

Flint high school teachers criticize deteriorating working conditions

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Educators and students at public schools in Flint, Michigan face deteriorating conditions as a critical teacher shortage forces staff to work overtime without compensation and leaves many students in classes without teachers each day.

Despite virtual silence from the Superintendent and the United Teachers of Flint union (UTF) on the conditions in Flint's public schools, multiple students and teachers have reported to the WSWs that Southwestern Academy high school has held dozens of classes without teachers for months at a time over the course of the current school year.

Multiple students told the WSWs that sometimes they are left in classes without supervision. Other times they have been sent to the library to play on their phones, or to other classes where they sit on counters and participate in the class regardless of whether it is different subject, or even a different grade.

The office of Flint School District Superintendent Gregory Witherspoon failed to return calls from the WSWs Monday regarding the state of Flint public schools. Responding to a request for comment, a representative of the UTF said only the president, Karen Christian, could comment on the issues. Christian could not be reached and did not return phone calls Monday.

The attack on public education has been decades in the making in Flint. 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. Flint Community Schools had 2,448 full-time staff on its payroll in 2011 and just 874 full-time workers by 2017.

Flint Central High School, a castle-like building built

in 1923 and closed in 2009, was described by MLive.com as "the crown jewel of an education system that served as the nationwide model for community education." At the time, parents and students were promised the school would re-open in five years after renovations. Instead, the building has been left to disintegrate along with other shuttered schools in Flint.

In fact, Monday morning, a fire on the roof of Washington Elementary, a vacant Flint elementary school, had firefighters tied up for hours. They were able to put out the fire but noted to reporters that fires were a common occurrence at the abandoned building.

Teachers at Southwestern Academy told our reporters they have been barred by the UTF from speaking publicly to the press about the teacher shortage or the conditions in their school. Many of the teachers, however, rejected the gag order and spoke with our reporters anonymously out of fear of retribution.

One teacher commented, "We are on a gag order from the union. They don't want us talking to anyone about what's going on here but I'll say this—everything you're reading is true. The media has gotten it pretty much exactly right!"

Teachers overwhelmingly said they were in the dark as to what is going on behind the scenes regarding the state of Flint's schools. One teacher speculated that the teacher shortage might be a deliberate strategy: "I think they are basically calling this year a wash. They are closing down Northwestern High school so maybe they don't want to hire teachers now because they want to transfer the teachers from Northwestern to here next year. And they don't care if that means students lose a whole year of teaching."

He went on to note that, "most of this has to do with money. We haven't had a raise in a decade or so because of the deficit." According to the district's

union contract, teachers' salaries start at a meager \$32,065 for first-year teachers and are capped at just \$66,780 after 13 years of work.

One science teacher at Southwestern Academy commented on the wave of teachers' rebellions across the country: "What the teachers are going through in places like Oklahoma, and other places where teachers went on strike, are the same here. I saw them posting on social media about their books falling apart—it's a mirror image of the conditions here. I lose a page a day in my teacher's edition textbook because it's so old. Every time I touch the thing it falls apart a little more."

Another teacher noted the push to dismantle public education through charterization: "There has definitely been a push for charter schools. And whether they realize it or not there are major implications for public schools. Charter schools don't *have* to take students. They can say, for special education for example, that they are full when they feel they don't have enough resources to take more special-ed students. We, as a public school, cannot do that. Whether or not we have the resources doesn't matter—we have to take the students who come to us. This means that we end up with a much larger proportion of students which special needs, or students who have behavioral issues."

He went on, "The other aspect of this is how funding is allocated. Funding is given out based on enrollment at the beginning of the year. But oftentimes students get sent back to us over the course of the semester, but funding for that student stays at the original school."

An 8th grade teacher explained that educators at Southwestern Academy are forced to rely on materials they can find online instead of textbooks: "None of the math teachers have textbooks. Everything we give to students is printed from the Internet. But the school printers are not reliable, so if the printers aren't working we can't give anything to students."

She went on to say that one narrative pushed by the administration to justify the teacher shortage blames the behavioral problems of the students at the school. She explained that these issues emerge out of the lack of resources, "If kids come to class and there's no teacher, how does that make them feel? It makes them feel like the school doesn't care about them."

The teacher explained that the teacher shortage wasn't just a problem at Southwestern Academy, but one confronted by schools all around the country: "For

someone to become a teacher today, they have to take on so much debt from college. And they'll never be able to pay it back—not with the pay public school teachers make in this country! It's no wonder schools have a shortage of teachers."

All of the teachers who spoke to the WSWS expressed the same sentiment regarding the national crisis of teacher shortages. Referring to the fact that teachers have to take on additional, often clerical roles as well as second or even third jobs to supplement their teaching income, one teacher told us, "I can't tell my kids to go into teaching. Teaching isn't even teaching anymore!"

"Every day we do what we can with what we have, which is less and less every day," said another teacher. When asked about the role of the UTF, she replied, "The union is just a hierarchy of officials meant to keep us down. This has been going on all year and they have done nothing about it. Absolutely nothing."

"I have a second job; a lot of teachers have to take on more work to get by. I agree with a call for a national teacher strike. I would definitely support it! Something has to give soon. These attacks on education are going to affect a whole generation that's coming up. It's important stuff we are talking about."



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