More Detroit schools threatened with closure

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A deficit elimination plan submitted by the Detroit Public School (DPS) system to the Michigan Board of Education was to be reviewed yesterday by state and district officials. The plan includes a proposal to close down 26 public schools within the DPS system, in addition to a number of other cutbacks.

The DPS system, which currently operates under the rule of Emergency Manager Jack Martin, will have a $120.3 million deficit by the end of the fiscal year in June, according to the estimates in the deficit elimination plan. In addition to the school closing proposal there are proposals to eliminate 555 positions in instruction, administration, operations and other areas between 2015 and 2018 and a proposal to institute a 5 percent salary rollback in the fiscal year of 2017.

Much of the revenue that the school district receives comes in the form of state aid which is connected to the number of students in the district. The state claims that the number of students in DPS is 48,730 though the district itself claims the number is actually 49,012. The draft of the deficit elimination plan estimates that there will only be 45,000 students in the district by 2018, although this figure is disputed by William Aldridge, the district's chief financial and administrative officer.

It has not been revealed which schools are slated to be closed and the plan itself is not available for public viewing. The results of the meeting yesterday have not been revealed. Aldridge plays down the deficit elimination plan as a "living document," saying not all of the proposals will "come to pass," adding, "No one has a crystal ball. We make certain assumptions about what will happen in terms of the district's finances. This deficit elimination plan is based on assumptions. Not all of the assumptions will materialize."

Nevertheless, the potential school closures conform entirely with the past history in Detroit.

Towards the beginning of 2012, then DPS emergency manager and former GM executive, Roy Roberts, announced the closing of 16 schools. At the same time, 15 other schools were to be incorporated into the newly-created statewide district called the Education Achievement Authority (EAA), which was established by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder as a conduit for the privatization of so-called "failed" schools. At the beginning of 2013, plans involving the closure of 28 schools in Detroit by 2016 were revealed by the *Detroit News*. The closures were to be accompanied by 1,688 teacher, administrative and support jobs and a reduction of expenditures by $200 million over 5 years. It has been estimated that this will reduce the student population by 13,000 to about 40,000, a number which is a little over a quarter of the 150,000 students who were attending DPS schools in 2000.

The recent case of the Catherine Ferguson Academy (CFA) for Young Women is telling as to the real motive behind school closings and the growth of charters. CFA, an award-winning school for pregnant and parenting teens, was announced to be closed in 2011 but popular anger forced a reconsideration and the school was chartered and taken over by Evans Solutions, Inc. After becoming chartered, the school switched focus, sending students out to get internships instead of attending classes. As a result, after 3 years, enrollment at the school dropped to only 92 students and it has again been slated for closing in June.

All told, 100 DPS schools have been closed since the first emergency manager was imposed on the district in 2009 by Governor Jennifer Granholm. All of this has proceeded under the notion that public schools are failing, wasting money and rewarding poor teachers. The truth is that the campaign of school closings, in addition to the assault on teachers and the increasing chartering of schools is wholly bound up with reactionary drive to destroy public education altogether and replace all schools with for-profit entities.

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The EAA is the state of Michigan's de facto class-based system of education where students from the most impoverished areas are sent.

Established in 2011, the EAA began taking over Detroit schools in September 2012, under the leadership of Roy Roberts. The system is a so-called "independent" school district run by a corporate-based "board of education" and is modeled on the practice of individual computer-based learning. In these schools, underpaid and undertrained teachers serve merely as "facilitators" and are forced to work without books, supplies or even adequate numbers of working computers. The schools are exempt from many regulations which apply to public schools and are notorious for ignoring the requirements of special education students.

Today, after five years of the rule of emergency managers over the DPS, there are more Detroit students enrolled in charter schools than in public schools. The rationale that financial crisis requires emergency action is the continuing pretext to transform education from a social right to a privilege for the wealthy.

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