

“The US is prioritizing money above human life”

Detroit, Michigan teacher speaks on public education during the pandemic

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23 May 2020

Michigan, a COVID-19 epicenter with over 53,000 cases and over 5,000 deaths, is now facing the threat of crippling cuts to public education as districts make plans to open in-person education in the fall. With the closure or slowing of manufacturing and Depression-levels of unemployment nearing 25 percent, state tax revenues have fallen by \$3.2 billion.

To pay for the shortfall and balance the budget, Republican state politicians are demanding unprecedented cuts to schools. They estimate the School Aid Fund could be slashed as much as \$1.2 billion for the 2019–20 school year (ending June 30) and another \$1.1 billion cut for 2020–21. Schools are meanwhile scrambling to devise plans for split-week schedules to reduce class sizes, student temperature checks, social distancing, deep cleaning of buildings and online classes. This comes after most Michigan schools have been short-staffed for years, with teachers forced to deal with oversized and under-resourced classes.

Rockford School Superintendent Mike Shabler gave an indication of the extent of these measures, telling local media MLive, “Now, with less than a month remaining in our school year and just three months before the start of the next school year, there is no way we can cut our budgets by the amount indicated in state budget projections without massive staff layoffs and the elimination of essential programming in the future.”

Democratic state representatives are calling for additional federal assistance, an entirely unlikely prospect. The state received only \$89 million to assist both K-12 and higher education in the grotesquely misnamed CARES Act, while schools sought to somehow maintain mass food distribution, provide online devices to those in need and revise curricula for distance learning.

The attitude of the federal government towards struggling public schools was underscored this week when Education Secretary Betsy DeVos mandated that private and parochial schools should be included in CARES.

The draconian budget cuts in Michigan could mean up to a \$2,000 annual cut from the present \$8,000 per-pupil allocation, according to the chair of the Senate education committee, Wayne Schmidt (R-Traverse City). The bulk of all school funding in the state is administered through this “foundation allowance” determined by district enrollment on set “count days.” As a result of systematic cuts to the per-pupil grant, many districts have never recovered to pre-2011 funding. In addition, the Obama

administration enacted substantial cuts to Title I and special education funding which hit Michigan with devastating force.

A veteran science teacher in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, addressing the conditions facing teachers and students during the pandemic, the looming budget cuts and plans for reopening the schools.

Detroit teachers have long battled the bipartisan state and federal defunding of public education, gaining international attention for their courageous sickouts during 2015–2016 against crumbling, unsafe schools. Photos of black mold in classrooms, buckets to catch water through leaking roofs and rodent infestations went viral. In 2018, DPSCD revealed that an estimated \$500 million would be needed to bring all buildings up to “satisfactory” condition, a number far out of reach for the cash-strapped district.

WSWS: First of all, what has it been like switching to all-online classes?

Teacher: During these weeks of virtual online learning, I had been hearing from about ten kids a day compared with 160 which I service. I have called my students when they were supposed to be meeting for class and find that they are on their way to work. This is 1:00 in the afternoon, but employers and even parents are expecting that they work. This is, of course, a socioeconomic problem. Or students could be watching five or six siblings and trying to use their mom’s cell phone to access lessons. Economic disadvantage is even more glaring than usual.

WSWS: Only 10 out of 160?

T: Yes. And I’m not talking about participating in the online class or turning in work, but any presence. That would include looking at the assignment, clicking a roll call post, or messaging me. By “attendance,” it doesn’t mean they are actively participating in class.

WSWS: Would you call this a breakdown of the system?

T: I wouldn’t go that far. We have an amazing team of teachers. The district’s first response has been to ask our students, “Do you need anything? Is there anything we can do to support you?” The first issue was arranging pickup for breakfast and lunches. Of course, if families don’t have a car, how do they get the lunches? Maybe If we [the Detroit public schools] had consistent busing services, then this food could be delivered, but then, many schools don’t.

