

In midst of lethal disease outbreak, nurses, paraprofessionals, counselors on the chopping block in Detroit Public Schools

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We want to hear from you. If you have information about a school outbreak, or are ready to get involved in our fight for safe schools, contact the WSWs now! Fill out the form at the end of this article, or write to educators@wsws.org. We will protect your anonymity.

Last week, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) announced increased layoffs for the school year 2023-24.

Included in these cuts will be the elimination of contracted nurses, according to a May 3 special School Board meeting. This is under conditions of a disease outbreak among DPSCD students, which took the life of Marcus Garvey Academy student Jimari Williams, 6, on April 26. The illness sweeping the DPSCD school and another outbreak reported as hand, foot and mouth disease at a nearby day care center has hospitalized several and sickened at least 25 children in total.

While Jimari Williams' cause of death has not been publicly revealed, COVID continues to spread. An estimated 96 percent of school children have contracted it, placing students at increased risk for many other diseases and conditions. Additionally, Detroit teachers report that Long COVID is having a widespread impact among students.

Despite this urgent necessity for medical staff in schools, contracted nurses are on the chopping block. Michigan is one of a few US states that does not mandate a nurse in every school.

Also slated for cuts are the jobs of about 150 educators. These include paraeducators, school culture facilitators, college transition advisors, principals, academic deans and other administrators. School Superintendent Nicolai Vitti claims that laid-off workers can apply for other positions in the district, but "might need" additional education to qualify. He blithely remarked, "There is no reason why any individual in those three groups would not be employed next year."

The May 3 School Board meeting provided a Power Point

presentation by the district implying an inevitable "Sophie's Choice," pitting worker against worker for jobs. The charts depicted a series of possible tradeoffs: for example, retaining all paraeducators by eliminating 40 attendance agents, or funding school nurses but eliminating all attendance agents and re-occurring districtwide salary increases, and so on. Superintendent Vitti's proposal to save attendance officers and sacrifice the others is motivated by the fact that attendance determines the school's state funding grant.

Vitti explained that the Orwellian-named "culture facilitators" were hired to run in-school suspensions, but due to massive teacher shortages many serve as substitutes. He suggested that teachers should in the future use their preparation time to run in-school suspension.

Other charts detailed plans to shift all master teachers into full-time classrooms, increasing their workload and curtailing professional assistance to newer teachers. The plan also calls for ending the award-winning expanded summer school and after-school programs, which served thousands of students, offering athletics, STEM enrichment, classes in cooking and other interests.

Vitti tried to justify the cuts by citing budgetary pressures. "Inflation continues to be over 8 percent in the aggregate," he said, "with categories like natural gas at 200 percent." He also cited the ongoing population decline in the city and state, the rising costs of contract vendors and health care, and the aging workforce in the district. What Vitti did not explain is why, in the face of these cost increases, more money is not allocated to educate the children of Detroit, instead of being doled out to corporate billionaires in the form of tax rebates.

What is behind the claim that schools cannot be fully funded?

The Democratic Party, which currently controls every level of government, from the local School Board to the state and federal government, is funneling society's resources to military spending and bank bailouts. In March, Biden

unveiled a record-setting \$1 trillion military budget for 2024. A few days later, he told Silicon Valley Bank millionaires and Wall Street more broadly that the Biden administration would do “whatever is needed” to provide federal funding to insure the wealth of big investors, speculators and corporate executives, without regard to Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation limits and at taxpayer expense. All of these measures are receiving bipartisan support.

In other words, there is no lack of resources, but they are being appropriated for the most malign and destructive purposes.

In contrast to the lavish funding of US wars, Biden’s 2024 education budget is scaled back even from last year’s. He long ago broke his promise to triple funding for high-poverty schools systems like Detroit’s, and to fully fund special education. Federal support for special education, a particularly urgent matter, will at best cover only 13 percent of costs, far short of the congressionally mandated 40 percent. Biden’s proposals, which will be further watered-down in discussions with his fascistic Republican “colleagues,” will translate into tens of thousands of layoffs and the further gutting of public education.

On the state level, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s recent budget allocates a below-inflation increase for public schools of 4 percent, an amount that will fuel cuts not just in Detroit but statewide.

Far from challenging the cuts, the Detroit educator unions, whose contracts expire June 30, have refused to mobilize educators. Just the opposite: the Detroit Federation of Teachers hailed Vitti’s proposal to keep attendance agents as a “victory” since they are DFT members, as opposed to members of the Paraprofessionals or AFSCME unions.

The public statement on the DFT website remarks: “The district’s proposed layoffs for our Attendance Agents have been rescinded. Formal notification will be forthcoming from DPSCD. We will continue our negotiations with the District regarding the issues related to this concern and will provide it to you as it becomes available. This is a victory we are celebrating with you.”

Organizations that hail the elimination of other educators’ jobs are entirely anti-worker. They are hostile the principle that “An injury to one is an injury to all,” which animates all genuine working class struggles and working class organizations.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) as well as the National Education Association (NEA) are fully integrated with the Democratic Party and committed to shutting down strikes and rank-and-file opposition to the layoffs and budget cuts dictated by the ruling class. The pro-capitalist nature of the AFT was underscored once again by the recent betrayal of the courageous month-long University of Michigan

graduate student strike, which was isolated and stabbed in the back.

The DFT/AFT record of unending betrayals has a bitter history in Detroit, where teachers have never been made whole after decades of cuts. As the DPSCD chart shows, education staff workers in Detroit schools are scraping by with McDonald’s-level wages: \$15-\$16 an hour for paraeducators, \$17.55 for cafeteria workers, \$20 for substitutes, following decades of sellout contracts.

It is abundantly clear that the DFT, the Detroit Federation of Paraprofessionals, AFSCME, and the Detroit Association of Educational Office Employees are opposed to mounting a joint plan for strike action against these cuts or to defend any of the rights of educators and students. While the School Board offered a perfunctory moment of silence for Jimari Williams, it has done nothing to address the conditions in the schools, and the same can be said of the unions.

The tragic death of Jimari Williams underscores the fact that schools, underfunded and under-resourced, are not safe, and the essential needs of students are not being met. A massive infusion of resources must be made available to provide up-to-date COVID-safe ventilation systems in every school, and sufficient numbers of nurse and mental health staff in every building. No jobs should be cut. More staff is needed to provide a robust, challenging arts and sciences-rich education for all.

The first step is to expand the Michigan Educators Rank and File Safety Committee and take the decision-making power out of the hands of the politicians and their toadies in the union bureaucracies. Educators and parents should form rank-and-file committees at every school, linking up their struggles with workers around the world engaged in the same fight.

We must demand and fight for what is necessary, not what Wall Street claims is affordable. Contact us today.



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