

Detroit public schools begin cutting educator jobs, services and summer programs, as COVID funding runs out

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Approximately 100 Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) staff members are set to be laid off before the next school year, coinciding with the end of federal COVID relief funding. These include teacher assistants, known as paraprofessionals in Michigan, school nurses, college transition advisers, school culture facilitators, academic deans, assistant principals and other central office staff.

The layoffs are being enacted in the immediate aftermath of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer's new budget. Although the governor claims the budget includes a "historic" investment in education, it leaves schools still scrambling to provide even rudimentary services.

Today, Detroit school principals are receiving their budgets and will have one month to decide what programs and staff to cut. DPSCD officials have begun to meet with staff members already targeted for layoff.

Also on the chopping block are summer school and after-school programming, as well as COVID testing. Only children in grades 8-12 requiring credit-recovery for core subjects are expected to be eligible for summer school. The DPSCD Summer Learning Experience which, for all practical purposes is being ended, was recognized nationally last year for its academic enrichment and STEM classes as well as recreation.

The Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), currently in contract negotiations, has already signaled its acquiescence if not complete indifference to the loss of educators. DFT President Lakia Wilson-Lumpkins stated at the March union meeting that "these are not our members." (In fact, the paraprofessionals Local 2350 is also affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.)

Wilson-Lumpkins told local media, "We understand that there will be some shifts made due to the loss of COVID funding." Her only stipulation was that the union wanted to avoid "a situation where there have been deep cuts *unnecessarily* or *prematurely* [emphasis added]." In other words, the union is not only abandoning fellow educators and critical school workers, but knows that in exchange for its "seat at the table" it will initial a new deal that keeps educators underpaid, under-resourced, and without adequate benefits.

School workers, however, are in no mood to give up their livelihoods and parents are up in arms over program and job cuts. This anger was palpable at the March 12 school board meeting. Paraprofessionals about to lose their jobs spoke passionately about their children, and parents echoed their support in the most heart-felt manner.

"About the paraeducators, we are the foundation that is necessary to students," said Carlotta Taylor. "Think about kindergarten, first and second grade—they won't have any support staff!" Addressing herself to DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, she asked, "How is it that you are taking us out? Where is the support for them, for these children?"

Referring to Vitti's claim that he will transfer some staff to other positions, she said, "You talk about us going to other locations, like putting us in the kitchen, this is not the same job. We are losing a lot if you put us there. It makes a big difference for the kids, if [as you say] we are considering the kids over everything else? You are going to lose a lot of kids because parents are concerned about this."

Parent Jonathan Dumars addressed the school board. "My son's school, Nichols Elementary, is an example for the implications of this budget policy. He started this fall as a kindergartener. It's a legacy school with a proud reputation, but faces a lot of challenges. There is no regular recess, no field trips, no music, no extracurricular activity."

Dumars explained that due to schools being combined, his son's class had 45 students at the beginning of the school year. With the staff facing significant challenges like this, the parent paid special tribute to the paraprofessionals. My son "has a tireless kindergarten teacher, but the main enrichment has been the support staff. He has three, they are role models, working with grace and integrity and kindness to the kids."

Addressing the district superintendent, Dumars said, "I understand concerns when balancing a budget after losing 2,500 students. I understand the need to raise teachers' salary. I want you to reconsider this. Children that are especially needy after COVID aren't getting the support they need."

A school counselor told the WSWs, "We just lost our nurse because word was getting around that they were not going to be

retained. They are cutting College Transition advisers. For a district that is touting an increase in high school graduation, they don't realize that they help maintain the integrity and count of the high school graduation rate.

"There are 300-400 kids in my K-8 school and we only have two AI's [academic interventionists] and they are cutting paraprofessionals? It makes no sense." She reflected, "They say there is no money, but isn't the city getting \$410 million to build up downtown?" referring to tax incentives being handed to real estate tycoon Dan Gilbert and others.

Rodney Fresh objected to the overall effect of years of cuts and pointed to the failure of Vitti's promises in last year's Master Facilities Plan. "I am a teacher at CMA [Communication and Media Arts High School]. Dr. Vitti talked about the survey on students feeling loved and prepared. My students don't feel loved, my seniors in particular don't feel loved."

"We were promised that they would have all these wonderful things but in the words of one of my students, 'We don't have anything,'" Fresh continued. "They don't have the football field that they were promised. We still have chalkboards in most of our classrooms. We have a biology teacher that still doesn't have the current biology books. We haven't had a counselor for most of the year—but the students are supposed to feel loved?"

"One of my outstanding juniors said she probably wouldn't be here for her senior year because we don't have music. Other schools have piano and art. Every time the district keeps pushing things back.

"I am very concerned how are they supposed to feel challenged and prepared. Another student said she was very concerned about the curriculum. She pointed out, 'I haven't even read Mark Twain, I've never read Romeo and Juliet,' I said those are staples. I read them all in high school. I read them all, I read Ralph Ellison. You can't recruit and retain students this way. I am demanding you move up the timeline because CMA isn't going to exist in five years at this pace."

Speaking to the WSWs, an experienced paraprofessional explained the critical role of support staff. "In elementary schools paraprofessionals are used to monitor children with mental and physical disabilities. Without paraprofessionals, the children will not be able to get the academic help they need to be successful. Education shapes the future. The layoff and lack of staff in the schools is aiding the drive for a society with no future."

The mass elimination of paraprofessionals from the classroom is a major assault on children's education. They perform critical functions, including substituting for absent teachers. They are often deeply loved by the children and referred to as the "heartbeat" of a school. Said another, "We are a much older group of workers who have been in DPSCD for decades" but nonetheless, "We are expendable to the

district."

For her part, Donna Jackson, president of the Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals, told the DPSCD school board she regretted the layoffs. Her crocodile tears, however, underscored the fact that none of the unions would mount a fight for these jobs.

She said, "This week we learned that positions of facilitators and paraprofessionals will be eliminated. They have been a staple in DPS since the early 1970s, playing a vital role for students and communities, academically and behaviorally. They were instrumental during the height of COVID. ... This staff reported every day in Learning Centers, continued to dedicate their lives for staff shortages, covering lunchrooms and long-term subbing. The elimination of these positions will be noticeably missed."

The fact is that the DFP and DFT are jointly blocking the necessary mobilization of educators and parents against the ongoing assault on public education. They fully endorse the false claim by Superintendent Vitti and all of the politicians that "there is no money" for high-quality public education, and their efforts to pit educators against each other in a fight over shrinking resources.

As the school counselor told the WSWs, billions of tax dollars are being handed to big business. While Whitmer's new budget leaves schools short-changed, lavish handouts in the billions of dollars were turned over to the cash-rich automakers. This week, in a matter of hours, hundreds of millions of dollars materialized to bail out Silicon Valley Bank's wealthy depositors, Credit Suisse and other banks. Meanwhile, the Biden administration's budget allocates another \$1 trillion for war, after squandering untold hundreds of thousands of dollars to escalate US aggression around the world.

Paraprofessionals, school workers, educators and parents must take the road of struggle, reject the corrupt union apparatus and demand their rights. The struggles of educators, railroad workers, autoworkers and more—from France to Sri Lanka to the US—must be unified, independent of the parties of ruling elites. Detroit educators should join and build the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee is uniting their struggle with those of educators and other workers around the globe to demands billions for education, an end to poverty and social inequality, and a future free of war for our children. For more information, sign up here.



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