

Michigan school district shuts down for lack of funds

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Buena Vista, a small community adjacent to Saginaw, Michigan, saw its school district suddenly shut down indefinitely on Tuesday. The closure followed the announcement by the school board Monday night that it could no longer make payroll for its 27 teachers and had laid off all of them and terminated their benefit plans. Many questions remain unanswered as school superintendent Deborah Hunter-Harvill held closed-door meetings with state and local officials on Wednesday.

An emergency public meeting was held Tuesday night which drew about 100 parents, teachers and students who expressed immense anger and mistrust toward the school and state officials implementing the shutdown. Superintendent Hunter-Harvill and school board president Randy Jackson addressed the meeting, distributing a list of “common questions” and answers, and refusing to answer any questions not on the list, citing “legal auspices” that prevented them from saying anything that would “hurt the district”.

The line from the board is that Buena Vista School District (BVSD) was mistakenly provided more than \$500,000 from the state of Michigan to run a juvenile detention education program, but the program no longer exists. The state is now withholding all of the district’s funding for the months of April, May and June and part of July in order to recoup.

Among the questions that could not be answered: “Will high school seniors be able to graduate this year?”, “Why did the board spend the money meant for [juvenile detention program] Wolverine Center when it no longer existed?”, “who are you working with at the state level?”, “Will the district exist next year?”...

After several parents demanded to know what the money had been spent on, Jackson replied that it had been used to pay taxes to Buena Vista Township and

Saginaw County. He also told the audience that the recoupment was not the result of an audit, but that in February of this year, “we [the school board] informed the state. We went to Lansing and met with them. They said they were going to come back and get it.” It is clear that state and local officials have been—and continue to be—working hand in glove.

A May 1 posting on the BVSD web site states that the district is “taking the first steps toward confirming a financial emergency under Michigan Public Act 436”, which is the Emergency Manager law rammed through the state legislature after voters defeated an almost identical measure in November 2012. This was not mentioned at the public meeting.

The sudden shutdown in Buena Vista coincided with a photo-op tour conducted by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder (Republican) and President Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan (Democrat) through public schools in Detroit and Ypsilanti, Michigan, where they praised as a success the attacks carried out against the Detroit Public Schools under that district’s Emergency Manager, whose powers are enumerated in Public Act 436.

Snyder’s 2012 budget cut \$1 billion from education statewide, while providing \$1.8 billion in tax cuts to businesses. It was also recently revealed that a secret panel in the Snyder administration has been working with technology company executives behind the back of the public on a plan to establish so-called “value schools” which would operate on \$2,000 less per student than the current state minimum by replacing teachers with long-distance video-conferencing technology.

In light of these revelations, superintendent Hunter-Harvill’s promise at Tuesday’s meeting to develop an “innovative” solution to BVSD’s budget crisis should

be understood by the community as a threat. She said the plan would be further elaborated when attorneys were present at a board meeting set for 6pm on Thursday, May 9 at Buena Vista High School.

Buena Vista is an unincorporated community whose population was around 8,000 at the time of the 2010 census. More than a third of its children lived below the official poverty level, and median family income was \$33,851, or 65 percent of the national figure. Since 2010 the school district has shrunk from more than 900 students in 2010-11 to about 400 in 2012-13. Half of its staff had already been cut over the same period, and wages had been frozen for four years.

Buena Vista High School, where Tuesday's meeting was held, is directly across the street from the headquarters of Nexteer Automotive, which makes parts for Ford, Chrysler, GM and a number of overseas auto companies. Nexteer, formerly known as Delphi Steering, was founded as the Saginaw Product Company by GM in 1909, but was purchased by Chinese firm Pacific Century Motors in 2010.

In preparation for the sale, the UAW used the threat of closure to impose a concessions contract lowering the wages of the 2,200 workers there to \$12 per hour. In November of 2009, Buena Vista Township gave Nexteer a 100 percent tax abatement for 20 years as incentive for the headquarters to remain there.

At Tuesday's meeting, parents, teachers, and students expressed outrage at the situation, with many of them accusing Jackson and Hunter-Harvill of calling the meeting as nothing more than a "run-around".

A teacher explained that the staff had voted to continue teaching without pay as long as they could manage while the school officials worked out a solution, but the school board indicated that they would not consider this an option. Many parents in the audience also pledged to volunteer their time to keep the school open.

After the meeting, this reporter spoke with several attendees.

William, a senior at Buena Vista High School (BVHS), said, "If I was a parent, I would be livid. It's ridiculous that they can't answer any of these questions. I'm just concerned about graduation. I've applied to go to college next year. If I don't graduate I'll have to get a GED. I hope that won't happen."

Mavis, a social worker whose child is a junior at

BVHS, said she felt "betrayed by the township and by the school district. There was a severe lack of communication. The children will be the ones who suffer. Thank god I have retired grandparents who can take care of my kids when they aren't at school."

One parent with five children enrolled at BVSD, was furious. "What's going to happen to the kids when they're out of school? I know a lot of parents here who cannot afford day care. Kids are already getting shot in the streets in Saginaw all the time. What's going to happen to them now? Kids also get two meals a day at this school, which their parents will now have to provide. I already called every other school district in the area and all of them told me they cannot take my kids at this point in the school year."

Doris, another parent with five kids enrolled in BVSD, said, "I luckily have family that can take care of my children, but the question is: who will educate my children? I grew up in Buena Vista and graduated from this high school in '85. It was a very good school."



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