

State of Michigan gives the green light to close 70 more Detroit public schools

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Detroit Public Schools (DPS) emergency financial manager Robert Bobb has been given the green light to implement his proposal to close up to 70 schools, or half of the city's remaining public schools, by 2013. State School Superintendent Michael Flanagan gave the go-ahead on Monday, with the stipulation that the plan "must be implemented immediately."

The consolidation of the remaining schools will mean thousands more teacher layoffs and class sizes that top more than 60 students for grades 9 through 12, creating impossible conditions in the classroom for educators and students.

The changes, which will effectively destroy public education in Detroit, are in line with the broader assault on working people's living standards taking place in the state and nationally. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder just announced a budget proposal that slashes funding for education and social programs, as well as attacks on the wages, benefits, job security and bargaining rights of public employees. (See "Michigan governor proposes massive cuts to fund business tax cut")

Several months ago Bobb threatened "draconian" cuts, including the proposed massive school closures, as a means to eliminate an alleged \$327 million deficit, unless the state of Michigan agreed to an infusion of funds to prop up the district. Such moneys were not then, and will not now be forthcoming.

The closure of 70 schools, on top of the scores already shuttered since Bobb was appointed financial czar two years ago by Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm, is the product of an effort by Bobb, Mayor Dave Bing and the state, with the complete support of the Obama administration, to effectively destroy the DPS as a viable public school system. Their aim is to open the door to privatization and the unfettered spread

of charter schools. This is integrally related to Mayor Bing's proposal to "right-size" Detroit by shutting off essential public services to wide areas of the city.

One year ago, Obama's education secretary Arne Duncan characterized Detroit as "ground zero" in the fight for education "reform." The announced closures represent the consummation of this policy.

Since 1999, when student enrollment in the DPS was 175,000, the student population has declined by nearly 60 percent, and could bottom out at 58,000 by 2014. Decades of gross mismanagement and corruption, coupled with a devastating economic collapse, have led to the gutting of the school district. At the same time all manner of charlatans and opportunists have filled the breach with charter schools, in an attempt to cash in on the education crisis.

With the shuttering of more institutions, these trends will accelerate as families are forced to move out of the city or shift their children into charter schools. For the Detroit youth who remain, Bobb's plans will mean an end to anything resembling genuine education at the high school level. Herded like cattle into overcrowded classrooms of 60 students, learning will become all but impossible, under conditions in which the schools are already unable to meet the needs of their students.

In a recent school-by-school analysis by the Michigan Department of Education, only two Detroit high schools had more than 1 percent "college readiness" among graduating students, measured by ACT tests. This compares to a statewide average in Michigan of 19 percent, itself an extremely poor result.

For Detroit teachers, the closures will consummate the elimination of what remains of their seniority rights, as the existing school clusters will be emboldened to hire and fire teachers "at will." Eventually, educators will be compelled to accept lower wages and benefits

as a condition of employment. At the same time, teachers will be pitted one against the other, as pay becomes performance-based, i.e., merit pay, and tied to improved standardized test scores.

Currently, Detroit's teachers are in the second year of a \$10,000 pay cut, transparently called the Termination Incentive Plan, or TIP. The result of collusion between the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) leadership and Robert Bobb, TIP was designed to compel high seniority teachers, at the limit of their pay steps and with decent health benefits, to retire. TIP was pushed through by the DFT in December 2009, following a 60-day contract extension that forced teachers to ratify these concessions only after they had returned to the classroom.

In his remarks on Monday, Superintendent Flanagan was careful not to recommend that Bobb declare bankruptcy, a threat Bobb has made on several occasions but now claims to have abandoned. This is a clear message that any reorganization of the DPS will not be done unilaterally, but will enlist the support of the employee unions, especially the Detroit Federation of Teachers, to push through the necessary agreements.

Recently, while the unions looked on, Bobb privatized school maintenance services, already cut to the bone by previous layoffs, to a company called SODEXO. DPS custodians, glaziers and other support personnel who are re-hired by SODEXO relinquish their pension rights as part of this process.

At the national level, the American Federation of Teachers and its President Randi Weingarten have already signed off on "reforms" such as merit pay, peer review, charter schools and the destruction of teachers' seniority rights, behind the reactionary and false proposition that the decline in American education is due to "incompetent" teachers.



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