

“When a school closes the community dies”

Detroit begins a school reorganization which leaves children and parents in the lurch

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The Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) school board is implementing a reorganization of Detroit schools following a contentious vote on May 10. The agreement follows a series of community meetings in which parents and educators voiced anger and opposition. School Superintendent Nikolai Vitti incorporated some changes in the final plan, nevertheless Detroit’s schoolchildren will continue to be confined to unsafe buildings with deteriorating educational opportunities.

The Facility Master Plan entirely ignores the people who teach, drive buses, and provide critical support services. Focused simply on buildings, it fails there too.

There will be five new schools and others which gain air conditioning, but critically, the deal fails to upgrade all HVAC systems for air conditioning and protection from the aerosolized COVID virus. Moreover, the school board will end the mask mandate June 30.

Some community schools will be closed, further devastating impoverished neighborhoods. Class size levels will increase. And teachers and staff will continue to be underpaid and under-resourced.

The plan is financed by \$700 million from Michigan’s \$6 billion federal COVID relief and is a one-time infusion to the Detroit schools. The plan document acknowledges that the measure is a band-aid, stating, “With continued rising costs, our Facility Master Plan proposes the **most immediate investment needs totaling \$700M out of a \$2.1 billion need** [emphasis in the original].”

In 2015-16, educators mounted a series of sickouts—in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the Democratic Party politicians—demanding attention to the prevalence of mold, crumbling ceilings, buckling pavements and rodents common in the city schools. After the union squashed the protests, the district soldiered on, making only the most minimal improvements.

Michigan’s School Aid Fund provides no money for school infrastructure. Additionally, following the contrived bankruptcy of Detroit, the Detroit school district was dissolved to pay off state bondholders. Workers, via their property taxes, were left holding the bag for the school system’s historic debt, incurred primarily by

a series of dictatorial Emergency Managers. These measures purposefully left the DPSCD ham-strung with no means to cover infrastructure improvements.

“I still have ceiling tiles falling in my classroom,” said a DPSCD high school educator to the WWS. “Upstairs, one of the students recently took a fallen ceiling tile and tossed it out of the window, damaging a car.”

DPSCD parent Aliya Moore diligently attended and spoke out at school board meetings. She reflected bitterly to the WWS, “All the work we’ve done for equity—or was it the illusion of equity—and look at where we are! I am angry and frustrated. Dr. Vitti even says the [DPSCD] will get rid of books by 2025! We are going backwards. But their pockets are getting fatter.

“I’m told, if you don’t like it, go find a charter [school]. Well, I don’t want to be part of the illusion.

“Many parents have been vocal about the reorganization of DPSCD. Some will get new buildings, but at what cost? In exchange for closing schools down the street. For example, Paul Robeson Malcolm X Academy will get a new building, but Thurgood Marshall will close. Marshall has a large population of special needs students, now called exceptional students, who will be uprooted. This is especially traumatic for them.”

Speaking to the press on the fate of her school, Sampson-Webber educator Sheila Allen-Frazier told the media, “It hasn’t been very positive, it’s been kinda bleak. It’s heartbreaking to see a school close because when a school closes the community dies.” After substantial community pushback, DPSCD placed the threatened closure of Sampson-Webber on “hold,” removing it from the immediate “phase-out” list. Instead, Greenfield Union Elementary School, known as a “hidden jewel” for its small classes and STEM focus, will be closed.

Under the finalized agreement, DPSCD will spend \$281 million to rebuild five schools, \$296 million on renovation, and \$128 million to reopen previously closed schools, expand pre-K, build additions, and demolish or sell some vacant buildings. It will close Ann Arbor Trail Magnet Elementary-Middle, Catherine C. Blackwell Institute Elementary, Greenfield Union, Thurgood Marshall, and J. E. Clark Preparatory Academy Elementary.

Aliya pointed out, “Our buildings need upgrades. But they are spending so much money on buildings! What about mental health? Or school nurses? They are already saying they will cut school

nurses by the 2023-24 school year. There won't be a nurse in each building; we will have 'traveling nurses.' By then, I expect there will be a lot of cuts. They are saying even assistant principals may be laid off. What about our cafeteria staff?

"It's good more children will have air conditioning. I'm glad they won't be sweating in class. But think about it. What about the quality of the education? What about the curriculum? What about the class size—there will be 40 people in there? Already, seasoned, good teachers are leaving. Good paraprofessionals [paraprofessionals] are leaving."

