already have enough schools closed, instead of closing schools, they should be building more schools.”

Leonora Brown, a building substitute teacher at Pulaski Elementary, said, “No more schools should be closed or teachers laid off because schools are overcrowded as it is. There are too many students in our school. You can’t give the students the attention they need. Teachers are stressed; students are stressed.

“I believe everyone has the right to education. In America you are supposed to have the right to pursue happiness. You can’t have that without education.”

Karen Keffer, another teacher at Pulaski, with 20 years in the Detroit public schools, told the WSWS, “I have taught for the district a long time and I am encountering problems I never thought I would encounter, and I am at a good school. We are having attendance issues, truancy.”

She spoke of the overall decay of conditions in Detroit. “My whole family works for the car companies, and we have been hit hard. Because of what is happening, the schools are losing students and losing funding.

“Many of The kids at my school don’t think they have a future. They don’t think they will go to college. They don’t even think they will make it through high school. A lot of my students know someone who has been killed. I am hearing it more and more often.

“We have a lot of families at poverty level at my school. It seems we are getting them more and more often.”

She was angered by the payout of bonuses after insurer AIG got a government bailout. “Look at AIG; they are giving them everything they want. They should have put some sanctions on AIG and the banks. I owe more money on my house than it is worth. I don’t want to just walk away, because that just contributes to the problem in Detroit.

“I am struggling and I work. I have four jobs and I am a doctoral student. I have a good job as a teacher, but I can’t make ends meet on that one salary.”



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