

Schools “pushed toward the edge of a cliff”

Educators discuss impact of Michigan cuts

Tom Eley
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The state of Michigan is on the verge of enacting massive cuts to elementary and secondary public education in the state, forcing administrators and school boards to scramble to avoid bankruptcy.

All told, the state appears set to slash per-pupil funding for schools in the state by nearly \$300. Some schools, largely in the suburban areas of Detroit, face substantially higher cuts of as much as \$500 per student. Among these are major school districts such as Dearborn, an inner-ring suburb and the headquarters of the Ford Motor Company.

There is some possibility that the size of these cuts could be reduced if Senate Republicans approve a House measure using more federal stimulus dollars to relieve school districts this year. However, that would only defer more cuts until 2011—what some are referring to as “the cliff year.” Commentators predict that cuts for 2011 could go as deep as \$600 per student.

“That cliff is coming and if the districts don’t re-imagine their education they won’t survive the cliff,” Michigan State Superintendent Mike Flanagan said.

The “re-imagining” of education taking place in various Michigan school districts includes closing schools, laying off teachers and staff, increasing class sizes, and eliminating programs such as preschool and continuing education, busing, art and music education, physical education, and imposing “participant fees” for high school athletics.

Around 800 parents, students, teachers, and administrators rallied outside Michigan’s Capitol in Lansing on Tuesday, demanding that legislators rescind the cuts. One hundred and fifty of that number came from Dearborn, which faces per-pupil cuts of more than \$500.

On Saturday, Dearborn was the scene of a heated meeting between parents and teachers, on one side, and school administrators on the other. Parents and teachers are outraged over the cuts Dearborn’s public schools have proposed in response to the reductions in state aid. These include about 300

layoffs and increased class sizes.

Chris Sipperley, president of the Dearborn local American Federation of Teachers (AFT), told the World Socialist Web Site that the district anticipates \$527 per pupil cuts. “It’s going to be devastating,” Sipperley said. “You’re going to have to cut schools and programs.” Sipperley said her union is limiting its opposition to the cuts and layoffs to appeals to state legislators.

Although the anger of parents, teachers, and students toward school administrators is understandable, this is not a local issue, nor even solely a state-level problem. Schools all across the country are facing similar cuts, the result of a “perfect storm” of simultaneous declines in all forms of tax revenue and corresponding cuts from state legislators. This is the end result of the global economic crisis, which all over the world is being used to attack social programs, including education, as well as jobs and wages.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with leading educators in the state of Michigan, William Mayes of the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA), and Tom White of the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB). Both men have spent decades working in education.

“We have cuts coming this year that are the most significant and largest in the history of the state of Michigan,” White said. “The fact that they’ve come between a quarter and a third of the way through the school year has made it very difficult for schools to respond.”

Both Mayes and White disputed the notion that the approximately 40 or so districts, like Dearborn, slated for cuts beyond the \$300 per student that all other districts face, are “rich.” The schools were allowed to maintain higher per-student funding based on local property tax revenues.

Mayes mentioned the Port Hope school district in northeastern Michigan, a small town, and school districts in Wayne County such as Dearborn as examples of districts that can hardly be described as wealthy. “That’s scary,” Mayes

said. “These districts have already seen their funding base erode,” with the collapse of industrial production in the state.

Mayes and White confirmed that funding cuts for the 2011 year could be even more severe, and that a number of districts will go into bankruptcy as a result. According to Mayes, as many as 90 districts could go into bankruptcy this year, and if the worst-case funding scenario for 2011 comes to pass, more than twice as many could go into receivership next year. White said that some districts could see a two-year per pupil funding cut of nearly \$1,000.

What do all these cuts from the state legislature and Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm mean? “They’re hurting children,” Mayes answered bluntly. “It means right now school districts are cutting programs, laying-off teachers. They’re closing down elementary schools, making larger class sizes.”

“The schools definitely need more funding right now, in the short term, in order to shore up their funding,” Mayes said. “Then in the long term, we need to rethink how we do school funding.”

White mentioned some of the ways school districts are attempting to cope with the sudden cash shortage. Schools are doing what they can to spare basic curriculum. Now they are tending to cut curriculum such as “gifted and talented programs” and other programs not required by law. “You’re seeing school districts not buy books, or defer scheduled maintenance on buildings,” White said. “Probably more than half of schools in the state are now doing pay-for-participation” where students who wish to go on field trips to museums or to join in extracurricular activities such as sports, band, and choir, must pay elevated fees.

Mayes said that one Michigan school district, Grand Ledge near Lansing, has announced the end of busing service for high school students.

White compared the situation confronting school districts to “a line of people being pushed toward the edge of a cliff in a single file.” He said there are 28 school districts in the state already in bankruptcy. “You’re seeing some districts going over the edge now,” White said. “There are probably some districts that can make it through the year, but they’re going off the cliff next year.”

Mayes and White each pointed out that much of Michigan’s school funding is based on a combination of the sales tax, income tax, and local property taxes. These revenue streams have been devastated by the economic crisis.

“We have cities in Michigan with 20 percent unemployment

and we have counties up in the Upper Peninsula with 40 percent unemployment,” Mayes said. “I’m telling you that’s a depression in any sense of the word.”

Under these conditions, the school system is burdened further, serving as what one might call the last thread in the social safety net. For many children, the schools provide the only hot meal in a day, and in the midst of Michigan’s cold winter, the only consistently warm temperatures.

These students “present additional difficulties and those are the kids of the greatest need, the ones most readily impacted,” by the economic crisis, White said.

The schools “work very hard to meet the needs of children, to provide breakfast programs and hot lunch programs, all kinds of things like that,” Mayes said. “But we have cities and rural areas in this state that are suffering. It is difficult for a child to learn if his parents are unemployed, if his family doesn’t have a home, or if they face foreclosure. It’s hard to learn when you don’t have enough to eat.”

Both men are deeply concerned about the disaster engulfing public education in Michigan. They said they believe that districts are doing everything they can to deflect cuts from education, and praised the quality and dedication of teachers and schools in the state.

Yet with major cuts piling up, there will inevitably be a drastic reduction in the quality of public education in Michigan. And the main source of cuts, by all accounts, will come in the form of layoffs for teachers and school staff in a state already burdened with the highest unemployment in the nation.

“Children did not choose this time to come up through the Michigan school system,” Mayes said. “Ultimately, we owe it to them to provide them with what they need to learn.”



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