

Schools in Buena Vista, Michigan may reopen after board approves cuts

Shannon Jones
16 May 2013

State officials Wednesday said they would release money to public schools in Buena Vista, Michigan, a small community outside Saginaw, after the school board voted to adopt a deficit elimination plan. The action could allow schools in the district to reopen.

Schools in Buena Vista (population 7,845) closed May 6 after the district ran out of money to pay teachers. The state withheld aid payments for April, May and June, claiming the district misspent funds intended for a juvenile detention program it no longer operates. The district faces a \$1 million deficit and in August owes payments to the state on a \$2 million loan.

According to school officials, the deficit elimination plan calls for staff reductions, the consolidation of elementary, middle and high school students into one building and the use of more online instruction in place of classroom instruction. No details have been released about how many of the district's teachers and staff will be recalled.

The closure of the schools has had a severe impact on families in the district, who are largely working class and low-income. In addition to the loss of education, the closure of the schools means that students who received free lunches lost access to what, in some cases, were their only nutritious meals of the day.

The downsizing of the auto industry has severely affected Saginaw and communities in the surrounding area. Nexteer automotive (formerly Saginaw Steering, part of General Motors for 90 years), which makes parts for Ford, GM and Chrysler, has its headquarters across the street from the Buena Vista High School. In 2010 the United Auto Workers helped impose a concessions contract on the 2,200 workers at the company, slashing pay to just \$12 an hour.

At a Tuesday school board meeting in Buena Vista, Beatrice Tatum, expressing the feelings of many,

denounced the proposal for a four- to six-week skills camp initially proposed by the board as a substitute for holding regular classes. The camp would only have provided instruction in reading, writing and math. "This is not real school. This is a cop-out. Bring these kids back to school."

Shawnette Davis, a General Motors worker and a parent with a ninth grade student attending Buena Vista schools, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "It is like a nightmare. They say 'leave no child behind,' well, they are leaving the whole district behind."

"It won't cut it. You shut down the schools with no notice and then talk about a six-week program where you will have math, writing and reading. I don't think that is right. [Republican Governor Rick] Snyder should be ashamed of himself. These kids need education."

The brutal, forced shutdown of Buena Vista's schools is only the latest and one of the most egregious examples of the assault on public education taking place in Michigan and across the United States. As of February 2013, the Michigan Department of Education reported there were 49 districts in the state running deficits so sizable as to place the continued functioning of the school systems in jeopardy.

Last week schools in Pontiac, Michigan, north of Detroit, barely avoided a shutdown by the state when the local board of education approved a deficit reduction plan containing major cuts. Meanwhile, the Albion, Michigan school board voted to close the only high school in the district in face of a \$1.1 million deficit.

Detroit's public schools, comprising the largest district in the state, have been under the control of an emergency financial manager since 2009. The district has slashed pay and benefits for teachers and is in the

process of closing two-thirds of its schools.

Since taking office, the Obama administration has presided over the destruction of some 300,000 teaching positions and the closure of 4,000 public schools nationally. Barack Obama has used the “Race to the Top” program to force financially hard-pressed districts to compete for federal funds by expanding charter schools, using standardized tests to fire teachers and closing so-called underperforming schools.

At Tuesday’s meeting in Buena Vista, school board president Randy Jackson said he felt local school officials were being “held hostage” by the state. However, that did not prevent Jackson and the board from acceding to all the state’s demands.

Likewise, the local teachers union, the Buena Vista Education Association, affiliated with the Michigan Education Association and the National Education Association, has signaled its willingness to cooperate with whatever cuts are deemed necessary.

The board meeting was called at the last minute, apparently with the intention of keeping the turnout to a minimum. In any event, several dozen parents and teachers attended. Most of those spoke in opposition to the closure of the community’s schools, denouncing both the local board of education and state officials.

“I am scared of charter schools,” said Melinda Beresford, a special education teacher at the Buena Vista schools. “They are taking over everything. The charter schools are not out-performing the public schools by any means. Most are failing.

“Even parents who do not have children in the Buena Vista schools have been active in opposing the shutdown. One woman said she didn’t want to live in a community without schools, and she didn’t even have children in the schools.”

Beresford said she was one of the teachers who opted to have a portion of their pay withheld from checks so they could receive compensation over the summer months when school was not in session. Now she fears she may lose that money. Health benefits for teachers were also terminated when the district ran out of money.

Alexis Ervin, a fourth grade teacher told the WSWS, “Too many people fought for the right for children to go to school. All children should have the right to an education.”

Genoveva Ells, a primary school teacher, said she

was devastated by the shutdown of the district. “It is sad the we have to go through this. It was a big surprise actually.

“The parents are upset because they don’t know what to do with their children.”

Ellis said the shutdown of the district followed years of cuts. “They have been laying off teachers. The kids have been moving to other districts.

“A lot of the kids, almost all, are getting free lunches. That is a good indication that there are a lot of low-income families.”

An angry parent of a ninth grade student told the board he considered public education a basic right. “You say you are doing the best for the kids? I don’t see it at all. Get our kids back in school! I want my kids to be educated. The state owes me that.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact