

Grand Rapids school board moves to approve plan to shut down 10 public schools

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On November 13, the Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS) Board of Education in Grand Rapids, Michigan, announced a plan to consolidate schools in the district with the purported aim of increasing facility utilization to 75 percent. The plan, known by the title “Reimagine GRPS with Us” calls for shuttering ten elementary and middle schools and further displacing students at various schools by repurposing buildings.

On November 7, the public voted on a \$305 million bond for GRPS. The board’s plan is to use these funds over the next several years as part of its plan to close the ten schools beginning in 2024 and ending in 2031. As of this writing, this is what the plan looks like, by school year:

2024-2025:

- The East Leonard and Stocking elementary schools will be permanently closed, and their 302 students split up between four nearby schools.

2025-2026:

- Alger Middle School students will be permanently transferred to Ottawa Hills High School, and the building will be repurposed.
- Riverside Middle School students will be permanently moved 3 miles away to Innovation Central High School, while the building is repurposed.
- Ken-O-Sha Park students will be moved to Sherwood Park until renovation is finished on their building the next year.
- Students at the alternative high school Southeast Career Pathways, currently at a school-owned facility on Jefferson Street, will be transferred 2.4 miles away to another facility on Sigsbee Street.

2026-2027:

- Brookside Elementary School will close permanently, and its students will be sent to the renovated Alger Middle.
- Grand Rapids Montessori Academy, Montessori Middle High, and North Park Montessori will close, with all PK-12 students crammed into the Riverside campus. The first two will be permanently closed, while North Park might become a new elementary school, or a new one will be built in northeast Grand Rapids.

2027-2028:

- Palmer and Aberdeen Elementary will close permanently, their 433 students transferred to other schools. Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders at Aberdeen will be moved 3.8 miles away to Innovation Central.

2028-2029:

- All 154 Westwood Middle School students will be permanently moved to Union High School.

2029-2031:

- Mulick Park Elementary, Campus Elementary, and Ridgemoor Park Montessori will be renovated.

Although the district has not officially released figures for the schools to be closed, it is clear that thousands of students will be displaced, most of them permanently. To justify the plan, the district cites the low utilization of the buildings and “deferred maintenance costs,” i.e., maintenance that has not been done due to lack of funding. Altogether, the ten schools on the chopping block account for \$63 million in deferred maintenance.

The official language of the “Reimagine” plan on the GRPS website states, “The proposal takes actionable steps to realign programs to better meet the needs of GRPS scholars.” This verbiage is designed to conceal the fact that the shutdown of one fifth of the public schools in Grand Rapids is an attack on the rights of the working class population of the city.

The GRPS board is scheduled to vote on the “Reimagine” plan at its next meeting on Monday, December 18. Following a period of so-called “gathering community input” through online and in-person comments, the board is intending to go ahead with their original plan with minimal adjustments and modifications.

The attempt to palm off the closure of ten schools as a wonderful new beginning for “GRPS scholars” is the part of the collaboration of the school administration and members of the school board with Democrats and Republicans in Michigan who have cut public school funding and diverted government resources to private and for-profit charter schools in the state.

Grand Rapids is the home of former-Trump administration Education Secretary and billionaire Betsy DeVos, who is a leading figure in the Republican Party and advocate of charter schools. DeVos has been a key force behind the defunding of public education in Michigan and across the US and the handing of education funds over to the growing number of educational corporations.

GRPS is one of many school districts across the country that is in a deep crisis of declining enrollment and shortage of staff. At a recent meeting, Board of Education president Kimberly Williams said enrollment has gone from over 30,000 students to less than 15,000 over the past twenty years. Anya Lusk, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, told the board that the district is currently confronting 109 teacher vacancies.

The staffing crisis has reached the point where some teachers are working at more than one building in each day. The district recently began outsourcing work to virtual teachers and is in the process of doing the same with social workers.

The abysmal pay rate for GRPS teachers is a major factor in teachers leaving the school district and potential hires taking positions elsewhere. At a finance committee meeting on November 27, Anya Lusk confessed to the committee that the district currently compensates teachers in the bottom third of districts in the area.

