

School districts throughout Detroit area face cuts

Tobin Reese, Gita Ruffman
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Due to a drastic decrease in education funding statewide, suburban and outlying communities around the Detroit area are facing significant budget cuts. This is resulting in increased class sizes for students, teacher and staff layoffs, reduced student transportation, school closings, and other program reductions in areas that previously had higher levels of per-pupil funding compared to the city proper.

In recent weeks, administrators at Plymouth-Canton Community Schools (PCCS), west of Detroit, have sent out 269 teacher layoff notices. While some of these teachers may be hired back again after a massive restructuring, hundreds have been left guessing as to whether or not they will have a job in the fall.

The budget proposal for PCCS cuts \$18 million from a budget of \$163 million for the two-town district. Before the budget deadline of June 30, district officials must determine how to implement the decrease in state and federal funding. Measures under consideration include the permanent firing of at least 80 teachers and 20 or more janitorial staff, canceling bus routes, increasing class sizes, and closing at least one school.

Fiegel Elementary School, the most likely school to face closure, is home to many students from low-income families who live nearby. Should the institution be shuttered, parents and educators will be forced to find ways to transport children to one of four different schools in the surrounding area. Long-standing relationships between students, parents, teachers and staff will be broken up.

A comment on the *CantonPatch* web site from a concerned Canton parent reads:

“I am a parent of a child that attends Fiegel. He almost cried at the bus stop this morning when he heard the news that his school will be closing. What is the transition plan for these kids? What school will he go

to? Do parents have any input?”

In nearby Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, the school district faces \$15.1 million in budget cuts for the 2011-2012 school year. The administration plans to lay off around 70 teachers, eliminate transportation for high school students, cut funding for sports programs, combine several administration jobs, and lay off custodians.

In the past five years, there have been more than 260 layoffs in the district and a cut in spending of \$34.4 million. Teachers who retain their jobs will now be forced to contribute a greater portion of their salary toward health care and retirement. This effective reduction in pay is an experience shared with public and private workers in Michigan, and throughout the nation.

In addition to a loss in funding from the state, districts also face deficits stemming from a decrease in property tax revenue due to the region's devastated housing market. In Oakland County, just north of Detroit, property tax revenues have dropped nearly 30 percent. Although the area is one of the wealthiest in the state, school districts in the county face an additional loss of hundreds of thousands, or millions, of dollars, on top of the already reduced state and federal education funding.

A letter to the editor published in the *Detroit Free Press* captures the sentiment of broad layers of the population toward declining funding for public education. Rick Seefelt, a resident of the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak, wrote:

“Sadly, Gov. Rick Snyder, the businessman, is moving to make Michigan's educational system a for-profit business.... When young parents look for child care, do they look for a well-run business, or do they look for trained experienced, caring, warm staff where

their children will thrive? Do they seek a warm voice reading a book or a computer technician and a screen on a wall?”

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder’s education budget plan would reduce per-student spending for K-12 schools by a total of \$470—a combination of \$300 in state cuts and \$170 in federal funding. This amounts to an 8 to 10 percent decrease in funding for most districts in the state. The Michigan State House proposes making even greater cuts. Under that plan, total federal and state funding would be decreased by up to \$501 per student.

While the Democrats have raised certain objections to the scale of the cuts being prepared, they are united with their Republican counterparts in insisting that reductions must be made. In addition, as does the party at the national level, Michigan’s Democrats support “school reform”—i.e., the introduction of merit-pay, the overturning of teacher seniority rights, and the expansion of various forms of testing to identify “failing” schools that can then be targeted for closure, mass staff layoffs, or transformation into charter schools.



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