

# Ypsilanti, Michigan, parents, school employees initiate fight to defend education

**Our correspondents**  
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As school districts across Michigan prepare to cut millions of dollars from their budgets, opposition is rising among parents, teachers and other school employees. In the past week, many school boards held meetings to unveil job cuts, school closures, privatizations and other stinging cuts.

With the highest unemployment rate in the nation and revenue from sales and property taxes continuing to fall, the state's public education aid fund has a projected \$400 million shortfall in fiscal year 2010-2011. Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm has so far ordered per-pupil funding cuts totaling some \$430, and still steeper cuts are projected next year, with some estimates ranging up to \$1,000 per-pupil after the limited federal stimulus aid dries up.

The crisis has been exacerbated by the Obama administration, which has made additional federal funding dependent on the expansion of privately-owned but publicly-funded charter schools, merit pay for teachers and other punitive "performance-based" schemes.

In Ypsilanti, parents hosted a community meeting February 3 attended by over a hundred parents, teachers, bus drivers and other residents. A subsequent school board meeting on February 8 was packed with hundreds of people, overwhelmingly opposed to the cuts. A group of parents has taken the unique step of forming an independent committee to unify all sections of the working class in defense of public education.

The Ypsilanti Public School District budget deficit stands at \$6.4 million after running in the red for the past decade. The school board has proposed the closure of two of the city's four public elementary schools, and possibly one of the two public middle schools.

The school board has also announced plans to cut 42 teachers—nearly a third of all Ypsilanti teachers—and many staff positions over the next few years. Staff, bus drivers and food service workers face possible privatization. Several teaching positions and entire courses are slated to be replaced by for-profit "online learning" systems.

The school board meeting was widely anticipated to draw a large crowd. The board made the conscious decision, however, to hold it in a small basement room and called the city's fire marshal to enforce room capacity at the door. As many as 100 people filled the boardroom, and an overflow crowd of at least another 100 were held in the school cafeteria outside the door.

The meeting opened with an outpouring of comments from parents and school workers condemning the undemocratic character of the meeting and calling for no cuts. Responding to these charges, school board President David Bates told the crowd, "This is not a public meeting; it's a board meeting that's required by law to be in public view."

As parents and teachers denounced the cuts, applause broke out on multiple occasions and the board was prompted to call several recesses in an attempt to cool the crowd. People in the cafeteria, viewing the meeting on a small monitor, chanted "We can't hear! We can't hear!" and protested at the door for the meeting to be moved to the high school auditorium.

The anger expressed at the school board meeting followed the February 3 organizational meeting hosted by parents. There have been a series of mass public meetings throughout the state in response to the budget cuts. These meetings, however, have generally been organized and controlled by local school boards. In contrast, the Ypsilanti meeting was called and run by parents at Chapelle Community School, one of the elementary schools targeted for closure.

Several parents led the meeting with presentations on the importance of neighborhood public schools, the origins of the budget crisis, the impact of school closures on social conditions, and the need for a unified opposition in defense of public education.

The meeting drew some 100 Ypsilanti residents, including parents from all of the public schools, many teachers, and school workers. Also in attendance were several parents and teachers from neighboring school districts facing similarly devastating cuts.

Alarmed by the level of opposition and initiative taken by the parents and school employees, several school board members, along with the city's mayor and other officials also attended. However, the meeting's organizers placed emphasis on the democratic format of the event, allowing any audience member a 3-minute period in which to speak, with no special privileges given to members of the school board.

The parents decided that an independent public meeting was necessary as a first step to defend the schools after they were told to attend a series of "budget workshops" hosted by the school board administration. At these events, the cuts were presented as inevitable and parents were told that the district had to "live within our means." The administration unveiled several "options" involving school closures, but officials refused to identify by name which schools would be targeted.

Parents began investigating the proposals and found that Chapelle and Adams elementary school, both running close to capacity and serving mainly poor and minority-heavy neighborhoods, were targeted for closure.

During the February 3 meeting, parents noted that at Chapelle School, where 90 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, the school scored only 5 points off the top elementary school in the district on student test scores. It was pointed out that

these are “at-risk” children who have benefited from a secure, nurturing, and accommodating learning environment.

