

350 Ypsilanti, Michigan school workers receive layoff notices

Naomi Spencer
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The deeply indebted Michigan school districts of Ypsilanti and neighboring Willow Run, located around 35 miles west of Detroit, are in the midst of a consolidation, a process accompanied by building closures, attacks on the wages and working conditions of teachers, and administrative reshuffling.

Teachers and support staff at Ypsilanti Public Schools (YPS) and Willow Run Community Schools (WRCS) were handed pink slips en masse April 12. The 350 employees were told they had to reapply for the 20 percent fewer jobs that would exist next year.

On Friday, May 3, teachers will be notified whether they will be rehired to work for the new unified district, called Ypsilanti Community Schools. The entire process has been humiliating and deliberately opaque for teachers as well as students and parents.

Scott Menzel, superintendent of the nearby Washtenaw Intermediate School District, is overseeing the consolidation process. “We have a significantly reduced number of positions that are available due to the budget constraints and the reality of coming together to create one new district,” Menzel told the *Ypsilanti Courier* April 29.

The district has publicized an estimate that 1,000 students will leave the district as a result of the consolidation. This number, which represents roughly 20 percent of the student body, has been used to justify cutting staff by one-fifth. Menzel acknowledged that an outside firm hired to do an analysis of the student retention problem had predicted a significantly smaller decline, but told the paper, “Given the deficit status of the district, we have to be far more conservative.”

At the end of the school day on Friday, teachers will be handed sealed envelopes with letters informing them of their employment status. Some teachers will reportedly receive letters stating they “met the criterion,

but the district does not yet know if a position will be available to them.” The April 12 layoff notices for these teachers, along with those who are told they are not being offered a position, will become effective at the end of the fiscal year June 30.

An “external group” has “scored applicants based on their application material, their references, their certifications, an interview and a classroom visit” over the past three weeks, according to the *Courier*. The pace of the reviews has been used to sow panic and confusion among the teachers.

Some 330 teachers and support staff have reportedly re-applied. The “evaluation” of teachers has been “really, really difficult,” Menzel said. “I have no idea how many are meeting the criteria.”

An Ypsilanti Community Schools employee spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the layoffs. “The situation as it stands right now is very up in the air. The only people who are going to know definitively what the situation is are those who will get a ‘no’ on Friday. Those who do get a job won’t be informed of their placement or salary.

“The budget for the district does not go into effect until July 1, and rehired teachers have until June 30 to decide whether they are going to sign on. And after that date they won’t be able to file for unemployment.” The employee added, “Legally the district can offer salaries of 70 percent of what employees are currently making.”

“There are a lot of unknowns and gaps at this point. It is not over Friday.”

On Facebook pages and local blogs dedicated to the topic, teachers and parents expressed outrage, distrust, and despair. “In the meetings I have attended, I have not heard them say they will hire back 80% of the CURRENT teachers, just that they commit to interview us first,” wrote one teacher in the Ypsilanti Community

Schools Supporters Facebook group.

“The principal selections and the plans to hire from outside the district leaves THIS teacher even MORE scared, worried, and stressed out about what will happen and WHEN it will actually occur. Add humiliating, stress inducing, and demoralizing to amateurish and poorly planned, and you will have hit the nail on the head. As it is, HIGH QUALITY teachers are continuing to seek and find employment elsewhere.”

“To make things harder for these staff members,” explained an anonymous commenter to the local *Purple Walrus Press*, “they were given their pink slips before and during the school day AND were expected to paste a smile on their face and teach their students as if nothing devastating had just happened.” A teacher noted, “we received an email stating that despite all this, we are expected to remain positive and put on a happy face for our kids and students.”

Over the past decade, both YPS and WRCS have seen budget deficits swell by millions of dollars. The debt crisis has been brought on by a combination of declining per-pupil school funding at the state level, the collapse of industrial manufacturing and home values in the area, and education policies at the federal level that have tied funding to standardized test scores.

Last week, the unified school board approved a “performance-based compensation system” for teachers and principals. Base pay for teachers will be set at \$40,000, and capped at \$70,000 for “master” level teachers.

Because base pay at YPS and WRCS is currently at the below-average salary of \$32,000, administration officials have presented the \$40,000 as an enticement to attract “the best talent.” However, teachers in the unified district will begin in the “emerging” classification, meaning many experienced teachers who are not among those immediately re-hired will be subjected to a steep pay cut.

The shift to “performance-based” pay, approved without resistance from the teachers union, the Ypsilanti Education Association, follows the policy of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top program of scapegoating teachers for the deepening social crisis and axing older teachers whose pensions and health care costs are higher.

Ypsilanti, a former auto manufacturing center along

the Detroit-Chicago industrial corridor, has seen a substantial decline in its working class population. The vast majority of the student bodies at YPS and WRCS come from low-income households, as reflected in rising free and reduced-price lunch program participation rates. Between 2009 and 2012, the proportion of Ypsilanti students receiving free or reduced lunch prices rose from two in three to nearly four in five. The number of homeless students has spiked by 48 percent.

For the past few years the city has ranked among the lowest-performing school districts in the state. Willow Run has a graduation rate of only 46 percent. Similarly, between 2007 and 2011, Ypsilanti High School has seen its graduation rate plummet from an already dismal rate of 66.78 percent to 57.45 percent.

A 2012 analysis of high school standardized test scores by Bridge Magazine found that only 3 percent of Willow Run students and 4 percent of Ypsilanti students were considered “college ready.”

As in areas of social and economic distress across the United States, the social breakdown is being seized on by the corporate and political elite to privatize public infrastructure, and in particular public education. For-profit charter school operations have proliferated across Ypsilanti and Willow Run, snatching up public school properties and siphoning off students. At least 2,600 students in the Ypsilanti area are currently enrolled in charter schools or attending other districts through “school of choice” options.



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