

Two Michigan school districts consolidate, shed 187 teachers

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Two neighboring school districts in Ypsilanti, Michigan, are in the midst of consolidation, a process that has left nearly 200 teachers and support staff jobless. Last month all 358 teachers from Ypsilanti Public Schools and the eastside Willow Run Community Schools received pink slips and were made to reapply for their jobs.

On Friday, May 3, teachers were handed envelopes informing them whether or not they would be offered positions with the new consolidated district, Ypsilanti Community Schools (YCS), in the fall. One-third of the teachers were informed that they were not accepted, or that they met the criteria of the district but that “there were no more positions available.” Those who did not receive job offers will be officially laid off on June 30.

The layoffs are the latest in a long series of cuts to the schools in Ypsilanti, a former industrial town just west of Detroit. Every year for the past decade, the districts have struggled with declining enrollment, lower per-pupil funding from the state, and collapsing tax revenue. Administrators have pointed to the multi-million-dollar debts of the school districts to justify staff reductions and wage cuts, higher health insurance premiums, the privatization of transportation and food services, the elimination of programs, and multiple school closures.

As a result, class sizes have risen, workloads have increased, and the cost burdens for “extras” like sports and fieldtrips have fallen more heavily on the overwhelmingly low-income families in the districts. Not surprisingly, thousands of Ypsilanti students have been enrolled in the numerous for-profit charter academies that have sprung up in the city, or have transferred to neighboring districts.

On Monday, Republican Governor Rick Snyder and President Obama’s Education Secretary Arne Duncan

made an appearance at Ypsilanti’s citywide Kindergarten to showcase education “reform.” The visit was carefully managed to exclude the public as well as teachers, parents, and students who might express outrage over the attack on their schools. One parent with four children enrolled in the district called the event a “drive-by photo-op” and “a deliberate slap in the face of our teachers.”

Across the state, district after district has fallen into insolvency. On May 7, the Saginaw Buena Vista School District abruptly shut down for lack of funds, leaving students and parents in the lurch. All of the district’s teachers were laid off the night before, their health and benefit plans terminated.

At least 40 school districts collaborated with unions to push through draconian cuts ahead of the right-to-work law March 28, including in Detroit, where 4,000 teachers were subjected to a pay freeze and an end to limits on class sizes.

In Taylor, the city’s teachers union agreed to an immediate 10 percent pay cut for the district’s 500 teachers in exchange for a 10-year security clause guaranteeing its dues base. The Lansing Schools Education Association agreed to a similar measure in exchange for the layoff of 87 staff members and the elimination of art, music, and physical education (the so-called “specials” programs). Dearborn, Grand Rapids, and nearly every other urban district secured similar concessions.

Even in wealthier districts such as Ann Arbor, where per-pupil funding is hundreds of dollars higher than that of neighboring Ypsilanti, some \$3.8 million in cuts are on the agenda by the end of the school year. A significant part of the deficit has been attributed to an unexpected increase of \$700,000 in transportation costs, due in part to a rapidly rising homeless student

population. Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, both in Washtenaw County, have seen 30 to 40 percent increases in youth homelessness each year since the onset of the recession in 2008.

After receiving pink slips April 12, Ypsilanti teachers had two weeks to re-apply and interview before a review board selected by the district administration. The board, composed of non-educators, based its decisions on surprise classroom observations, references and certifications, and a short interview.

“I had three people, who don’t know me, come in and watch a lesson plan for 20 minutes and then go into a conference room and answer seven questions,” one YCS employee told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “These people are going to make a judgment on my livelihood, an assessment of my skills?”

“The school principals were like the foremen of the factory telling the assembly line to speed up, holding out their metrics and offering the heads of art teachers, Kindergarten teachers, speech therapists,” the employee commented. “If the teachers don’t give the standardized tests and show growth, they’ll be evaluated as ‘minimally effective.’”

“Until you correct the poverty and inequality that’s attached to education problems, you’re not going to fix them,” the YCS employee said. “The politicians are using the poverty that exists here, as everywhere else, to divert funding to the private sector. It’s not about helping kids learn or improving their lives. It’s about creating wealth for somebody.

“It’s such a complex problem. I just hope parents get it.”

In the wake of last Friday’s layoff announcements, teachers expressed shock and anger over the board’s decisions. Local reports indicate that references were not called in many, if not most, cases. “I had to submit three references to speak on my behalf, and they have decided not to contact any of them. They went back on this policy to speed up the process,” said a teacher who checked with the references that had been submitted.

Many teachers have commented online and to local media anonymously out of fear of retaliation, asking for help from parents and community members. A Facebook group of supporters has filed a Freedom of Information Act request for information on the hiring practices. Notably silent are the union heads, who agreed to concession after concession as their rank-and-

file expressed a desire to fight. Kathleen Miller, Willow Run teachers union president, told the *Ypsilanti Courier*, “This is one of the most awful feelings ever. Morale is so low. It’s devastating.”

YCS Superintendent Scott Menzel defended the board’s decisions, telling the *Ann Arbor News* that the policy was “because of feedback from teachers who said they needed to know as soon as possible” and to “avoid distracting students.” Asked if there would be an appeal process for teachers who wanted to challenge their firing, Menzel told the paper “the term ‘appeal’ is not one he has heard come up very frequently.”

“We were very intentional, even though it was a compressed timeframe,” Menzel said.

District administration prepared for the notifications Friday by alerting the Washtenaw County Sheriff’s Department, deploying a “Traumatic Event Response Network,” and lining up substitute teaching staff to be on call. “Over the past week we did pre-incident response drills. We know the teachers are going to be with our children,” explained Michelle Rose-Armstrong, a coordinator of trauma psychologists who were placed in the schools Monday.



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