

Report chronicles school cuts in western Michigan

Clement Daly
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Despite the passage of legislation in Lansing aimed at driving tens of thousands of more-highly-paid veteran teachers into early retirement, school districts across Michigan continue to carry out deep cuts in staffing levels and programs in an effort to deal with massive shortfalls in local budgets (See: “Michigan teacher pension ‘reform’ attacks public education”).

An article in the *Muskegon Chronicle* recently detailed what the 12 public school districts of Muskegon County, located on the west side of the state, are preparing. Referred to as a “shock and awe” campaign of spending cuts by one superintendent, school officials are now openly talking about eliminating essential services.

In Fruitport, Michigan, budget reductions totaling \$1.5 million will result in the elimination of 6.5 teaching positions, 4 special education staff, 1.6 counselors, and two instructional assistants. There will be reduced hours for support staff, as well as funding for field trips. In addition, some positions may be privatized.

In Holton, Michigan, the *Muskegon Chronicle* reports, cuts totaling \$688,000 will include laying off the middle school principal, privatizing busing, custodial work and food service, eliminating 5.2 certified staff positions, reducing athletics programs, and closing the transportation building.

In Mona Shores, Michigan \$2.5 million will be axed from the budget by eliminating some or all school transportation and slashing 25 positions, including teachers, deans, secretaries, and paraprofessionals. Middle school sports teams and summer school will also likely disappear.

The newspaper details the reductions scheduled to take place in town after town across the region. These include:

Montague: Cuts totaling \$827,000 could include the elimination of 10 positions, some or all athletics, some or all transportation; the privatization of custodians and bus drivers; administrative cuts.

- **Muskegon:** Cuts totaling \$10.2 million could include the elimination of at least 20 positions including 14 teachers; the privatization of custodians and bus drivers; the closure of middle school pools.

- **Muskegon Heights:** Cuts totaling \$3.7 million include the closing of two elementary schools.

- **North Muskegon:** Cuts totaling \$325,000 could involve the elimination of 2.5 staff positions and all busing, as well as changes to athletics programs.

- **Oakridge:** Cuts totaling \$1.6 million could include the elimination of positions; the privatization of staff; adjustments to athletics and extracurricular activities.

- **Orchard View:** Cuts totaling \$2.3 million could include the elimination of 23.5 positions; privatizing custodians, food service and bus drivers, as well as technology and secretarial staff; replacing all-day kindergarten with half-day kindergarten and an enrichment program; the elimination of middle school sports and clubs.

- **Ravenna:** Cuts totaling \$1 million could include administrative consolidation; the elimination of 10.5 certified staff; the gutting of sports programs; reducing hours for secretaries and counselors.

- **Reeths-Puffer:** Cuts totaling \$1.8 million could include the elimination of 13.5 certified staff positions and 1.5 administrators; reductions in transportation; the institution of pay-to-play athletics or the elimination of some sports; the privatization of bus drivers.

- **Whitehall:** Cuts totaling \$1.6 million could include the elimination of 13-15 certified staff positions; administrative consolidation; the reduction of 23 bus routes; the institution of pay-to-play for extracurricular

activities and sports, or in some cases, their total elimination.

In personnel alone, the county intends to realize an estimated \$7.5 million through the elimination of teachers, administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, and staff.

In many districts, officials asked the community to look at lists of programs up for elimination and prioritize them according to which they think should be cut.

“You might as well close your doors,” suggested Dana Bryant, the superintendent for the Muskegon Heights Public Schools District, which is expected to be running with a \$4 million deficit and no reserve funds by the end of the year.

The operating budget for the Orchard View Public Schools district is so slim superintendent Pat Walstra worries what the district would do in the event they had to replace a boiler.

And in the Ravenna Public Schools district librarians are already volunteers, athletics are on a pay-to-play basis, and maintenance work is privatized. According to the district’s superintendent, John VanLoon, the only thing left for elimination is certified staff.

Muskegon County is far from being alone in its fiscal troubles. In nearby Ottawa County, the Grand Haven Public Schools district is faced with offsetting a \$3 million loss in state funding next year. In addition to privatizing substitute teachers, the district has sent layoff notices to seven of its teachers, won voluntary wage and benefit concessions from administrators, and plans to make up an additional \$1 million in savings through other spending cuts.

With a 52 percent high school dropout rate, the Grand Rapids Public Schools district is taking steps to avoid a state takeover. Included in the \$10 million in cuts called for in the latest budget proposal are plans to reduce human resource costs, supplement secondary instruction with technology, and begin offering electives on a citywide basis.

Anticipating further state cuts in per pupil funding, Grand Rapids plans on implementing online courses and limiting the time of certified teachers in the classroom to only twice a week. The district is also hoping about 100 teachers retire this year, most of which will not be replaced. Recent meetings on the budget have drawn hundreds of angry parents and

community members opposed to the plans.

The crisis in the area extends to higher education as well. In an effort to close a \$3.6 million budget shortfall, Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) is planning to raise tuition by 5.9 percent this fall. The hike will be the school’s largest in more than a decade. On top of this, the college will be seeking wage and benefit concessions from its employees.

A sharp falloff in state funding has accelerated the financial woes of the region’s public education system. The percentage of revenue coming in from the state has fallen from 23 percent to 16 percent over the past five years alone. At the same time, revenue from property taxes has also dropped precipitously.



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