

# School districts in Michigan vote on cuts

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This week school districts throughout the US state of Michigan met to vote on devastating cuts in response to funding reductions imposed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and the state legislature.

Meetings were held in twelve different districts this past Monday, including Wayne-Westland, Livonia, Kalamazoo, Saugatuck, East Lansing and Rockford, to decide which programs and services would be reduced or eliminated.

Most districts are scrambling to enact the cuts by the end of the calendar year to comply with the state law mandating a balanced budget. While some of the school closings will go into effect next September, the majority of other cuts will begin in January. These include teacher layoffs, wage cuts, and the elimination of programs such as physical education, music, and business—all disrupting the middle of the school year.

The state government has carried out over \$500 million in K-12 school cuts since the school year began. This includes a reduction of nearly \$300 in per-pupil spending statewide. In addition, \$51.7 million was cut from 39 districts, mainly in southeast Michigan. Some of those districts, such as Dearborn, would lose a total of \$600 in per-pupil funding.

After numerous protests at the state capital and local school districts, Granholm announced last week that she would delay part of the cuts (\$127 in per-pupil funding), stating she believed there was more money in the state coffers than projected.

Many school superintendents reported that while they were happy about the delay, they planned to make cuts anyway because of the uncertain status of funds later in the year. The withdrawal of the \$127 cut depends on the results of a January report by state economists.

The WSWs spoke to parents and students at the Wayne-Westland and the Livonia school board meetings on Monday. The Wayne-Westland board voted 5-2 before angry parents to close one third of the

district's elementary schools—six out of seventeen—to save \$5 million out of an \$11 million deficit.

Terrance, a high school student at Wayne-Westland attended the meeting with friends Tony and Jordon. Terrance told the WSWs, “I don’t agree with the cuts the board wants to make. I just think it is wrong. Everyone should have the right to get a good education. How can you do that with these cuts?”

Tony said, “To be honest, I think they have other priorities. What is more important than schools? I see money is going into prisons but not into schools. Something is wrong.”

“I am really shocked by all of this. I am from Georgia,” Tony said. “I never heard of school closings before I came to Michigan. It just doesn’t make any sense to me.”

Sally and Ron Madison are leaders of a parents group, Parents After the Truth, which they formed to fight the school closings. Both spoke to the WSWs before the meeting to express their opposition to the board. They are calling for a recall of board members voting on the cuts.

“We realize they have to make cuts,” stated Sally, “but they are not going about it correctly. There is a political agenda here. Why are they closing schools with 95-98 percent full capacity?”

“The board is antidemocratic,” stated Ron. “They say they are being transparent but they are not.”

“We have no one speaking for us,” Sally said.

Before a crowd of more than 300 parents and students, the Livonia school board announced that it would impose \$4.3 million in cuts (out of an \$8 million budget deficit). The cuts include laying off 40-50 staff and teachers, closing an adult education center, reducing physical education, athletic and music programs and eliminating foreign language for sixth-grade students.

To head off an explosion at the board meeting, the

school board organized an hour-long meeting of parents and students beforehand. The two hundred people present were divided up into 5-6 groups where complaints could be registered.

The school board took off the table an earlier proposal to eliminate the high school busing program, basing themselves on the decision to delay the cut of \$127 in per-pupil funding. However, if this cut is reinstated, the proposal will be reconsidered.

James Nilan, a high school student, told the WSWs, “I don’t take the buses, but all of my friends use them. If they cut out the buses I think a lot of them won’t come to school. Some will try to find a way somehow, but it will be hard.”

Sarah Tennant agreed. “Sixty percent of the students at Franklin [one of the Livonia high schools] take the bus. I just don’t think they should eliminate the busses. People are saying they will just drop out of school if they do it.”

A history teacher told the WSWs, “As a teacher I am absolutely against the cuts. Every school district in the state is facing these cuts by both the Democrats and the Republicans. And it is noticeable that all of them have set their sights on the teachers for cuts. How are you supposed to have an educated population if you get rid of teachers?”

Superintendent Randy Liepa told the crowd that Livonia had cut \$30 million from its budget during the past seven years due to reduced state funding. “Last year we were cutting to the bone,” stated board secretary Rob Freeman. “This year it is amputation.”



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