

Record numbers of Detroit children chronically absent from school

Nancy Hanover
19 December 2017

Over two-thirds of Detroit children attending public school are chronically absent, according to a new report from the Coalition for the Future of Detroit Children. The Coalition describes students with more than 10 days absent in a school year as “chronically absent.” National standards for “chronic absenteeism” are 10 percent of the school year, typically 18 days. Detroit still has 56.3 percent, or 27,533, students so identified, up from 54.8 percent the year before.

Last month, Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) school superintendent Nikolai Vitti noted that at least 10 percent of Detroit students are homeless—putting Detroit on par with New York City. Of the nation’s 1.3 million homeless public school students, New York has the highest percentage, according to the 2014-15 national database.

These dire statistics emerge directly from years of poverty ravaging the citizens of Detroit, significantly worsened as a result of the Wall Street-imposed bankruptcy process of 2013-14 which devastated city services, workers’ wages and pensions. Block after block of burned out and foreclosed-upon homes testify to the social crime visited upon the biggest poor city in America by bondholders, wealthy investors and the banks.

These victimized neighborhoods have seen little or no improvement compared to the minuscule downtown area described as “roaring back” by the *New York Times*, other media and Democratic Party politicians, dubbing Detroit “the comeback city” in order to advance their careers on the bones of hard-pressed residents. For example, new laws were passed this year giving developer Dan Gilbert up to \$1 billion in taxpayer money for his latest downtown project on the site of the former J.L. Hudson building.

“There are a lot of homeless children,” a long-time teacher from the Detroit Public Schools Community District told the WSWS. “They are squatting in

abandoned homes. I tell the cafeteria workers, ‘Please don’t throw away extra food.’ I get this food, bag it up and take it to my classroom. When I see one of these kids—you can tell who they are because they stink—I tell them to take some of this food home to their family.”

She went on to describe the third-world conditions facing children in Detroit. “I also give my children food while they work on projects. It helps their behavior and plus they just need to eat. A lot of times their water is cut off and they can’t wash their clothes. We would sometimes get their clothes and wash them in the school washing machines for them.

“It bothers me to think about these kids living in abandoned houses. Yes, they are absent. But when school is cancelled, like it is today for snow, kids will come to school anyway to see if they can eat.”

Mounting evidence shows how the “toxic stress” of adverse childhood experiences, including homelessness, can impair brain development in young children and have long-lasting emotional and physical effects, including creating a weak foundation for learning, behavior and health.

It is therefore no wonder that standardized testing shows Detroit last in the nation in early literacy for low-income students. In 2016 and 2017, only 9.9 percent of the Detroit district’s third-graders were proficient in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The teacher, who requested anonymity to protect her job, spoke on an added dimension to the scale of social devastation in the city. She said, “You’ve also got homeless teachers. Yes, teachers living in their cars. They take their own kids to school and then come in and teach. They were already ‘underwater’ before they started teaching and their checks are being garnisheed. We had a teacher here whose car was repossessed right in the parking lot while she had a room full of children.”

Addressing the way these socially induced problems are used as a pretext to privatize schools and open them up to for-profit charters, she added, “But they blame the teachers for the test scores when half the students are coming to school. It’s gotten so bad they hired an 80-year-old math teacher! Meanwhile you have 45 kids in a classroom, and we are talking about sixth graders who cannot add or multiply.

“It’s just runaway poverty. [Trump Education Secretary Betsy] DeVos wants to turn everything into charter schools. It’s not the administrators, it’s the administrators on top of the administrators. When Barack Obama came to Detroit and the teachers were marching in the cold, he didn’t even recognize us. Then he went to Flint and claimed he drank the water. I don’t believe he drank Flint water for a minute.”

A quarter of Detroit students now attend suburban schools, as parents make huge sacrifices in time and money to try to better their children’s education. Half of the city’s children are attending charter schools, the majority of which are for-profit. The Coalition for the Future of Detroit Children itself is a partnership between representatives of the charter schools and the Skillman Foundation, business entities and Democratic politicians. Other organizations like IFF, a nonprofit heavily connected with JPMorgan Chase and Goldman Sachs, are issuing reports on the devastation of public education in the city for the purpose of further privatization in the guise of philanthropy.

A teacher at a Detroit charter said conditions are just as bad at the privately run schools: “At charters, there is no busing. Many of our kids are not within walking distance. I’ve heard about parents’ car problems, not being able to afford gas or—even more common—ninth graders having the responsibility of taking care of little siblings who are sick.

“I have kids who miss a day a week for an entire year. Often kids can’t get to school. Add in suspensions and that’s a whole other thing. It’s supposed to be ‘restorative justice,’ but we still have kids suspended for long periods of time. It’s a day just for dress code, 3-5 days for ‘nearly’ getting into a fight.

“When you miss that much school, it affects your academic progress. Getting suspended just feeds into the mindset of not being motivated.

“I’ve had students whose families live out of their cars or at a long-term motels with three kids in a room with their parents. The amount of stress that entails has huge effects on children. They are worried about their parents.

“Obviously absenteeism is extremely correlated with poverty. If kids worry about where to sleep or what to eat, no wonder they have problems academically.”

Another DPSCD teacher referred to about a hundred coats being given out at her school, saying that number fell far short of the actual need. She also added that in her view, “The absenteeism has a lot to do with the testing campaign of the schools, I consider it torture of both the students and the teachers.” As to the extraordinarily high levels of absenteeism, she said, “I have one girl who has to take a cab to school every day, but some days the cab doesn’t show,” then of course she is absent through no fault of her own.

The charter school teacher concluded, “There is no fixing my students without fixing the underlying problem, which is social. We, as teachers, cannot do that. I just try to take small steps to help.”

The veteran DPSCD teacher focused on the failure of the union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, to protect either students or teachers. “When I had to take a half day off, the union rep came and told me that it would be counted as a full day. What am I paying union dues for? We are being told that taking more than seven days off will affect our evaluation, yet our contract gives us 12 days a year! It’s a violation of the contract.

“Actually, I stopped paying union dues. What was I paying for? The union told me I was ‘freeloading.’ I told them that the union had been freeloading off of me for years. I said, ‘You have nothing in your bag to convince me, you sold us down the river.’ The union hasn’t done anything for us. Fifty-five should not be a class size, it’s a speed limit. All the union wants is to keep the organization large so they can get the dues money.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact