

# Rural school closings devastate Wisconsin communities

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Nearly 100 students at the Arena Community Elementary School were dismissed from their classes for the last time June 11 as the public school in rural Wisconsin closed its doors for good. This is the first time that Arena, a village of 820 people located roughly 30 miles west of the state capital of Madison, will be without a public school since the 1800s.

Arena is in Iowa County and is part of the River Valley, which includes the villages of Spring Green, Lone Rock and Plain. Joining Arena, Plain's elementary school will also be closing. The over 200 hundred students from both elementary schools will now be bused to River Valley Elementary in Spring Green beginning next year.

Spring Green's elementary school is "centrally located," according to school officials, and is approximately 8-9 miles from Plain and Arena. As is the case in the hundreds of school closings since the 2008 recession, officials cite "tight budgets" and demographic shifts from rural to urban areas as the reason to close schools that have been serving communities and teaching children for decades.

The two closures were portended by the failure of a \$9.3 million school referendum in 2016 that would have increased school levies on struggling working-class residents.

In many rural communities the local school is a hub of community and employment. The closing of a school has a devastating effect on the rest of the village, forcing young families to consider moving lest their children be forced to travel miles to the nearest school. This extra burden on travel is not only dangerous, but also cuts into extra-curricular activities such as sports or the arts. Additionally if a family chooses to stay they will likely see a decrease in their property values and fewer job opportunities.

Melissa Schmid, an Arena mother of two, spoke to the *New York Times* about the predicament the rural community faces now that one of the largest employers in the community is gone, saying: "We basically have a bank and a cheese factory. It's not going to be a growing community."

The erosion and closure of rural public schools in America has been a priority for the ruling class for over 100 years. In the 1930s there were over 262,000 public schools in the US, with a population of roughly 133 million. Nearly 150,000 were one-teacher schools. The number of schools in both rural and urban areas grew as the product of a sharp increase in the number of students of all races enrolled in public schools from 1900 onward, which was the result of social struggles against child labor and for access to public education.

Today, in a country with over 327 million residents, fewer than 95,000 public schools are still operational. Between 2000 and 2015, 25,513 schools closed in the US, an average of 1,700 a year. This included nearly 14,000 during the years of the Obama administration, which escalated the assault on public education and championed the closing "underperforming" schools.

At the same time the number of charter schools, which are privately run but publicly funded, has steadily grown. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, charter schools have increased from 2,000 in 2001 to over 6,900 by 2016. This increase in charter schools has siphoned away public funds to for-profit enterprises of dubious educational value.

While Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker has handed over \$4.5 billion in state funds as tax incentives to major corporations, including to Foxconn, rural school districts are forced to raise funds through increased property taxes on workers' homes. While Foxconn has

received unlimited permits, tax breaks, exemptions and waivers, small communities like Arena have lost state funding due to falling enrollment. At the same time, school districts in major cities like Milwaukee are perpetually underfunded and have responded with austerity and attacks on teachers.

The first salvo on public education under the Walker administration began with the passage of Act 10 in 2011, which eliminated the right of public sector workers and teachers to collectively bargain for anything except their base salary, which is also tied to the Consumer Price Index. During the first months of 2011, tens of thousands of teachers, students and workers protested and courageously occupied the state capitol building for weeks in some of the largest working-class demonstrations in state history.

In the end however, the trade unions and Democrats—which tacitly supported Walker’s austerity measures but opposed his efforts to impose them without the aid of the unions—diverted the movement, which was rapidly developing towards a general strike, into the dead-end campaign to recall Walker and elect a Democratic governor. The Democratic candidate, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, a budget-cutting proponent of corporate-backed “school reform,” was defeated by Walker in the recall election in June 2012.

The impact of the bipartisan assault on teachers and public education has been devastating. According to a 2017 CNN Money report, Wisconsin teachers saw a 21 percent decrease in wages and benefits between 2011 and 2016. This has led to an exodus of teachers not only from rural districts to higher-paying urban districts but out of the state or the profession entirely.

These conditions are universal for teachers in rural and urban districts alike. The erosion of teachers’ real wages and the failure of 29 states to restore school funding to pre-2008-recession levels have fueled a rebellion of teachers across the country, with teachers’ strikes spreading from West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona to Kentucky, Colorado and North Carolina. The teachers’ unions, which are allied with the Democratic Party, did everything to sabotage those struggles and divert them behind their campaign to elect Democrats in the midterm elections in November.

The demobilization of teachers has given the Trump administration a green light to escalate its attack on public education. Schools for American children are

being shut down, while Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other Department of Homeland Security agencies build prison “tent camps” for immigrant children.

None of the issues that sparked the teachers’ revolt of 2018 have been resolved, and a new round of battles will erupt when schools reopen after the summer break. To take forward these struggles teachers will have to organize independently of the unions and develop a political struggle against both big-business parties.



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