

A letter on the closure of two schools in Ypsilanti, Michigan

5 April 2010

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site by a parent of children in the Ypsilanti, Michigan public school district, which recently approved the closure of two schools. (See, “Ypsilanti, Michigan, board votes to close schools, impose layoffs”)

The school board in Ypsilanti recently voted to close two of our schools (East Middle School and Chapelle Elementary), on the grounds that we have too many school buildings open for a declining student population in the city.

I am writing as a parent of public school children in Ypsilanti who has seen the impact of the budget-cutting firsthand. I'm in complete agreement with the position of the SEP on what is being done to the schools. One looks in vain for any other political organization with a plan, let alone a desire, to defend public education as a democratic right.

School closures are devastating. I'm trying to help my kids and others I see every day not to feel heartbroken over losing their schools, teachers, mentors, and grounding in our already threadbare living conditions.

Like everywhere else, the working population here has continually been accused of “living beyond our means” by having all these schools around. Time to live within our means, cut out the “luxuries” of community-based schools, door-to-door busing, and so on.

I have to rub my eyes! It is possible that our administration and political officials have never clicked their little heels onto the tiles of our schools. It's more probable that they know very well what our schools are like, and that they don't give a good goddamn about what sort of “means” they are condemning us to live within.

I've been in both of the schools that will close their doors this June. Their closure is a terrible blow to the area, which has already seen two other schools close and private charter academies creep in over the last few years. The district administration decries the loss of students to the economic crisis, but ignores the prodigious growth of the charter schools within spitting distance of the public school buildings that have been shuttered.

East Middle School, which was remodeled just last summer, is one of two junior highs in Ypsilanti. It is clean, orderly, structurally sound, and I would say even rationally organized into grade-separated commons. There were many windows, skylights, a pretty garden in the middle of the school, and open hall areas.

The school board administration said this building, where 300 or more kids were enrolled, was underutilized and therefore needed to be closed. Yet—the classrooms were full! I visited classrooms where more than 30 kids were instructed by a single teacher.

The principal—who has just tendered her resignation to the school board—told me that around 28 percent of the students at the school were “special needs.” This is compared to an average of something like 12 percent for public schools nationwide. These children require far more professional support staff and special classrooms. One suspects this is an extra expense that particularly nettled the administration.

One of East's two science teachers let me sit in on a lesson given by an unpaid student teacher. There, 33 eighth graders shifted in their seats; 13 of these kids were special needs students, including one with blindness who sat in the back of the room with no apparent aids for him.

The language arts teachers were similarly overwhelmed. In their classrooms, the teachers had bookshelves full of literature they had purchased

themselves because they had no budget to supply their kids, most of them poor, with books.

Of the building renovation, one teacher told me she appreciated that she now had a plug outlet. Investments that can be called “luxuries” and waste are, upon the most cursory examination, revealed to be both modest and long overdue.

One is immediately struck by the pride of school workers over the minimal improvements—a computer, a better front door. It suggests so many things: the selflessness and commitment of the school employees to their work; the need for a vast expansion of funding for rebuilding the country’s infrastructure; the total disregard of the policymakers for either public education or the children who need it.

The school was run as efficiently as possible given an inadequate budget. Essentially, teachers and other workers have been bowed with workloads far too heavy for them to carry.

The other school being closed, Chapelle Elementary, is currently running close to capacity at 306 students. Like East, the building was renovated last summer and appears sound and clean.

But there, too, class sizes are large and teachers are too few. In one second grade class, 30 kids have barely any room to move among their desks. They are called to line up for lunch one at a time; when one end of the line is turning the corner at the end of the hallway, the other end is just leaving the classroom. Supplies are stacked in front of the windows with no room anywhere else. Kids have no art supplies, and teachers pay out of pocket for pencils, crayons, glue, and so on.

The school has no money for field trips. The playground is dilapidated and has only a couple of functional swings, which kids fight over. Parents are implored continually to donate money and time to assist with the most basic things that just a few years ago were a regular part of the school budget.

We’re told to be more “involved.” The problem is parents these days, we’re told; go to the school board meetings!—of course, when we go to the school board meetings, we’re told that they aren’t actually public meetings but rather “meetings legally required to be held in public view.” The “parent involvement” they want to see is the kind that involves dollar bills and unpaid labor. But keep your democracy out of the schools!

Public school teachers throughout the Ypsilanti district and the entire country are strained with larger and larger class sizes. More families are becoming poor, and kids come to school with more problems—they are tired, irritable, emotionally vulnerable, hungry. A growing proportion of kids in Ypsilanti and nationwide are homeless. Teachers are forced to deal with all this with fewer support staff workers, counselors, and resources. Parents are called deadbeats and teachers are called greedy. To make up the difference, they put cops in like armed hall monitors and treat the kids like criminals.

Then when the test scores falter, teachers, students, and schools are punished with even more cuts to their funding levels. If the teachers somehow pull even, by “teaching to the test,” students are denied much of what is really needed in childhood—cultural experiences, time to reflect on art and savor literature and deeply understand the sciences, time to play and develop socially.

None of this can be pegged to the dollar. And none of it delivers returns that benefit the rich scum growing at the top of this deep social pond. Therefore it is sacrificed. Public education is being transformed into a basic training system for the millions of working class children.

Teachers are being transformed into cheap labor. Saddled with huge student loan debts, they are told to take pay cuts, benefit cuts, more kids, fewer planning periods, and to do the preparation work once handled by paid office staff. Attacks on the teachers ripple through the schools and our society, as attacks on the wellbeing of our children and our households. It’s all part of a deliberate process of prying away all the past gains of the working class in this country.

The closure of our schools is a new stage in this attack. And there are going to be many more cuts in the coming years if we don’t stand up and fight back. The working class has to be made to understand this. Thank you for taking up the task.

- A parent



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