Teachers have also been calling their students at home, doing check-ins for social and emotional health. When the district rolled out distance learning, they shortened class periods, and I'm personally giving kids the option to self-pace. Maybe they can't attend at 9 a.m., but I'm recording the classes and they can self-pace.

WSWS: What does it mean for parents?

T: Work at the high school level shouldn't require a lot of parental support, but elementary school is a very different animal. Even just access can be very challenging. If you're a mom working from home, but have only one laptop, your child has to work from their cell phone.

The district has arranged for all families to have free internet access during this period, with plans to get devices to students in need, but I don't know how that will go. They had to write a grant, wait to receive funds, figure out how to roll it out safely, and finally try to make sure those with the highest need get them. So many layers of mess!

WSWS: What do you think about the reopening of schools?

T: The phrase "reopening the economy" makes me grind my teeth. I know the shutdown can't be indefinite, but today there were more new cases yet, over 100,000 new cases, after hovering around 80,000 a day worldwide. I hear the argument about people being destitute if we don't reopen, but we could go a long way stemming the spread by being smarter.

I have a background in infectious disease and a basic understanding of epidemiology. Until we have contact tracing and can isolate outbreaks, I expect exponential growth will resume. We flattened the curve for a while, and I hope I'm wrong, but I think the second wave will be worse.

The United States is prioritizing money above human life. Reopening schools will mean devastating impacts on teachers, school workers, custodians and security staff. We have a metal detector at our school. Security has to touch every backpack every day. Any teacher knows how well their classrooms are cleaned. It's tidy, but it's a spray and wipe. I buy my own Clorox wipes to give to kids for their desks. There is minimal staff, and I suspect many are receiving low wages. It might be their second or third job. There's no oversight, and custodians are not trained in aseptic cleaning.

We know students can be asymptomatic carriers. My big concern is them taking this disease home to parents and grandparents. Many of my kids stay with extended family.

I hope that districts will make the decisions that our national leadership will not. Look at the silencing of [Dr. Anthony] Fauci, for example, who wasn't permitted to testify before Congress.

I explained to a friend of mine that more people have now died from COVID-19 than did in Vietnam, and he was shocked. We do need to educate people. I believe it is likely that deaths will increase threefold by the end of the year.

WSWS: Michigan is facing a massive cut to education funding. What will that mean?

T: Additional cuts to education are insane! Funding is already low here compared to districts like Boston. Having taught in three widely different schools, teachers' attention and effort are there. They are doing everything they can with limited resources and

limited support.

I have taught children from high poverty in Northern Michigan where most don't have anyone in their family with a college education. I've taught Native American students on a reservation. And currently I am in an urban setting in Detroit. We forget about rural poverty, but it is just as much as urban. Rural-urban students mirror each other. The divide is really socioeconomic, not racial. My kids see the inequities, it's two groups that want the same thing—they just want the government to stop screwing them over.

I can't imagine having less money for schools. I don't know *if* public education has a fate in this country if it continues on this trajectory. There is so much inequity. The two-party system doesn't work for us anymore. Fear of socialism is a serious problem because people don't understand it. One wonders if the November election will even happen at all, considering the probable second wave of infection we face.

Cuts like these, together with the pandemic, could decimate the workforce. Of course, I need a job and don't want to abandon the kids, but I don't believe I will return in September if I am asked to come physically into the classroom. I feel it would put at risk the security workers, people serving lunch, all the parents, aunts and uncles. Higher poverty means higher preexisting conditions. I would return in a "virtual learning" capacity or once I feel the rate of infection is under control, and proper measures can actually be taken in school buildings.

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The *World Socialist Web Site* Educators Newsletter urges teachers and school workers to contact us with your thoughts on the issues you face, the defense of public education, and questions regarding the Socialist Equality Party's fight for rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and neighborhood to determine how and when students and educators return safely to school. Write to us today at teachers@wsws.org.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact