

# Dozens of classes without teachers at Flint, Michigan, high school

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Over the course of the 2017-2018 school year at Southwestern Academy high school in Flint, Michigan, dozens of classes have been without teachers for months at a time. Parents have largely been kept in the dark about the chronic shortage of teachers even though many of the students will not receive credit for the classes without teachers.

Jake, a 16-year-old junior, described the startling situation at his school to the WSWWS, “Many of my friends have classes without teachers. I have one. The administration just tells us to go to the library, and then when we get there, we just pretty much do whatever we want.”

When asked why the classes do not have teachers, Jake answered, “The administration tells us they are sick, but no one believes them. I think some have quit.” Jake said that he knew for sure that a few of the teachers left to work at Hamady Community High School, another school in Flint.

Jake expressed concern about the shortage of teachers and the future of his school. “I don’t like what’s happening. I was very close to a few of the teachers who left; they were the good ones. I think it’s crazy that the administration won’t tell the students or parents what is going on.”

Many students at Southwestern reported that they will not be receiving credit for the classes without teachers. Instead, they will be forced to attend summer school if they wish to graduate on time.

Another student, Ann, explained, “There are more security guards than teachers at this point. I’m in high school, in ninth grade, but they send me to the eighth grade class in my second hour because there is no teacher.” When asked what class she was supposed to be in, she said she couldn’t remember because it was so long ago.

Every student who spoke to the WSWWS had a similar story. Chad noted that he is missing a teacher in his sixth hour: “I think it’s supposed to be English, but I don’t know. We just sit around on our phones for the hour or talk or something instead. It’s so messed up that they told us so late that they aren’t going to get teachers. There isn’t much to do about it now that it’s almost summer.”

Two friends waiting to be picked up after school, Jada and Josh, explained that the school administration blames the students for the low teacher enrollment. “They say the teachers leave because we don’t behave. It’s always made out to be our fault,” Jada complained. “The school doesn’t care about the students. We’re part of a cycle: The school puts teachers down, and that brings down the students.”

“The school doesn’t look into problems,” added Josh. “Kids get in trouble just for being around other people that are causing trouble. The school don’t see each individual kid. They just see us all as bad kids.”

As with other students, Jada and Josh noted the heavy presence of security guards at the school. “When there are fights, the security guards won’t come in and to break it up. They’ll use pepper spray on the people fighting, and anyone around them will get hit with it, too!”

They explained that situation facing teachers and students was extremely discouraging. “Every once in a while, we’ll get a substitute teacher, but most of the time it’ll either be another teacher who has to fill in for the class. Or they’ll actually have us sit in a room or auditorium without anyone teaching. There are a lot of students who don’t even come to school anymore. It’s like there’s no point. “

According to the district’s union contract, teachers’ salaries start at a meager \$32,065 for first-year teachers.

The salaries are capped at just \$66,780 after 13 years of work.

Last week, school staff passed a vote of no confidence in Principal Maria Boyd-Springer over her history of bullying, which has resulted in many teachers leaving in the middle of the school year. Parents and students told the WSWS that the teachers who have not left Southwestern Academy are forced to fill in for the missing teachers during their break period and planning period, meaning teachers are working dozens of hours of overtime each week without compensation.

Southwestern Academy has almost 1,300 students enrolled this year. One parent of three Southwestern students told the WSWS that since the closing of Flint Central High School in 2009, the class sizes at Southwestern Academy have been very large. “Every year, it seems like they have more students in each class. My youngest says one class can be over 40 sometimes. And now no teachers? And not even the decency to tell us?”

Once the nation’s model for public education, the Flint School District has been in steady decline since its peak in 1968 when almost 48,000 students were enrolled. By 2003, district enrollment had dropped to 21,007, and by 2017 was down to just 4,883.

That decline in enrollment is even more drastic than the epic decline in nearby Detroit, which saw a 71 percent drop from 157,003 students in 2003 to 45,237 in 2017.

Since funding for education is tied to enrollment, the public school system has been starved of resources. In 2003, the state gave Flint schools \$159.6 million, and by 2017, this was down to \$41.2 million. Flint Community Schools had 2,448 full-time staff on its payroll in 2011 and just 874 full-time workers by 2017.

The situation facing teachers and students at Southwestern Academy in Flint is one more graphic example of the extreme state of decay of public education throughout the United States. It is exactly such stark and universal conditions that have driven tens of thousands of teachers to strike in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states this year. The educators involved in these struggles, in many cases, have bravely defied state anti-strike laws as well as the opposition of the unions, which have worked to block strikes and then betray them when they do break out.

In Flint, the education unions are playing just as

malicious a role as in other states. Karen Christian, president of the United Teachers of Flint Union, recently sought to place part of the blame for the crisis in the schools on the Flint community, saying that the “mentality of our residents in Flint has to change”—implying that somehow it is the priorities of the community that have destroyed public education.

As is the case across the country, the destruction of public education and living standards in Flint is bound up with decades of deindustrialization and four decades of social counter-revolution against the entire working class. Over 40 percent of Flint residents currently live below the poverty line. The social distress created from these conditions, on top of the ongoing lead-in-water crisis, has severely impacted the working class and youth.

One 14-year-old Southwestern Academy student, Cameron, spoke to the WSWS about the difficult conditions in the community. At the end, he noted that he hoped to be a pathologist when he grows up. He explained that “lots of people in my family in Flint have died, and no one knows why and no one seemed to try to find out. So, I want to be able to tell people why their family members die, because I think you should get to know.” When asked if he thought it was related to the water crisis, he shrugged and said, “I don’t know. Around here it could be lots of stuff.”



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