

Teacher describes impact of social crisis in Toledo, Ohio schools

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Toledo, Ohio is a port city on the western edge of Lake Erie. The city, whose population burgeoned along with its glass-making and auto manufacturing industry in the early 20th century, was the site of the Auto-Lite strike of 1934, one of most pivotal battles in the establishment of industrial unions. For much of the last century Jeep was the city's largest employer.

After decades of deindustrialization and budget-cutting, the city of 280,000 is now the fourth most impoverished big city in America, trailing behind its Rust Belt neighbors Detroit and Cleveland, Ohio, as well as Newark, New Jersey. The official poverty rate is 27.8 percent and the median income for a household is \$33,687, according to the 2015 American Community Survey (US Census).

These conditions have had a terrible effect on public education. A Toledo teacher recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of years of education cuts and the growth of social inequality in the city, and how teachers are being scapegoated for problems in the classroom that inevitably arise from these dire conditions. To protect the teacher from victimization we are using a pseudonym.

"Ohio is in a severe heroin epidemic," explained Venessa. "So, we have even more issues to deal with, which impact the children. Imagine trying to work with parents facing their own crisis, and sometimes not functioning due to addiction or some mental illness. Sometimes there is a parent with no phone or who is homeless.

"In addition to my school being in a high crime area, Toledo has been identified as the fourth-largest recruitment site for human trafficking. We are expected to ensure every child's safety, even those not in our classroom."

The conditions in the Toledo schools speak to years

of de-funding education and other city services throughout Ohio. Municipalities have lost a whopping \$1 billion per year in state funding from 2010 to 2017 when adjusted for inflation, according *Policy Matters Ohio*. Toledo has lost more than \$15 million every year, in real dollars, since 2010—a cut of 37 percent in seven years.

These cuts were compounded in 2011 by Republican Governor John Kasich, who ran in the Republican presidential primaries last year. Kasich took \$15 million from Toledo Public Schools (TPS) to increase funding for vouchers and charters. The number of private school vouchers funded by the state rose from 14,000 to 60,000. The state's nearly 400 charter schools, a \$1 billion industry, have been the subject of numerous investigations and corruption scandals.

During this same period, teachers and paraprofessionals in the public schools were laid off and took pay cuts. In 2010, 237 Toledo teachers and 31 paraprofessionals were laid off; in 2011 teachers took a three percent pay cut. The current contract gave teachers a one percent raise in 2013 and 2014 with the option to renegotiate a raise in the third year, in 2015. However, the teachers did not receive an additional pay raise, and the contract expired last June 30.

Teacher shortages inevitably followed so many years of salaries failing to keep up with inflation and the overall deterioration of the school system. It is now common practice for school officials to assign lower-paid "long term substitutes" to the classroom instead of full-time teachers. More egregious yet, these relatively untrained teachers are being assigned to the most difficult classrooms, including those with special needs children. The Toledo school system employs some 400 of these "long-term substitutes." The situation has been made worse by the declining numbers of classroom

aides and counselors.

Venessa told the WSWS how she was victimized by these circumstances. A new administrator assigned her to work with students who are identified as emotionally disturbed (ED). “I was like, ‘Hey wait a minute, I don’t have a background in this, I don’t have a degree in this, I have never taught this in my life. I have no idea what to do in this situation.’ She [the administrator] basically said she didn’t care and this is where she was going to put me.

“Long term subs are not required to have a teacher certification,” explained Venessa. “They have what is called a substitution certification. Long term substitutes are placed wherever they are needed by the district, regardless of certifications.” Emotionally disturbed children lack the ability to regulate their emotions, and can become violent when their routine is altered.

Her warnings were proven correct when her students got out of control. She was scapegoated for the incident, demoted from long-term sub to a day-to-day position, a pay cut from \$120 per day to \$80 per day, and a loss of her health insurance.

“At that time, there was a new director of employee services,” Vanessa said. “She had just come in, and she is really someone who is trying to make a name for herself at TPS. Making a name for herself by basically being a bully and attempting to ‘sweep out the “bad eggs.”’ Whatever you want to call it, she is basically terrorizing teachers. She proudly boasted to the superintendent, ‘I’ve cleared out so many ineffective teachers.’ That is bordering on abuse and harassment,” said Venessa.

Under the Obama administration’s modifications to No Child Left Behind, the standards for being designated as a “highly qualified” teacher were loosened. Instead of requiring a minimum of a Bachelor’s degree and state certification in their subject area, the “highly qualified” status was determined by students’ test scores. This deliberate change in wording further opened the floodgates to lesser-qualified and uncertified teachers in the classroom, encouraged the hiring of “long-term substitutes” and doubled-down on the focus on standardized testing.

Venessa emphasized the devastating impact of poverty in the former industrial town. “Keep in mind that Toledo has a diverse population where half the

students are black and half white. The overwhelming majority of students qualify for free lunches. Toledo is a blue-collar town, and it is a very impoverished town. In the inner city of Toledo, we have an epidemic of poverty with children on foster care, and many suffering physical abuse and/or sexual abuse.

“I would say that 70 percent of the children in that particular classroom were in foster care, or relative care. Fewer than 30 percent were with their biological parents. There is an epidemic of homelessness in the school’s neighborhood.”

The blighted conditions in Toledo are reproduced throughout the US. They expose the cruel and fraudulent nature of the Obama administration’s Race to the Top/Every Student Succeeds Act and Excellent Educators for All, which facilitated the drive for the privatization of education. The Trump administration and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos are committed to a \$20 billion voucher plan, while slashing public education to fuel the military budget.



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