

US: Michigan school districts in turmoil over education cuts

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The recent education cuts by Michigan's Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm and the state legislature have thrown virtually every school district in the state into crisis, and many into opposition, as hundreds of millions of dollars have been eliminated from the districts and from vitally needed social programs.

In late September the state cut \$165 per pupil in preparation for the budget that was due October 1. Two weeks later, Granholm slashed an additional \$127 per student, for a total of \$292 per student in every Michigan school district, forcing districts that had already allocated their resources to make additional cuts. Along with the second round of cuts, Granholm took away an additional \$51.7 million from 39 districts considered to be more affluent, but also reeling under the budgetary assault.

The decision to cut the money from the higher-funded districts was an attempt by Granholm to pit districts with different incomes against one another. While some wealthier districts, such as Bloomfield Hills north of Detroit, receive 50 percent more funding than Detroit itself, there are relatively slight differences in the funding for the majority of districts.

The arcane method of funding education in America is based on the home property values, not social needs, and is palpably unequal. Detroit, which receives \$7,660 per student, along with Hamtramck and Lincoln Park, which receive \$7,316 and \$7,310, respectively, were exempted from the additional cuts, while Dearborn (\$8,802) and West Bloomfield (\$9,116) were included. The gaps between these various districts are not great; however, the different treatment is useful politically in dividing Detroit from the suburban districts surrounding it. In reality, all of these areas are grossly

underfunded.

Michigan has 1.67 million students in the K-12 education system. Adding the initial \$487.4 million in per-student cuts and the \$51.7 million from better-off districts produces a total of \$539.1 million in education cuts, or an average of \$317 per pupil throughout the state.

Next year's assault on the education budget may well be worse. Democrat Andy Dillon, the state House Speaker, said in a recent interview that \$700 million to \$1 billion in cuts could be expected next year.

On November 10, 1,500 parents and students attended a rally in Lansing, Michigan's capital, to oppose the cuts and demand the restoration of funding. The rally was called by a newly formed organization called SOS, for Save Our Schools. SOS, which bills itself as a non-governmental organization, advances policies strikingly similar to those proposed by Gov. Granholm and functions largely at this point as a pressure group on the Republicans in the state legislature. A position paper, distributed by the group, calls for implementing "a strategic combination of tax increases, spending cuts, and reforms."

Numerous other rallies have been held throughout the state, including in Dearborn and at Wayne State University in Detroit (see WSWs report), to protest the state government's cuts in education.

On Tuesday, an officially-sponsored rally took place at West Bloomfield High School, organized by the West Bloomfield Education Foundation. The district, in suburban Detroit, is one of the 39 subject to the additional cuts. West Bloomfield is losing \$551 per student, the equivalent of \$3.8 million this year alone.

Whatever the intentions of many in attendance, the gathering did not represent any challenge to the savage cuts and the corporate stranglehold over the economy.

The express goal of the rally was to raise money from parents to replace the funds cut by the state budget, not to demand the cuts be restored.

Attending the rally were Democratic and Republican politicians, including Rep. Gary Peters, a Democrat, and Republican Mike Bouchard, seeking to become the Republican candidate for governor in 2010. Both the Democrats and Republicans in Michigan have supported the cuts.

West Bloomfield is a relatively affluent district, where the average household income is \$87,740. The aim of the rally organizers is to collect \$2 million to overcome the gap in funding. They are asking contributors to make a minimum pledge of \$1 a day.

In any event, many families in the district, facing layoffs and salary cuts, cannot afford the extra payment.

“They do this year after year,” stated one parent leaving the West Bloomfield event. “Before, it was for things like sports equipment or other items the school needed. Now they want us to replace the cuts. It doesn’t end.”

“I am recovering from cancer,” explained Renée Judkins, in attendance with her daughter and son. “I have no money to give. It seems like the wealthy people control everything. Why are we the ones who are being asked to sacrifice?”

“The special needs program is always facing the threat of cuts,” continued Renée. “Last year they cut transportation for Head Start. They always seem to go after the neediest kids first.”

Jason Chilton, Renée’s son, concurred. “My sister is 9 years old, in the 4th grade,” stated Jason. “I don’t want to think what will happen if we don’t have these special needs programs.”

“When I went to West Bloomfield High School they had one of the leading programs in the state for special needs. I am very concerned about the kids who need extra faculty. If they don’t get the support, these kids will not be able to have the kind of programs that will allow them to have a normal life.”

“I was a part of the special needs program. I know from experience the kind of skills these kids can get.”

Adrienne Wise, at the meeting with her daughter, told

the WSWs, “I think these cuts are devastating to the infrastructure of the school system. We have enough challenges already getting a quality education. If they carry out more cuts they will make it even more difficult. This will not end.”

When asked what she thought about the proposal of parents to give money to the school she said, “There are many families who can give, but there are many who cannot because they are struggling to pay their mortgages, utilities and other bills. Many people have lost their jobs and are making difficult decisions on where to cut expenses.”

“I see this every day in my neighborhood, in my community. Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the country right now, and we haven’t seen the end of it. This is impacting not only the schools but the infrastructure.”

The crisis in education today is an expression of the deep crisis of the profit system affecting every layer of society and aspect of life. There are abundant resources to fund high-quality education for all. The US government has made \$23 trillion available to bail out the banking system, and now the Obama administration is planning to spend a minimum of \$35 billion for additional troops in Afghanistan.

Opposition to the savage budget cuts must be organized on the basis of an independent political movement of the working class, against both the Democrats and Republicans, on the basis of a socialist program for reorienting society’s priorities.



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