

Suburban New Orleans school district to close six schools

Emma Arceneaux
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Are you a teacher in Jefferson Parish or the Greater New Orleans area? Tell us what you think about the school closures by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Jefferson Parish Public Schools, the largest school district in Louisiana which covers much of the suburbs of New Orleans, will close six schools at the end of this school year. The move affects over 6,200 students, or 13 percent of the student population. The decision comes as school districts across the US are slashing budgets, closing schools and implementing mass layoffs.

Citing declining enrollment, staffing shortages, and infrastructural inefficiencies, the school board voted on April 5 to adopt an amended version of a district reorganization plan produced by consulting groups MGT and Meyers Engineering. The district claims the changes will allow for better utilization of the district's buildings and resources.

Six schools, both elementary and high schools, will be closed and the students transferred to other schools in the district, while two schools will be relocated to the newly vacated buildings, and two entirely new schools will be built. This follows an earlier round of school closures in 2020, when three schools were closed.

Just as in 2020, the plans are deeply unpopular. Public comments lasted over three hours at the school boarding meeting, with students, parents and staff pleading for the board to keep their schools open. A fourth grade student began the comments, telling board members, "We often hear from adults about childhood trauma and preventing it. I must say this is the most traumatic thing I will have endured in my ten years, leaving my friends and my school family... Why have you allowed my school to be neglected for years to the point where it's recommended for closure?"

Brian Glover, faculty member and head football coach at Grace King High School, which will be closed, pointed

out a contradiction in the decision to close the school based on enrollment and space utilization. Under the plan, Grace King students will be absorbed into two other high schools, with another school, Haynes, relocating onto Grace King's campus. However, he noted that Grace King has the largest high school enrollment in the district's east bank (the district covers both the east and west sides of the Mississippi River). Haynes has fewer students; therefore the building will be even more "under-utilized" as defined by the district's proposal.

Ellen Boyer, a school social worker, spoke about the destabilizing impact the school closures will have on thousands of the district's children. She cited the fact that a large portion of the student population suffers from the "impact of mass incarceration, extreme poverty, homelessness, immigration, mental illness and more" and that their schools are vital sources of stability. She noted that the consolidations will lead to larger class sizes, which will result in less one on one time for students and more chaotic classroom environments.

A week prior to the vote, dozens of students at Grace King High School walked out of class to protest their school's imminent closure. Speaking to local news, one student stated, "I've had teachers and people here who have changed my life, and I don't want to say goodbye to that." Another student, referring to the district's claim that the closures were a response to the ongoing teacher shortage, said, "We should be looking into why are teachers not here, where are they, what happened? And get to the root of that instead of doubling sizes."

One teacher at Mildred Harris Elementary noted that educators were given little notice. "We absolutely did not think we were going to be shut down. We are devastated. We feel like our kids are not being considered and they are going to come out on the losing end of this. We're a small community. They will have to buy new uniforms, will be several miles down the road, and of course they

will be bussed there, but children get sick and they're going to call home, and some [parents] don't have the means to pick their children up."

Educators are also at risk of losing their jobs. Although the district claims that the closures will not result in mass layoffs and that "certificated employees with a satisfactory evaluation" will maintain their employment, the district made no promises about non-certified and classified employees, which would include non-certified teachers, paraprofessionals and other school workers. Such layoffs will only exacerbate ongoing staff shortages in the district, symptomatic of a nationwide teacher shortage. The district website currently lists 478 staff vacancies, including 241 teaching positions.

Driving the shortages are the deteriorating conditions inside public schools, increased workloads, and stagnating wages amid the worst inflationary crisis in decades. The average teacher salary in the state is \$52,000. According to a recent survey by the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, more than one-third of Louisiana teachers work at least one additional job in order to afford living expenses. Ninety seven percent of teachers said they aren't paid enough to raise a family, and over one-quarter said they depended upon public assistance programs.

While some in the press have blamed "systemic racism" as the motive behind the closures, the closures represent an attack against the entire working class within the school system that will affect students, teachers and school workers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. According to the district's 2021 Audit, 79.2 percent of the student population comes from "relatively low-income households" and are "economically disadvantaged." The US Census Bureau estimates that 17.5 percent of the population falls below the federal poverty line.

The closures in Jefferson Parish can only be understood as part of a broader, decades-long attack against public education by the ruling financial elite, not only nationally but internationally. This attack has undergone a rapid escalation amid the global financial crisis triggered by the ruling elites' disastrous handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Politicians in both capitalist parties claim there is not enough money to fully fund education, to end the pandemic, or to maintain social benefits such as Medicare while they collaborate to pass the largest military budget in history at 1 trillion dollars.

Last year, districts both large and small across the US began to implement massive budget cuts, citing declining enrollment and anticipated funding cliffs once federal

pandemic relief funding expires. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, "Declines in student enrollment before the pandemic were always a self-fulfilling prophecy. The gutting of public schools led to lower enrollment, which in turn was used to carry out further cuts and promote charters, school vouchers and other 'school choice.'"

On top of slashing school budgets, states across the US are aggressively expanding school voucher and "school choice" programs, which will further siphon funding away from public schools into private, charter and religious schools. Already, Arizona, Florida, Arkansas, Iowa and Utah have implemented universal school voucher programs.

Following Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans became ground-zero for school privatization efforts, when politicians and businesses interests seized upon the crisis and converted the district into the US's first all-charter school district. Charter schools have since expanded into Jefferson Parish over the last ten years and are increasingly sopping up the district's resources. According to the district's budget from last summer, between 2012 and 2023 "Payments to Other LEAs (Local Education Agencies)", i.e., charter organizations, ballooned from \$1.2 million to over \$90 million, nearly 16 percent of total expenditures.

Instead of mobilizing its membership to fight the school closures, the local union is going along with the plan. Sandra Hauer, Interim President of the Jefferson Parish Federation of Teachers, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, told local news that the organization would be "working with HR to help teachers through this transition." She even stated that the consolidations "could possibly help with the region's teacher shortage."

To actually address the nationwide teacher shortage and to fully fund all public schools, including desperately needed infrastructural upgrades, requires that society's resources actually be allocated to meet social needs instead of being squandered on war and profit interests of the ruling financial oligarchy.



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