

# Protest over closure of Detroit Day School for the Deaf

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14 March 2012

Parents, students, teachers and community residents held a protest and picket outside the Detroit Day School for the Deaf March 12. The school is one of more than a dozen slated to be shuttered next fall on orders of Detroit Public Schools Emergency Manager Roy Roberts.

Over the past three years, state-appointed emergency managers wielding dictatorial powers have shut down scores of public schools in Detroit and driven tens of thousands of students out of the district or into for-profit charter schools. Roy Roberts was appointed by Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder while Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed his predecessor, Robert Bobb. Both have acted ruthlessly to gut public education in Detroit in the interests of the banks and bondholders.

Detroit Day School for the Deaf, organized in 1898, is one of the oldest schools of its kind in the United States. It is the only non-residential school for the deaf in Michigan and currently has 39 students enrolled.

An ancillary staff member at the Detroit Day School for the Deaf told the WSWS,

“This school offers a continuum of education with deaf and hard of hearing students who communicate with sign language. If they are dispersed, their best friends will be their interpreters. If they don’t have peers who can communicate with them they will be socially isolated. To send these kids into an environment where other kids can’t understand them would be a crime.

“We really don’t know what is going to happen to the students. It is being dictated to the principal.”

The closure of the school will likely mean that students will be put into the general population of the

Detroit Public Schools or bused to the Michigan School for the Deaf in Flint, more than 60 miles away.

As one educator explained to the WSWS, the problem with putting children into the general student population is that many children coming to the school have little or no language experience at all, because 90 percent of deaf or hard of hearing students are born to hearing parents, who do not have skills to communicate with the deaf. This means that deaf and hard of hearing students are behind when it comes to language and communication skills and require extra time to catch up. Therefore, to require a student at age 14, who is likely reading at a second or third grade level, to enter a regular high school is a recipe for failure.

Mary Ellen Anglewicz, a former Detroit public school teacher, told us, “The teachers here are specially trained. What happens when the children are scattered? What resources do parents have?

“I know that schools like this get federal money for special needs students. I don’t know where that money is going to. You have a facility that is up and running. It is like you are tossing it away. There is no thought behind it.”

Michael Stenvig said, “I teach in Hamtramck. I taught in the Detroit schools program for special education. This is one of the best.

“I have a question for Mr. Roberts. Are you going to take all these students to individual schools? Are you going to forget about them like in the 1920s?

“It is one thing to say this is a bad move by an unelected dictator over the Detroit schools. But we have a state with a surplus of money. Why is the state allowing this to happen?

“I have a feeling this is going to be a steamroller

year. It will be destroy and pillage.”

Jan Goike, a former principal at the Detroit Day School for the Deaf, told the WSWS, “This is not the first time we have dealt with this. At least once every four years they have threatened to close this school until we expend huge manpower in trying to fight the closing. The unfortunate part of all this is that all the time and energy we expended to keep it open could have been used to make the school better.

“I think there is a lot of misunderstanding about the law, especially the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]. One of the tenets of IDEA is inclusion. When the law first passed in 1975, a large majority of cognitively impaired students were being isolated, put in special schools. Therefore, they wanted to make sure that students with disabilities had the same opportunities as general education students. In other words, with accommodation and modification they might be able to attend their neighborhood schools.

“The least restrictive environment for a profoundly deaf student who uses American Sign Language is in a specialized center because, number one, the teachers are expert users in sign language and therefore they can teach students directly without an interpreter.

“Number two; they have a critical mass of students that also use sign language as a means of communication. This is essential for the emotional and social well being of the deaf.

“Number three, there are teachers and support personnel, like social workers, speech therapists, language specialists and other staff, who are expert in the use of American Sign Language. The big advantage is that the child can communicate with everyone in the school. This ability gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of valuable self-worth and opportunity for personal growth.

“They feel this is an easy push, an easy cut—except if your child is deaf. This school could really be a program for all of Wayne County. In the 1970s we had 362 kids in this building, all deaf or hard of hearing. It was a strong program.”

Emily, another former Detroit teacher, added, “I’ve been appalled at what is happening for years. I think it is terrible. This school is needed.”

About Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top” program, she said, “The charter schools are a way for the rich people to make money. I told my husband I was appalled that the American Federation of Teachers endorsed Obama. I was like, ‘Are you kidding?’ After Arne Duncan and all he did? My school is set to become a charter. I don’t want to go that route. I am fed up.”



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