

# West Virginia: Seven Fayette County schools to be shuttered

Joe McGee  
7 October 2016

In the latest round of state cuts to public school systems in the coalfields of southern West Virginia, the state School Building Authority (SBA) approved a plan for the consolidation and closure of schools in Fayette County last week.

Under the plan the number of schools in the rural county would be reduced from 18 to 11, leaving only two high schools open.

State Schools Superintendent Michael Martirano plans to ask the SBA to approve the first round of funding in the amount of \$22.6 million, to complement the \$17 million to be provided by the county to begin implementation of the plan.

The state and both of the big business parties have seized upon the deteriorating condition of many of the county's facilities to implement the closure of community schools. In 2010 the West Virginia Board of Education took over the Fayette County school system, citing hiring irregularities, poor financial practices, and low student achievement.

During this period of state control, little was done to improve the maintenance of many of these facilities. The building at Collins Middle School, for example, became so dilapidated that for the safety of the students they were moved to portable classrooms.

Collins Middle was the county's largest school, with a student body of 875 children. By the time it was closed, children were down to using only one bathroom, sewers were leaking into the facilities, the cafeteria was defunct, and the facility housing the gym and school-based health clinic were declared unsuitable for occupancy. All of the schools in the county, except one, were past their 30-year life expectancy and faced similar issues.

One of the high schools to be closed in the eastern end of Fayette County, Meadow Bridge, has suffered so

many years of neglect with regard to its maintenance that volunteers from the community were compelled to make many of the needed repairs to the ceiling and flooring to keep the school functional.

Now, with the closure of this school, many students from the area will face morning and afternoon commutes of up to an hour. Such a long commute is in clear contravention of state guidelines regarding travel times. In the winter months, when hundreds of inches of snow can fall in the mountainous areas, travel may take even longer and carry the danger of accidents. Cancelled school days and poor attendance will be likely consequences.

The principal arguments for consolidation are low test scores and declining enrollment. However, Meadow Bridge High School, targeted for closure, has consistently outperformed Fayette Schools in the past in terms of graduation and attendance rates.

In addition to longer bus rides, classroom sizes will be larger, with less time devoted to the needs of individual students. Meadow Bridge will lose its sports programs and other extracurricular activities.

In 2015, under state direction, the county attempted to pass a bond levy to fund a closure and consolidation plan, which was voted down by residents by a margin of 62 to 38 percent. These property taxes would have fallen the hardest on the poor and the working class and would have raised tax bills significantly at a time of increased utility and food costs.

Like much of the coalfields region of southern West Virginia, Fayette County has seen a collapse in employment related to the decline of the coal industry and the global commodity slump. At 21 percent, the county's official poverty rate is among the highest in the state and well above the national average. Per capita income stands at just below \$19,000.

After the rejection of the levy by voters, the state has revealed its contempt for the population by implementing school closures by fiat through the unelected members of the SBA. Officials have attempted to demonstrate a token display of concern by hosting community meetings in the affected areas while ignoring the input of residents, teachers, and schools. All of this is done in the name of improving education and raising test scores.

In some instances, administrators understate the enrollment at schools targeted for closure. Mistie Richmond, a local resident with Meadow Bridge Concerned Citizens for Community Schools, stated, “It’s like the state is trying to shove a pill down our throats, forcing us to take their medicine.”

“I have supported bonds in the past because I thought the purpose was to improve education, but I will fight them even harder in the future,” she added. “No one is listening to us.”

Under capitalism there is never enough money to fund schools, health care, or basic infrastructure but plenty for bailing out the banks or overseas military entanglements. West Virginia law has mandated that the state ensure the highest quality education through equalization of funding to its school systems. Unsurprisingly, both the Democratic and Republican parties have ignored this and instead seek to close schools, then pass the costs onto the working class.

The state faces a budget shortfall of \$350 million in the coming year. This is the approximate amount lost due to the elimination of the business franchise tax 10 years ago under then governor Joe Manchin, a Democrat.

Contrary to claims made at the time about the benefits of tax reductions, the rate of growth outside of the extractive industries was zero. Now plans are being formulated by both parties to increase the sales tax, which will adversely affect the most vulnerable West Virginians. Meanwhile, the state has further reduced taxes on businesses, including a recent reduction in the severance tax for the coal and gas industry.

The effect is a historic retrogression in the economic position of the working class, in particular the section associated with coal mining, where workers had won relatively better living standards.

In Fayette County, in particular, there is an important and protracted history of militancy among the coal

miners at the beginning of the 20th century. Many of these men and women expressed the desire for socialism and were forming a strong sense of class solidarity, only to be betrayed later by the United Mine Workers of America, the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party. Only an independent movement of the working class based on a socialist and international program can ensure effective access to education for all.



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