

Opposition mounts to Michigan education cuts

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Opposition among parents, teachers and school employees is mounting as school districts across the US state of Michigan prepare to close schools, lay off teachers and privatize services in response to the huge funding cuts imposed by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm and the state legislature.

The situation facing public education in the state is catastrophic. Because of an expected \$400 million shortfall in the school aid fund in fiscal year 2010-2011, the state is preparing to chop at least another \$268 in per-pupil funding to school districts. This is in addition to a \$165-per-pupil cut in the previous state budget. Districts are also being forced to contribute more to the state employee retirement fund. Even more drastic cuts are expected next year, after money from the federal stimulus runs out.

School districts large and small across Michigan are preparing to close scores more schools, lay off teachers and support staff, cut programs and privatization services. The Detroit Public Schools, the largest school system in the state, has already shuttered dozens of schools and imposed steep concessions on teachers, including a forced \$500 per month pay deduction.

Public schools face an accelerating downward spiral. As state aid is cut, necessitating cuts in programs, more and more students leave the public schools for private and charter schools. Since state aid is based on the number of pupils in a district, declining enrollment leads to even more cuts in funding.

In January, the Granholm administration signed legislation allowing more charter schools to operate in the state in a bid to win money from the Obama administration's misnamed Race to the Top program. The White House is making federal education funding contingent on states permitting the expansion of charter schools, merit pay for teachers and other punitive

“performance-based” measures.

In recent weeks parents and teachers have packed school board and town hall meetings to voice opposition to the new round of budget cuts.

In the Ypsilanti Public School District, the school board is proposing to close two of four elementary schools, along with one of two middle schools. The district faces a \$6.4 million budget deficit that has accrued over the past decade. Nearly a third of Ypsilanti teachers and many staff would see their jobs eliminated, and several courses would be wiped out or replaced with for-profit “online learning” systems.

In response to these proposals, parents at Chapelle Community School, one of the elementary schools targeted for closure, independently organized a mass citywide meeting and called on parents, teachers, school employees and residents throughout the city to unify in opposition to all cuts. The meeting, held at the school February 3, drew over 100 people, including parents and teachers from Southfield, Willow Run, and Detroit schools who were facing similar cuts. Chapelle school parents led the discussion on the real origins of the budget crisis and stressed the need to organize in defense of public education. Parents voicing their opposition to the cuts were met with loud applause.

A community town hall meeting on February 4 in the city of Southfield, a suburb north of Detroit, drew 150 parents, teachers and support staff. The Southfield school board is proposing the closure of two elementary schools, Eisenhower and Leonard, as well as reductions in staffing and the contracting out of support services.

A financial adviser to the Southfield School Board gave a lengthy presentation, outlining the district's financial straits. He said Michigan schools faced the edge of “a cliff” due to continued funding reductions

and declining enrolment. He noted that due to the economic crisis construction has virtually stopped in Southfield, while 1,725 foreclosure notices were delivered to homeowners in the city in 2009 alone. Further, the district lost some 688 students to charter schools in 2008.

A number of parents and educators spoke from the floor in opposition to the proposed cuts. A teacher of speech and language spoke out against the plans to privatize support services. “As I sit here and listen this evening to the presentation I would like to say I want to see the support services kept intact,” she said. “I hate to see the possibility that we may not be there. The fact that we may be privatized is disturbing. We deal with students who are at risk and have disabilities.”

A parent called the proposed closing of the two neighborhood elementary schools a “disaster.” Noting that his child would now have to walk to school across a busy street, he added, “What is it going to take, to get a kid killed?”

The Socialist Equality Party issued a leaflet to those attending the meeting calling for the building of a statewide movement in defense of public education. Referring to statements by school administrators who justified cuts by claiming, “we must live within our means,” the leaflet stated, “Working class families are not responsible for the bankruptcy of the Southfield schools or any of the other districts around the state. We must not be forced to pay for it by giving up the fundamental right of our children to a high quality education.”

The leaflet continued, “It is a lie to claim there is no money for schools or for jobs, health care and other basic necessities. The question is: Who is to determine how society’s resources are to be allocated?”

An SEP supporter spoke during the question and answer period. Addressing the parents and teachers in the room, he declared, “The right to quality public education is under attack, from President Obama to Michigan Governor Granholm. The economic disaster we face is not the fault of any of us. None of you were involved in credit default swaps. But we are being told that we must pay for the bailout of Wall Street.”

The speaker pointed to the \$100 million in bonuses recently awarded to executives at AIG, the insurance company that received billions of dollars in government bailout funds. “What would that money do for this

school district?” he asked. In conclusion, he pointed to the example of Ypsilanti, calling on working people in Southfield to organize independently of the school board and the unions to fight the cuts.

Over the past week parents also packed school board meetings in the western part of Michigan. Some 125 people attended a community forum February 1 in Grand Rapids over the district’s plans for school closings and consolidations. The district says it needs to cut between \$10 million and \$15 million in fiscal 2010-2011. During the meeting parents spoke out against the closing of Stocking and Harrison Park elementary schools, currently targeted under the board’s austerity plan.

In Benton Harbor, the school board outlined plans this week for the layoff of teachers and paraprofessionals in response to an \$11 million deficit. The superintendent of schools indicated its budget situation is so dire that the school is having difficulty making payroll.

Benton Harbor is one of the poorest cities in Michigan, with more than 50 percent of residents with incomes below the federal poverty level.



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