

Illinois teacher commits suicide citing working conditions

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Mary Thorson, a 32-year-old physical education teacher at Cottage Grove Upper Grade Center in Ford Heights, Illinois, took her own life on November 24, 2011. The note she left at the scene of her death was devoted almost entirely to the conditions in the Ford Heights school district, closing with, “We must speak up about what’s going on! This life has been unbelievable.”

A veteran of the US Army Reserve, Thorson was a popular teacher at the school where she had worked since 2008, having taught in Chicago and suburban Bellwood before taking the position at Cottage Grove Upper Grade in the Chicago suburb of Ford Heights. Her colleagues noted her dedication to the students at the school, including her habit of providing them with warm clothing and school supplies.

Thorson had been suspended one week before her death due to an allegation that she had cursed at a student. Her family told the *Chicago Tribune* that she was worried about having become a target of the school administration and about being fired. Her personnel records were found neatly laid out on her bed after her death.

More than 98 percent of students in the Ford Heights school district live below the poverty line. In her final statement, Thorson wrote of extreme hardships faced by the students, the school administration’s disregard for teachers, and the lack of resources available in the district.

In the heart of an area ravaged by de-industrialization, Ford Heights is one of the poorest municipalities in the United States. Recently, subprime mortgage rates and poverty wages have all but wiped it off the map. It lost one-fifth of its population in the last 10 years, depleting an already meager tax base. In 2010, the village could no longer support a police department at the cost of \$1 million per year, and it closed its local police station, still full of unprocessed evidence. Forty-nine percent of the Ford Heights population lives under the federal poverty line.

At a December district school board meeting, it became clear Thorson was not alone in feeling threatened by the school administration. Teachers admitted that they are intimidated by school officials, afraid for their jobs and dare not speak openly about the conditions they face. More than one teacher spoke about being harassed for taking sick days. Another teacher noted the irony of having an anti-bullying campaign in the school while the teachers are being bullied.

At the meeting, school administrators pushed back, blaming teachers for not speaking up or citing specifics. School board President Joe Sherman said, “If you guys would have come and brought allegations and we didn’t address it, then you would have every right to say what you need to say.”

Intimidation is a tactic in a nationwide strategy to de-professionalize teaching, as a precondition for the dismantling of public education and the selling off or leasing of its related assets. The so-called educational reforms, begun under the Bush administration and expanded by President Obama, have largely been couched in the highly confrontational language of “accountability,” which implies that teachers are overpaid and undeserving of professional status. This has accompanied a frontal assault on the workplace gains teachers struggled to win throughout the 20th century.

The state of Illinois has led the implementation of these “reforms”, subjecting schools to extremely aggressive measures, including mass firings which force teachers and staff to re-apply for their jobs, buyouts, capricious and punitive academic testing measures, and regular school closures and consolidations, which force students to make their way to schools in other areas. These policies have inflamed the crisis in public schools and the communities they serve, contributing to higher drop-out rates, violence, overcrowding, and burn-out among teachers.

School boards routinely provide cash incentives to

administrators to implement these changes on a school-by-school basis, extracting concessions from teachers in violation of their teaching contracts. Ratings and disciplinary measures are regularly used to meet predetermined numbers of layoffs which administrators are required to carry out over a school year. Outspoken teachers identified by administrators as “troublesome,” and the better-compensated veteran teachers are typically targeted.

In the Chicago Public Schools system, recent “reforms” have included longer school days, where teachers and other staff are not compensated for an additional seven hours per week, and many have reported being threatened and intimidated by school administrators into voting in favor of the extended hours.

As these reactionary policies devastate schools, students and teachers, the state and local budget crises have intensified the negative impact of lower wages and fewer school resources.

It is deeply tragic that the miserable conditions in public schools could result in the suicide of a dedicated young teacher, but once the ruthless policies of the ruling class are seen in full light, such tragedies are all but inevitable. Last October, a longtime Los Angeles-area teacher took his own life after being labeled a “less effective teacher” by the *Los Angeles Times*. (See “Teacher ranked ‘less effective’ by the Los Angeles Times takes his own life”)

Mary Thorson’s parents have made a special effort to communicate their daughter’s intentions. Her mother said that the young teacher’s suicide was directly related to the pressures at Cottage Grove Upper Grade Center, emphasizing that Mary had no prior mental health issues and was never in a combat situation in the Army Reserve. Thorson’s father said, “Is the school responsible? Yes, the school is responsible.”



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