

“School is like a second home”

Students and parents oppose closure of last high school in Highland Park, Michigan

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13 June 2015

The last remaining high school in the city of Highland Park, Michigan will close at the end of this month. Run since 2012 by the for-profit charter company Leona Group LLC, Highland Park Renaissance Academy has been deemed, in the words of Highland Park’s Emergency Manager Don Weatherspoon, “not financially feasible.”

The school’s 160 students and their parents learned of the decision last week. “When people found out the school was closing everybody was crying. It was a shock,” said Laylay, a senior at the school.

“I’m going to miss the teachers, and how they make you feel welcome,” said Cece, a tenth-grader at the high school. “Just being here, everybody knows each other, we just have a bond. People say ‘Highland Park this, Highland Park that.’ You might not know it, but it’s like everybody is family here. School is like a second home. It’s sad.”

Heather, whose son is about to complete grade 9, said, “They had some very good teachers here. My son went from learning disability to being in a regular class, just from being at this school. That was a big deal for me. I don’t understand why it’s leaving!”

On Monday, June 8, a “community meeting” was held at the school. Far from a forum for parents and students to have their questions answered, as it had been advertised in the media, the event was organized like a job fair. Students could visit a number of tables and speak to representatives of other public and charter schools in the area among which they must choose in order to continue their education.

In his pro-forma speech that opened the “meeting,” Weatherspoon repeated the claim of Leona Group that the closure was due to “declining enrollments.” He said

that, “rather than stretch it out and have uncertainty in your future”—i.e., rather than allow parents and students to have any say regarding the closure—“you have the choice to guarantee where you’re going to go.”

Throughout Monday night’s event, students and parents did not publicly protest as they shopped for out-of-district schools to attend. Officials, however, came prepared for a fight. The event was staffed by at least half a dozen security guards, and three or more Michigan State Police cruisers were parked around the corner just in case.

At a press conference outside the school, Weatherspoon placed the blame for the school closure on the students. Again citing “declining enrollments,” he stated that, “students have already exercised their choice in many ways”—i.e. by leaving the district and/or the city.

Highland Park, a three-square-mile enclave surrounded by Detroit, was the birthplace of Henry Ford’s assembly line in 1913. A landmark in human history, this technology increased the productivity of labor exponentially. It introduced a new era of mass production that changed the world, and, by the middle of the twentieth century, provided the basis of Highland Park to boast of one of the highest standards of living in the country.

“Back in the day, everybody wanted to come here,” said Phyllis, who lives across the street from the closing school. “People would actually pay you to use your address, just to be able to get their kids into Highland Park schools! My son, my daughter, myself and my mother all graduated from this district. It’s a sad day in Highland Park.”

Today the Model-T factory where it all began stands

empty. After decades of deindustrialization, more than 60 percent of Highland Park residents live below the official poverty line, placing the city among the poorest in America. Officials are presently floating the possibility of the outright dissolution of the entire city, under the pretext that it owes millions in unpaid water bills.

That under such conditions students and parents are “choosing” to leave is hardly an example of democracy in action. Lifelong Highland Park resident Letitia Gibbons, whose son is about to finish the tenth grade, recalled that “things started to change in 1976. They closed the Community College, which was highly regarded in Highland Park. Now things are being shut down everywhere. The utility company [DTE Energy] came in and took down all the lights. Now they are closing the only high school in the city. It seems like they are trying to close the city down.” The district owes hundreds of thousands in unpaid water and utility bills.

The high school—known since Leona’s takeover as Highland Park Renaissance Academy (“Academy” is now the standard euphemism for for-profit charter schools)—was recently moved into its current building, a former middle school, which is in a general state of disrepair. (The old high school building, now vacant, was recently sold to Brooklyn-based art and music venue Galapagos.)

Leona’s directors calculate that the cost of maintaining a functioning school with the public money that is provided to them by the state and federal government on a per-pupil basis won’t leave much left to line the pockets of its owners.

Cece was very opposed to the idea of for-profit education. “It shouldn’t be run like that,” she said. “That’s why we’re in this predicament. School should be run in the interest of students. Ever since Leona Group took over, it’s been falling apart. They’ve been stealing money. Without a Highland Park high school, what is Highland Park doing?”

She called the potential dissolution of the city “Unexplainable,” adding, “Back in the day, Highland Park was a beautiful place. We were known for our cars; the Model-T was made right around the corner. It’s like the history here is going to waste.”

“I was born here in 1960 and have lived here all my life,” Phyllis explained, “But now I’m moving out of

Highland Park because I can’t afford this huge water bill. I didn’t receive a bill for years, and then all of a sudden I got a bill for \$10,000! Something crazy is definitely going on with the city leadership.”

The editorial board of the *Detroit News* published a statement on the day of the meeting, headlined, “Good call to close Highland Park school.” Speaking for a section of the ruling elite that is set on “shrinking”—i.e. laying waste to—large sections of the Detroit area, the newspaper suggests ominously that Highland Park is “a microcosm for what’s facing Detroit schools.” They note that the Detroit Public School district “has nearly \$500 million in debt and falling enrollment.” In other words, Highland Park should serve as a model for further school closings in Detroit, and across the country.

Those interviewed by the WSWs uniformly lauded Highland Park teachers as excellent. “The teachers here have taught me so many life lessons,” said Cece. “Mr. Connor, Mr. Reynolds, Ms. Wall, Ms. Howard—she was a *really* good teacher. Mr. Godwin, my dean, we could talk to him about anything. Anything! Outside of just education, you had a personal relationship with them.”

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