

Superintendent plans to close nearly half of Kansas City schools

Tom Horton
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On Wednesday, the Kansas City, Missouri, School District's (KCMSD) board will vote on superintendent Dr. John Covington's plan to close 26 of the district's 61 schools, eliminating 700 jobs, including 285 teaching positions.

With the full backing of the local corporate and political establishment, and in line with the policies set forth by Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, Covington is also proposing a sweeping attack on teachers' working conditions, including longer school days, merit pay and other punitive "performance-based" schemes.

Despite efforts to muzzle popular opposition, thousands of parents, students and school employees have attended meetings over the last two months to protest the school closings and other attacks on public education. When the board announced the closing of Knotts and Pinkerton elementary schools, the crowd shouted out "No!" in unison and drowned out what the speaker had to say.

Audience members denounced claims that the measures were needed to "right-size" the district due to declining enrollment. One parent said, "The right-size plan is really a lights-out plan." Another parent added, "The solution is simple—we don't close this district, we don't right-size this district, we supersize this district!" expressing her support for additional funding, not slashing programs. A teacher said, "We don't see our students as dollar signs."

The district faces a \$40 million budget shortfall that Covington says will bankrupt their general fund by June 2011. This loss comes from many sources—federal money issued since 1985 to combat de facto segregation ended in 2003; property values have declined; and a fall in enrollment, due to charter schools siphoning off students and the loss of

population as the local economy worsened.

In addition, seven schools were annexed by the neighboring Independence School District in 2007, a move cheered by Democratic State Senator Victor Callahan, who said he hoped the KCMSD would be eliminated through annexations within 10 years.

Covington—who is being paid \$250,000 a year—has justified the draconian cuts by saying falling enrollment and the budget crisis left the district with no choice. District Chief Financial Officer Rebecca Lee-Gwin echoed this, saying, "We've got to live within our means."

The emptying out of the Kansas City schools is not simply the result of population migration. It is the direct result of the expansion of privately funded and privately owned and run charter schools. One public school, Troost Elementary, saw a sharp decline in enrollment because over half of the eligible students within its boundaries attend charter schools. Troost and four other schools will be "reconstituted" according to the terms of the No Child Left Behind Act—upheld under the Obama administration—which allows for the dismissal of the entire teaching staff at so-called "failing schools" and their reopening under private management.

The citing of "falling enrollment" is a self-serving argument. On that basis, school boards spend less on education, close schools, lay off teachers and cut programs—all measures that guarantee continued declines in enrollment, not to mention more "failing" schools.

This cycle is in no way stopped or slowed by the board's current actions. Board members claim that the consolidation will mean greatly increased per-school spending, with the intent of making students "fierce competitors." This lie has been exposed by Covington

himself, who told the *Kansas City Star's* editorial board on Monday that after this vote he will announce “phase two” of budget cuts, despite phase one being presented as enough to save \$50 million per year and get the district back to profitability.

Nowhere in these machinations is any mention of education as a basic right for all children, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Instead the plan is aimed at establishing a tiered system of education where better-off “exceptional” students are placed in “signature schools,” while the majority are deemed a waste of time to teach.

This plan has not emerged from a vacuum any more than the district’s problems have. The board has recommended closing schools nearly every year going back to 2003, succeeding at closing nine. Covington’s plan would bring the total number of KCMSD schools closed over the past decade to 42.

While the board vote is not expected to be unanimous, opposition to the plan comes largely from incoming school board candidates who also accept the argument that the district has no choice but to slash programs to balance its budget. No serious explanation, however, has been given to where the where school funding money has gone. Years ago, Kansas City voters approved expansions of the lottery and casino gambling with the promise that a portion would go to education. This portion has proved insignificant. Instead, Covington insists that all that can be done is the elimination of expenses, including major structural changes to the educational system. In particular, the “re-bracketing” of high schools would place 7th and 12th graders in the same schools.

The three Afrikan Centered Education campuses, held up by their black nationalist supporters as a model of strict disciplinarian education and by the board as a model of excessive expense, would be combined into one K-12 building operating at nearly 80 percent capacity.

One parent at the Paseo Academy forum accused the district of encouraging younger students to drop out, which would justify cancelling ACE’s contract altogether. Much of the opposition to ACE’s consolidation, and the school closings in general, comes from race-based or religious perspectives, which are incapable of unifying parents and school employees against the attacks on education.

As for the Kansas City Federation of Teachers, it has expressed dissatisfaction with the “reconstituting” of schools, but no opposition to those being closed. According to *USA Today*, Andrea Flinders, president of the KCFT, “says everyone agrees on the need for downsizing ... [s]he just hopes the cuts will be made fairly.”

This proposal is part of a now well-known epidemic of school closings, wage reductions, and privatization, with similar disasters taking place in Detroit, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Other districts in the Kansas City area are also experiencing the effects of the recession and the bursting of the housing bubble.

They include:

- North Kansas City and Blue Valley school districts are announcing layoffs and school year reductions to overcome \$9 million budget shortfalls.
- Hickman Mills School District plans to combine its two high schools into one.
- Shawnee Mission School District is cutting 130 jobs.
- Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools are expected to announce budget cuts later this month.



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