

Michigan dissolves two school districts

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In the latest assault on public education in Michigan, two school districts are being dissolved under the terms of recently enacted state legislation. The public school systems in Buena Vista, located outside of Saginaw, and Inkster, in the western suburbs of Detroit, are being liquidated and their students forced to transfer to neighboring districts.

The two districts failed to meet a state-imposed deadline of 5 pm Monday to secure financing to operate next school year. Under provisions of Michigan Public Act 96, which went into effect July 2, the state is empowered to liquidate financially insolvent school districts that have less than 2,400 students.

Statewide, some 55 school districts are operating at a deficit. Buena Vista schools have seen their deficit swell from \$1 million at the end of 2011-12 school year to about \$3.7 million by June 30. The district, home to a largely poor and working class population, is located in an area that has been devastated by the dismantling of the auto industry.

The district was forced to shut down for two weeks in May after the state of Michigan withheld its funding, claiming school officials had misspent money intended for a juvenile detention program it no longer operated. The state only restored aid after the school board voted to adopt a deficit elimination plan imposing drastic cuts. Still facing a shortfall in funding, the district attempted to secure a loan from private lenders, after the state refused to extend further credit. No loan, however, could be secured by the state imposed deadline.

The dissolution of the Buena Vista school district impacts 450 students and 28 teachers. The district owes its teachers some \$300,000 in back wages and it is not clear when or if they will be paid.

Melinda, a former special education teacher in the Buena Vista Schools told the World Socialist Web Site, "Parents are wondering where their kids will go in the

fall. I don't know where they are going to draw the district lines. They are being uprooted."

"The teachers from Buena Vista are out of jobs," she said. "They will be drawing unemployment over the summer. They cut out the part of the law that said teachers from dissolved districts would have first choice at jobs in the neighboring districts. They are fending for themselves."

"They owe us money," she added. "I think the union is filing a lawsuit. They are going through teacher by teacher to see how much they are owed."

The Inkster school board, facing a \$15 million deficit, met in special session on Monday in a last ditch attempt to avoid dissolution. Inkster School Board President Mischa Bashir read a statement explaining why the district could not meet the state's terms, noting that a pending bank loan was dependent on the state approving the district's deficit elimination plan.

In a catch-22 situation, the district said it had submitted a deficit-elimination plan to the state, but state officials said they lacked confidence in the district's leadership. The state, however, refused to provide the criteria on which they based this "lack of confidence."

Additionally, Inkster school officials said the district could not meet a state demand that its accounting firm verify that new funds would allow the district to remain open through the end of the 2013-14 school year because certified public accountants are barred from rendering any kind of opinion on solvency.

The liquidation of the Inkster school district impacts 2,200 students and 150 staff, including 91 teachers. Students from the Inkster schools will be distributed among neighboring districts including Wayne-Westland, Romulus and Taylor. About 500 Inkster students living in Detroit will have to return to Detroit schools or apply in districts that have schools of choice programs.

Under terms of the state law, buildings and assets of the liquidated district will be transferred to the districts that will receive students. However, property tax levees in the dissolved districts will remain in place to pay off debt.

The dissolution of the Inkster and Buena Vista school districts is part of an ongoing assault on public education in Michigan, where districts across the state have been forced to impose drastic cuts due to reductions in state funding.

In Pontiac, Michigan north of Detroit the school district has imposed massive cuts to staff to deal with a \$37.7 million deficit. The district was originally included in the state law that would have dissolved the district and dispersed its 4,700 students to neighboring school systems.

However, the law was changed to only apply to districts with 2,500 students or less. Pontiac school finances are currently under review by a state-appointed financial review team. If the district is found to be in a financial emergency, Michigan law gives the Pontiac schools several options—all disastrous—including the appointment of an emergency manager, a consent agreement, a neutral evaluation process or bankruptcy.

Three school districts in Michigan are currently under the control of emergency managers armed with dictatorial powers to impose cuts and abrogate union contracts. Last year the emergency manager over the Muskegon Heights schools in western Michigan shut every school in the district, fired all the teachers, and turned everything that remained over to a privately run charter school operation. The charter system was subsequently found out of compliance with more than a dozen issues related to its special education program.

In the Detroit public schools a series of emergency managers have closed scores of schools and turned over a large portion of the district to charter school operators. More than a dozen Detroit schools have been removed from the district and placed under the so-called called Education Achievement Authority (EAA), a new district for “failed” schools that is public in name only. Under provisions of the law creating the EAA enacted by the administration of Republican Governor Rick Snyder, teachers and school employees are stripped of seniority and wage protection.

Earlier this year it was revealed that Snyder

administration officials and right-wing opponents of public education had been holding secret meetings on means of circumventing the state’s ban on public funding of private schools in preparation for a vast expansion of for profit charters.

The destruction of the Inkster and Buena Vista school districts, together with the attack on education throughout the state of Michigan, is part of a nationwide drive, lead by the Obama Administration and its "Race to the Top" program, to destroy the institution of public education in the United States.



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