Lusk went on to say that the Grand Rapids Education Association (GREA) educators union had submitted a request to reopen negotiations on wages. In her words, she refused this request because it was too “formal,” and she implied that no changes would be made until the current contract expires in June 2025. She concluded by claiming that that district would provide increased pay for teachers, “if we can afford it.”

Cara Williams-Gardner, a fourth-grade teacher at CA Frost Elementary and member of the GREA executive board, spoke at the December 4 Board of Education meeting. After reiterating that teachers in Grand Rapids, the second largest city in the state of Michigan, have insultingly low pay, Williams-Carter complained that the Reimagine plan devalues teachers and said, “We have remained silent too long and ask that you bargain with us in good faith to realize these goals.”

It is clear from both these statements and the GREA’s history of blocking any fight against decades of attacks on public education that teachers, staff and parents cannot put their trust in the union bureaucracy. Aside from Williams-Gardner’s complaint and a few memes posted on the union Facebook page, the GREA has not made any public statement regarding the Reimagine plan or advanced any program of struggle against it.

In contrast, the plan to close ten schools has met with public outrage. Hannah Worth, a former English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and mother of a student at Palmer, pointed to the expected impact on the refugee and immigrant students in the district.

“These children have often already experienced disruptions and interruptions in their educations when they were forced to leave their home countries,” she said to a December 4 board meeting. “Is it truly just and equitable to force them to move schools again?”

She went on, “It is with my own former students in mind, along with my son’s friend Mohammed [an Afghan refugee in his class at Palmer], and other refugee and immigrant children throughout the district that I ask you to please consider how the Reimagine proposal disproportionately affects some of the most vulnerable children and families in our community—that is, the youngest children in ESL classes throughout GRPS.

“Currently, ESL programming is only offered at 30 percent of buildings across the district, yet 60 percent of the buildings proposed for closure are schools where ESL programming exists, and 100 percent of the Northeast quadrant buildings housing ESL programming are proposed for closure.”

Another parent, crying as she spoke to the board, powerfully addressed the staffing crisis. “I will ask you to imagine with me:

What if you paid our teachers well above a livable wage? What if you asked our teachers how many hours they actually work in a week and why? ... What if you prioritized the wellbeing of these people spending their days with our children? ... What if you show our other district staff, our families, and our scholars that their teachers matter and, in turn, that scholars matter?”

She also spoke about the close relationship between her children, who are neurodivergent, and their teachers, highlighting the anger of the public for the impact of the plan on special education students.

Cut off only by the three-minute time limit, she concluded, “Passive change starts here, with you and me, with the way we view and treat our teachers. Without them, there’s no point in updating our buildings to be more safe and secure, and so on.”

At their December 11 meeting, the Board of Education also highlighted the issue of student-to-teacher ratios. GRPS currently sits at 1 to 15, but the current plan will greatly increase these ratios. The current contract limits the maximum class size by grade, with grades five through twelve able to have 30 students per class, while physical education classes can have up to 50. The smallest limit, for pre-kindergarten, is 23 students per class.

Whatever the numbers provided by the board, teachers and parents can be certain that there will be massive increases in students per class. One likely scenario will be an attempt by the district and the union to come to a rotten deal that will provide a meager pay increase in exchange for an increase in the maximum class sizes.

Teachers, staff and parents at Grand Rapids Public Schools cannot rely on the GREA leadership or the supposed goodwill of the Board of Education to halt the destruction of their schools. The present crisis in the district is not an act of nature with no origin and no solution. It is rather the product of the ongoing bipartisan attack on public education in the US. While there is supposedly no money for public education, the state can give millions to the auto companies and the federal government can burn hundreds of billions of dollars on the military and wars waged across the globe.

Teachers and workers in Grand Rapids must organize themselves independently of the union and the Board of Education to fight against this attack directed at them. It is only through the struggle of the whole working class, united across every job title and every school district, that the systematic defunding of public education can be put to an end. The first step is the formation of a committee of trusted teachers, parents and students, as part of the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee, to mobilize the widespread opposition that exists against these attacks on the rights of the working class to public education. Fill out the form below to get involved.



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