

Benton Harbor, Michigan: School board votes to oppose governor's ultimatum to close high school

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Under the pressure of massive and outspoken opposition among students and residents, the Benton Harbor Area Schools Board of Education voted on Friday, June 14, to reject the demand from newly installed Democratic Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to shut down the only high school in this Western Michigan city.

In recent weeks, thousands of students, teachers and Michigan residents have voiced their outrage at the governor—who ran for office as “pro-education”—and her insistence on disbanding the school. Benton Harbor High School (BHHS) students, as well as those at the alternative school, would be scattered to some 10 other districts, some as far as 30 miles away.

The head of the state teachers union, which represents educators in the district, has endorsed the shutdown. Michigan Education Association (MEA) President Paul Herbart, arrogantly dismissing the growing outrage in the community, called the plan the “best solution for students and families” and “a bold solution that will put Benton Harbor students on a path to success.”

Herbart's remarks were contrasted by sophomore Dadrainana McFall, who said at a rally to save the school, “I don't have anywhere else to go. This is my hometown. Benton Harbor created me. I don't want the school to close.” Her statement was echoed by dozens of others.

The State of Michigan is utilizing Benton Harbor's accumulated \$18 million debt to blackmail the district, saying that it would eliminate \$12 million of the debt only if the district acceded to the demand for closure. Otherwise, it threatened, the entire district could be shut down and replaced with charter schools. While she claims to oppose for-profit charters, Whitmer named former charter school executive Doug Ross as a senior adviser on “educational attainment” last February. Dissolving the district would require approval from the state legislature.

Whitmer traveled to the city in June, telling residents that the district's financial and academic “crisis” required the school's so-called “temporary” closure. “My hope is that the district has phenomenal academic outcomes for K-8 and that we reboot the high school in Benton Harbor,” Whitmer said. “We shed the debt, we get the academics on the right path, and we rebuild a high school opportunity.” She called it a matter of “facts, science and the needs of the children.”

None of students or residents believe in the “temporary” nature of such a shutdown. In 2013 the state dissolved the Buena Vista Schools and Inkster Public Schools over a similar mass opposition by residents. The measure forced thousands of students into charters, most for-profit entities.

“I hope our voices mean something,” Benton Harbor parent Apollonia Williams vehemently disagreed, telling Whitmer. “We have been lied to. We can't trust anyone right now. We have had people come talk to us about what this is going to be, and they turn around and do another thing. ... There is not one parent who wants this high school closed,” she added, according to the *Detroit News*.

Since Whitmer laid down the state's ultimatum, hundreds of students and residents have jammed school board meetings seeking to save their school district. Last Tuesday, students organized a march of community members and students, while an online petition calling on the state to forgive the debt currently has over 12,000 signatures. Student group Peace4Life has won wide support by calling for a 90-day period to create a plan for the revitalization of the school.

The school board is now calling on state officials to negotiate an alternative agreement. The state's jurisdiction will end June 30 when a 2014 state-imposed

consent decree expires and control of the schools will revert to the locally elected school board.

For their part, however, school board members and media including the *Detroit News* have gone out of their way to characterize the conflict as a racial one, stating that the predominantly black Benton Harbor students were being transferred to neighboring white districts. The deliberate promotion of racial animosity is calculated to cover over the fact that Benton Harbor schools—like those across the state—have been systematically starved of funding—locally, statewide and nationally. Moreover, the growth of social inequality and the predominance of low-wage jobs have impoverished large swathes of the population, both black and white, across Michigan.

Western Michigan, the site of Benton Harbor, is home turf for the school-privatizer-in-chief, US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos who, through her massive campaign donations, has long played an outsize role in squeezing public schools financially while promoting vouchers, charters and other forms of privatization.

Long years of budget cuts and declining student enrollment have resulted in a situation where starting salaries for teachers in Benton Harbor are at an impossibly low \$34,000. Poverty-level wages have made it difficult to attract or retain educators, resulting in about 40 percent of the positions being filled by long-term substitutes who have lesser qualifications and must be reassigned every year. The district receives barebones per capita funding of only \$7,871 per student, with \$700 of that going directly to the banks in the form of debt repayment.

While Whitmer and other big business politicians make the lying claim that Benton Harbor High School or the entire district must be shuttered because of “financial mismanagement” or “low test scores,” the fact is, the city and its workforce have created hundreds of millions in wealth for its former main employer, Whirlpool.

The company was founded in the city over 100 years ago by Lou Upton. Today it boasts some \$21 billion in annual sales and 92,000 employees. An international manufacturing behemoth, the corporation retained only about 4,000 executives and analysts in Benton Harbor after it boosted its bottom line in the 1980s by shutting its local factories and relocating in cheaper labor locations. As of the 2017 US Census, 48 percent of Benton Harbor lives in poverty, with a median household income of \$20,157.

Meanwhile, the Uptons and their scions have dominated local politics, ensuring lavish tax cuts for the corporation

at the expense of public services. Lou’s son David served as state representative and now grandson Fred, a right-wing Republican budget hawk with a net worth \$7.3 million, continues the trend. He is also a beneficiary of DeVos’ campaign largesse.

In 2011, Whirlpool came up for a paltry \$1.5 million—a drop in the bucket—for the Benton Harbor schools. “We’re part of the community,” Jeffrey Noel, vice president for corporate communications, told the *New York Times* magazine, noting that the remaining employees are “active volunteers” around the city—an effort that costs the firm exactly zero.

The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* calls for all workers and young people seeking to defend public education in Benton Harbor and beyond to establish their own, independent rank-and-file committees to fight for the resources that are so urgently required. Governor Gretchen Whitmer has, in a few short months, already demonstrated the bipartisan character of the attacks on public education across the state. Moreover, the MEA’s criminal endorsement of the destruction of BHHS as well as the jobs of its own membership there reveals, once again, that the unions are in the pockets of the corporate elite.

The working class must put forward its own socialist solution to this attack. Rank-and-file committees should fight to unite Benton Harbor educators with teachers in Detroit and across the country and every section of workers, including autoworkers. Billions must be made available to rebuild the public school system and upgrade education, from pre-K through college, through the nationalization and expropriation of the billion-dollar banks and corporations, including Whirlpool, which are responsible for the impoverishment of society.



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