

Muskegon Heights, Michigan residents speak on conversion of public schools to charters

Our reporters
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As reported recently on the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Muskegon Heights Public School District in West Michigan has begun converting all of the town's public schools into charters. The district's Emergency Manager, Donald Weatherspoon, has fired all of the city's teachers and school staff and is now soliciting bids from for-profit charter school contractors.

Like many other cities in Michigan, Muskegon Heights was once a manufacturing center, but has seen steep social and economic decline over the past thirty years as factories have been shuttered and social services eroded. While Muskegon Heights, or "the Heights" as it is known to locals, has a population of only about 12,000 people (77 percent of which are African American), it is part of the Muskegon-Norton Shores Metro Area, which has a population of approximately 172,188.

The 2010 American Community Survey provides some insight into the harsh social conditions in Muskegon Heights. According to the survey, in 2010 unemployment was at 17 percent, and the median household income for a family was \$25,677 (nationwide, median household income is \$45,449). While 38 percent of all families in Muskegon Heights lived beneath the poverty line, 85 percent of families with children under age 5 fell into that category.

Over the weekend, a WSWs reporting team visited Muskegon Heights and talked with workers, students, and retirees about their reaction to the unprecedented attack on public education.

Jeannette Moore is a factory worker at Port City Plastics where she is a machine operator. "I've been working there for a year and before that I worked in shipping at Kandu." Kandu is a light manufacturing non-profit based in Holland, Michigan.

When first asked about the charter school plan for Muskegon Heights, Jeanette said that she didn't know what else could be done and that mismanagement of the finances had led to the current situation. Our reporters pointed out that this same situation is occurring all over the world, where basic services such as education are being slashed in order to

pay down interest owed to banks and bondholders. Meanwhile, the Obama administration is touting successful economic recovery.

To this, Jeannette responded, "My wages are very low and I can't say I have seen a recovery. It's not the case that the economy is improving from what I see. And now what is happening in the Heights school system is not good. My children are all grown, but they went to these schools. With the charters coming in, it makes people think about moving. Why did people move here years ago in the first place? At the time, it was for the schools."

Felicia Taylor works at the local Family Dollar store. "All my little ones go to these schools. It doesn't seem right. To be honest, we are moving to the South because of the economic situation—there are almost no jobs here and now the schools are going to be charters." Taylor also discussed her struggle to keep her house and her frustration with Obama's promise to provide housing help. "They did nothing to help me. I haven't seen any change for the better. We pay taxes, but for what? The taxes here are extremely high and we are getting less and less for our taxes."

When asked how the charter system would work, WSWs reporters explained that the Muskegon Heights Public School District would operate as the Muskegon Heights Public Academy System. It would function not as an educational institution, but as an entity with no other purpose other than to pay off its debt. Property taxes would continue to be collected and would be used to pay off the debt of a closed public school system. Suppressing teacher and worker wages, banning unions, and cutting students services such as sports, arts education and career counseling would allow the schools to pay down debt. Whatever profit is extracted from this process would not be reinvested in the schools or returned to the public coffers but would be profit for whichever company is chosen to run the schools.

Christa Harthun, a restaurant manager, also discussed the city's high taxes and expressed outrage over the conversion of the schools. "Our property taxes are double what they were when we lived in Lakeside. And where do they go?

Our roads are destroyed, businesses are closing, our schools are closing. This is our future. The mayor brought in some consultant out of Texas a couple of years ago and paid her \$300,000. For what?” Christa also described how her own family had struggled with foreclosure when her parents lost their home. “I grew up a Republican and then changed to Democrat for their more liberal views, but now I see they’re both the same.”

The SEP reporting team also spoke briefly with a member of the Muskegon Heights school board, Trinell Scott, who acknowledged the historic nature of the conversion of the school district to charter schools, saying, “This would affect public education throughout the entire country. I could be wrong, but I think they are trying to do away with the public education system.” The responsibility for this, she said, rested solely on the Republicans, particularly Michigan Governor Rick Snyder. When challenged that the Obama Administration and Arne Duncan are the biggest advocates for charter schools and in fact have incentivized the transition of public schools to charters, Trinell responded, “That’s true. They are. What Mr. Obama and Duncan are looking at is the success of some charters. But my focus is the state of Michigan and what’s going on here.”

Cordaro Waller, 18, a senior at Muskegon Heights High School told the WSWS he was opposed to the plan to make the school district an all charter district. “I feel that it is wrong. It seems like everything we have is being cut. It’s another move to cut education. I feel we need more education. We are in a situation now where they there could be no schools open. I don’t like it at all.”

Janelle Walker has three grown children who went through the Muskegon Heights school system and opposes the proposal to change the district into an all charter district. “They need to keep it the way it is. I don’t like charter schools. This is all about the money. They don’t care about the kids.” Janelle said she knew many of the teachers and that some of the ones who taught her also taught her children.

“Most of the people I have spoken to don’t like it. I don’t like the fact that they are taking the jobs of the teachers. This is wrong. We need the teachers and they need jobs. How are they supposed to survive? Unemployment don’t last that long.”

Theresa Jordan also has school-aged children. “I have a 4-year-old and a daughter in college. My 4-year-old goes to Ellen Grace Loftis Early Childhood Academy (a public school). I don’t know if my words can convey how I feel, but this is a really, really sad situation, especially with the turning of the high school into a charter. As far as I am concerned it is like saying we don’t have the right to go to school and I think something should be done about it. If kids

don’t go to school they will be out in the streets getting into trouble. I don’t like the charter schools and I think parents should stand up and fight this.”

When Theresa was asked what she thought about Obama’s support for charter schools she said, “I don’t think charter schools will help education at all. My fear is this will go badly.”

Faye Kidd is unemployed and listened with interest to the WSWS correspondents. “It’s just not right to run the schools in order to make a profit. That is not how education is supposed to be.” When our reporters said that these cuts are happening everywhere, Faye said that she and her husband had just been talking about what they saw on the news about Greece. “I know this isn’t just happening here in Muskegon Heights. It’s not even just happening in the US.”

Lovie Wright, a widow on a fixed income, was eager to talk to campaigners, “We don’t have jobs here in the area. In order to work, people have to travel to Holland or Grand Rapids. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.” Lovie still expressed hope in the Obama administration, to which WSWS reporters responded by explaining how Obama’s economic policies and charter school incentives are having a direct impact on the conditions of life for people in Muskegon Heights. Lovie took SEP material and thanked the team for their time.

Antwione Greenwood, 31, works at a factory making wooden pallets. “Shutting down the public schools here and creating charters is a set up for failure for the children. The kids are already under-educated as it is. So now they want them to go to charter schools where they may not even have athletics or sports. Sports can be a very good outlet for kids who have a tough home life. It can give them something to keep their minds off the difficulties at home. It can also keep them out of trouble. It’s not getting any better. It’s hard really. I make \$8.25 an hour and have four kids. These days you have to work two jobs and your partner has to work in order to make do.”



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