A DPSCD teacher also underscored the same point, emphasizing the continued spread of COVID. "Teachers are thinking the larger class sizes are a *fait accompli*. We're all being told the pandemic is over and we need to get back to 'normal.' I saw the cap for next year at 37, which would be seven students more than this year. Four years ago, it was 40, and that was actually 60 for the first few days. Standing room only. This means no possibility of social distancing, as if there were such a possibility with 30."

Aliya also emphasized that the schools will not have the support staff to deal with the continuing trauma faced by students as a result of being forced into unsafe schools, contracting and spreading the deadly disease. "We've got children who've lost their grandmothers and grandfathers, the main ones who took care of them. Others lost mothers or fathers. Where are the counselors? Where are the resources to help?"

Another high school educator noted that in the wake of the Uvalde and Oxford mass shootings, "The biggest issue this year has been pushback on security. We aren't told who to call in an emergency, there is no written protocol. We were promised that by the principal, but it never happened. When I'm dealing with fights or a child out of control, I have to call through an outside line and get clerical staff to help me find someone. Teachers don't feel safe."

Decrying the lack of support services, especially with an ongoing pandemic, Aliya said, "I'm glad I kept my daughter home last year, but it is not the same quality of education. They had empty schedules. They were expected to work independently; some students can, some can't. There was no after-school tutoring and no extras. The only elective was personal finances. The students were given the cheapest devices they [the Board of Education] could get."

The parent emphasized the growing movement of young people in defense of their right to safe schools. "I'm proud that our kids are speaking up and walking out. You have to do it. I hope they keep speaking out. There is too much money, too much injustice, and too much disrespect."

"They say it's 'black' and 'white.' But black people are making the decisions here. There is just too much money for us not to have what we need. Too many pockets are filled with corporate greed. The unions are doing nothing and we have a dictator for a superintendent."

Informed about the work of the Michigan Educators Rank and File Safety Committee and its struggle to unify all sections of the working class in defense of public education, COVID safety and democratic rights, Aliya agreed to sign up. She added, "Yes, all the workers should unite. These are the parents and they have to go

to work. They are dealing with their own unions and injustices.

"The criticism is always brought up that there's no work ethic, but you break down what \$14 an hour means now—it's the same as \$7 or \$8 an hour before. People are being forced to work two jobs or have a hustle to live comfortably. Schools, hotels—they all act like they are doing you a favor to pay you \$14-\$15 an hour. No, they should actually pay people [what it costs to live]."

"I first got involved in attending school board meetings in 2013 when Roy Roberts was the Emergency Manager. I saw him close down Oakland Orthopedic Elementary School, which had 315 students, with the lie that the building was too decrepit. These students used to have a personal nurse, physical therapy, speech therapy and so much support. They had children on wheelchairs, with tracheotomies and more."

She concluded, "We protested, we fought and they just lied and closed it down. They claimed the children would still get their accommodations and many did not. I am sure we lost some of those babies. Once I saw that, I never shut up. I couldn't go back to sleep. I'm accused of being a troublemaker, but I am doing it for the love of those babies."

Detroit public schools were, by many standards, the top-rated schools in the 1950s when the US auto industry boomed and the Motor City was the nation's fourth largest city. Decades of factory closures, tax abatements for the auto companies and deep cuts to public education and other vital services have ravaged the school system.

This has been accelerated over the last 15 years. During the Obama administration, the president's education secretary, Arne Duncan, described the city as "ground zero" for privatization. The city became the most charterized district in the US, after New Orleans. The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) assisted the administration and imposed massive cuts on teachers, blocking collective action in the defense of public education.

Democratic Party city and school officials have always pointed to falling student enrollment to justify school closings and other budget cuts. This has always been a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more public education is gutted and resources diverted to for-profit charters, the more students are driven away.

Now the further loss of students, due primarily to the criminal response of both parties to the pandemic, is being used to close more schools.

The Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee rejects this framework. There are more than sufficient resources to provide high-quality education, generously-paid teachers and school workers, buildings retro-fitted for COVID protection, full wrap-around services for all youth and families and more. But this can only be achieved by stopping the squandering of society's resources on war and the ever greater enrichment of the financial and corporate oligarchy that rules America.



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