Most of the proposed cost-cutting in the Ypsilanti “deficit elimination plan” centers on eliminating jobs, including more than 30 percent of teachers by 2014. A slideshow presentation by one parent, Charles, showed that student enrollment was projected to decline by only 5 percent in the same period. Declining enrollment is nevertheless routinely given as a rationale for layoffs and school closures.

Parents pointed out that the direct consequence of such a massive cutback to teacher levels would be enormously increased class sizes. Some teachers estimated that the class sizes would balloon to as many as 60 children. Combined with the transfer of students from closed schools across town into crowded facilities, both the quality of education and the working conditions for teachers and staff would dramatically worsen.

Charles also pointed out that the Ypsilanti Education Association (YEA), the organization that claims to speak for the district’s teachers, has refused to conduct any struggle against the school closings and teacher layoffs. In fact, during a previous school board meeting the YEA president went out of her way to extend an olive branch to the school authorities by making a \$200 donation to a foundation supported by the school board.

Another important distinction made during the presentation by parents was the misrepresentation by the School Board administration and many in the media of the district’s financial status itself. Charles told the audience, “Again and again, it has been suggested that the district must resolve the \$6.4 million deficit on its 2010 \$53.2 million budget immediately. However, for 2010 itself, the district is projected to spend \$2.8 million over its budget, or only about 5 percent over.”

Charles stated, “Given the depth and nature of the global economic crisis, this should come as no surprise to any well-informed citizen. Why then is the administration proposing such a drastic reduction in public education employment and services?” Parents noted that the crisis was in fact being utilized in Michigan and nationwide as a pretext to inflict draconian cuts to services in education and in other basic public infrastructure.

Speakers called on those in attendance to reject the insistence that there was “no money” and that “we have to live within our means,” and pointed out that Ypsilanti schools had seen one cut after another over the previous decade, including the closure of two elementary schools.

A lively discussion session followed the presentation, with parents and teachers speaking on why their schools were vital to their neighborhoods and the wellbeing of their children. Many voiced anger and opposition to any cuts and expressed concern over the deterioration of social conditions, educational quality, and home values in the city.

School board President David Bates came to the front of the room to defend the budget proposals, claiming that the deficit made it “impossible to run the district as it had been done in the past” and that “restructuring” was needed. He was met with strong disapproval and was made by the audience to end his remarks after three minutes.

To applause, Naomi, a parent with children at two Ypsilanti schools, called for the resignation of board members who refused to oppose the cuts and called on the audience to help organize an independent committee to defend the schools.

Two divergent political strategies emerged at the meeting.

A school board member proposed that the parents join a group

called “SOS [Save Our Schools] Michigan.” Far from a “grassroots organization,” SOS was founded last year by the Michigan Association of School Administrators, the Michigan School Business Officials, and the Michigan Association of School Boards to prevent opposition to the school cuts from challenging the two-party system and the corporate interests it defends.

The group has organized rallies at the capitol and a petition drive to appeal to state legislators and the governor to overturn the budget cuts and stabilize school funding. The latter includes proposals for an even more regressive taxation system, which will continue placing the overwhelming burden on working families, while continuing tax abatements for the wealthy.

Naomi rejected this orientation and stressed the need for complete independence from those responsible for carrying out the cuts, from the local school administration up to the Democratic and Republican parties. She urged the audience to support the establishment of the Ypsilanti Action Committee to oppose every effort by the authorities to pit schools and workers against each other, and appeal to working people to reject all school closures, cuts, layoffs and privatizations.

Ed, a teacher from Detroit, spoke in support of the call and related the disastrous policies that the state-appointed “emergency financial manager” had enacted in his district. The attack on public education, he said, was being spearheaded by the Obama administration, which was pushing charter schools to siphon off funding and students from cash-strapped public schools.

Jerry, a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party who is also a parent from Southfield—where the schools are facing \$20 million in cuts this year—welcomed the initiative taken by the parents and school employees in Ypsilanti and said their example should be emulated across the state in order to unify the struggles to defend education.

Rather than appealing to big business politicians, Jerry said, parents should appeal to the working class. What was required was a fight against Granholm and Obama who claim there is no money while the White House hands trillions to Wall Street and is funding two wars. The payouts to the executives at AIG, he said, were more than enough to keep the school district solvent for years to come. The working class could only assert its own interests, he said, by breaking free from the two parties of the financial elite.



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