

Youngstown, Ohio public schools face closures and potential layoffs

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The Youngstown City School District (YCSD) announced January 7 that it will consolidate or eliminate five elementary schools and consider teacher layoffs. A state-authorized audit is demanding the district “rearrange” funds for the 2024-25 school year.

Historically, Youngstown was part of the “Steel Valley” with Pittsburgh, once the world’s top steel-producing region. Youngstown Sheet & Tube’s closure in 1977 began a jobs slaughter which cut some 50,000 industrial jobs in the 1980s. This was followed by the 2019 shutdown of General Motors Lordstown assembly plant, which once employed over 10,000. The region has never recovered from the job cuts.

The Ohio state government, under Republican Governor DeWine, has dramatically expanded school vouchers, further undermining funds for public education.

The Youngstown school board voted on January 2, 2024 to reassign students from Kirkmere, Volney Rogers, William H. Taft, and Paul C. Bunn Elementary School, as well as Chaney Middle School.

“Imagine 2- through 5-year-olds being on the bus an hour or more, because that’s what you’re talking about. Already underpaid teachers may now potentially lose their jobs, while elementary and preschool students now face the reality of having to travel up to an hour on the bus for school,” said Jill Cuscino, a preschool teacher, in an interview with local news station.

Youngstown Education Association (YEA) president Eric Teutsch has already made clear that the union will not oppose the reorganization. Teutsch told *The Vindicator*, “My main concern is how they intend to implement what they are trying to do, what that means for staffing and how they’re going to go about the move. Are there going to be any job cuts? I haven’t gotten any answers on any of that yet.”

The audit, conducted as a part of Ohio’s Academic Distress Commission (ADC), predicted a \$17 million deficit by 2027. In 2015, Youngstown, along with two other public school districts in northeastern Ohio, Lorain and East Cleveland, were then placed under state supervision ostensibly for “poor academic performance” and failing student test scores.

The ADC was created under Ohio’s House Bill 70, which increases state authority within designated areas. It can appoint a CEO who maintains full operational control within the district, including abolishing the teachers’ contracts, awarding large pay increases to the CEO and their “administration team,” and granting no-bid contracts without being required to answer to the school board or public.

Although the decision-making process was taken away from the appointed CEO and re-allocated to the Youngstown City School Board in 2022, the district is under the thumb of the state for “academic distress.”

This well-known playbook, utilized nationally, aims to provide state authorities political cover for massive cuts to impoverished schools.

Youngstown schoolteachers are amongst the lowest paid in Ohio and the United States. As of 2022, entry pay was \$35,360 a year; it requires eight years of seniority for an educator to make \$50,000. Those with a master’s degree received an additional measly \$2,829 annually.

Youngstown households earn less than half the national average, with poverty rates over 35 percent, according to the US Census. The devastating rate of poverty naturally corresponds with low scores on standardized tests. Canton, Ohio Board of Education member Eric Resnick called it a “perfect correspondence” between poverty and low state report card scores.

“If you look at the top five percent and the bottom five percent in the state as a whole, the bottom five percent are the high-poverty school districts and the top five percent are the very affluent school districts,” Resnick explained to Ideastream.

It is no secret that students attending school in wealthy districts with lower class sizes, more enrichments, and less stressed-out staff receive a higher quality of education while students in poverty-stricken school districts are neglected. The state of Ohio, in line with the national trend, has prioritized its handouts to big business while underfunding social programs.

The biannual education budget passed by Governor Mike DeWine in 2023 increased school funding to \$24.5 billion for public schools, which failed to keep up with inflation much less the years of budget cuts. Moreover, it including a massive \$1.5 billion for vouchers to incentivize Ohio families to send their children to privately owned schools.

In an egregious handout to the wealthy, DeWine advocated providing state funding for vouchers to those making an average household income of \$135,000 a year for a family of four. The measure, which results in lowering the enrollment in public schools, all but ensures school closures and mass layoffs across the state.

Unlike public schools, private schools are not subjected to a yearly financial audit, which results in far less control over how they are spending the voucher money provided by taxpayer dollars. Ohio has become notorious for its charter school scandals and open theft of public resources by politically connected education businesses. Other notorious cases have involved undocumented purchases and the overpayment of board members.

For its part, the Biden administration and the Democrats in both the Congress and the Senate have removed the little additional funding that schools received during the pandemic declaring that it is over, despite thousands of new daily infections. This funding is now being utilized in the \$100 billion budget to further the war in Ukraine, while another \$100 billion is being requested for the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Last August, the teacher’s union in Youngstown, the Youngstown Education Association (YEA), went on a contentious, month-long strike demanding higher pay rates and changes in the contract language that would

give teachers more say in the student’s curriculum. The strike was betrayed by the union, who termed the below-inflation 3 percent pay raise a “substantial win.”

Justifying the rotten deal, YEA spokesperson Jim Courim told The Vindicator, “There’s a pie, and we get a slice of the pie,” he said. “Would we like a bigger slice? Everybody would, but there are other priorities to meet the needs of the students, and we understand that. That’s what we just fought for for a month. We got three percent because that’s what kept everyone teaching. If we got eight percent, people would have lost their jobs.”

Youngstown teachers must draw the lessons of their experiences and organize independently of the union to defend the right to decent wages and living conditions and universal high-quality public education. Take your place within the growing struggle of educators in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committee and sign up below.



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