

School officials order closure of Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy

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Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy will be permanently closed this month, Asenath Andrews, the school's principal, told teachers Tuesday after the school district's emergency financial manager ordered its closure.

Ms. Andrews said she could no longer hope that the school would remain open after attending a meeting with the Detroit Public Schools administration about how to dispose of the school's physical assets. The administration told her that the school would be closed June 17, and that finals had to be moved up by a week.

"I did everything I could to keep from sobbing in the meeting," she said in an WSWs interview after school Tuesday. "It's almost like I was in denial this whole time, I never thought this could happen."

Catherine Ferguson Academy is a school for pregnant and parenting teen mothers in Detroit, which was founded in 1986. It is one of only four such institutions in the US. The school was on a list of 44 schools to be converted into charter schools, or closed if charter school operators were not found to operate them. (See the WSWs video series on the school: Part 1 and Part 2 .)

The district's emergency financial manager, former General Motors executive and private equity manager Roy Roberts, made the final decision.

"It's like going through the stages of death," added Paul Weertz, the school's science teacher, who developed the school's innovative urban farm more than two decades ago.

When the school was initially threatened with closure, letters of support came pouring in from all over the country—and throughout the world—as the story caught the attention of the national media.

"I'm just so distraught, so disappointed, so frightened," said Ms. Andrews. "How do you close a

school that's been on national TV, that has an international following?"

In Detroit, there is overwhelming support for keeping the school open. "These girls were trying to improve their education at all odds, but now that opportunity is being taken away from them," said Detroit resident Beth Breidenstein, after learning about the closure. "There's no excuse for it."

"Detroit already has an illiteracy rate of 47 percent, but they're closing more schools. It's absurd," she added.

"The political establishment wanted to make an example out of the school," said a social studies teacher at Catherine Ferguson Academy. "They didn't have to shut it down, but they did it deliberately to let people know that they have no voice. We got so much support; even internationally. But the powers that be don't care."

Ms. Andrews and her staff have been fighting desperately to keep the school open, but to no avail. "They tried everything: talking to the media, sending letters, even sending fruit from the school's garden, nothing worked," she said.

"This is just another example of how the United States isn't a democracy. How the working class doesn't have a voice," she added.

The mood was somber in the school, which was sweltering in the day's record-breaking heat. "I can't even talk about it I'm so mad," said the school's security guard. That sentiment was shared universally, from the staff, who were losing their jobs, to the students, who will not be able to return to their beloved school, to the administrative and teaching faculty, who had put a lifetime of work into the school.

"What can you say? It's gone," Ms. Andrews said. "I had been in a state of denial."

As Ms. Andrews was speaking in her office after school, Mr. Weertz walked in to her office, fresh from working at the school's farm under the sweltering sun, in his straw hat and gloves. They sat in the office, and talked about their future plans, now that all that they had worked for over decades had been destroyed.

Students responded with a mixture of outrage, sadness, and determination to stay in school even in difficult circumstances. "This is so wrong," said Shadiaia Baker, 18. "Even if you don't have children, it's still the best school because the teachers and staff are so great." She said that she was a year away from graduation at Catherine Ferguson Academy, but that it would take longer at another school that is not equipped to help her with her two children. "Hopefully I can still graduate, but it'll be harder without childcare," she said.

"There is no other school we can go to that has the things that pregnant girls need," said Shaletheia Davis, a tenth grade student.

She said she liked Catherine Ferguson Academy much better than her old school. "Since I came here my grades have gone way up. Everyone understands each other. They help us here before we even ask for it."

"A lot of girls are going to drop out," she added. "I am not going to give up, but I can't say that others are going to keep fighting, because they have no where else to go."

The decision to close Catherine Ferguson and other schools in Detroit is being coordinated with efforts by the city's Democratic mayor, David Bing, to shut down entire neighborhoods deemed too sparsely populated and poor to provide continued services.

Well aware of this, there is growing determination on the part of teachers, parents and students to defend their neighborhood schools.

The Socialist Equality Party is urging workers in the Detroit metropolitan area to rally to the defense of Catherine Ferguson and prevent its closure.



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