

Milwaukee public education under attack, with 13 schools targeted for closure

Bill Shaw

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In a further attack on public education, Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) district in Wisconsin is considering closing 13 school buildings as part of its long-range facilities master plan. The 13 buildings are located in a three-mile square area of the poorest neighborhoods of the city, with six of the buildings in the single poorest ZIP code of the city.

While avoiding any public comments on the school closing plan, the operation is largely being overseen by Democratic Mayor Cavalier Johnson and the Democratic-controlled Common Council. At a press conference in June, Johnson warned about “deep problems” in the state’s largest school district, saying they “require solutions and they require prompt solutions.”

The mayor said he was not interested in taking over the school district and had confidence in the current school superintendent and board of education officials to address the financial crisis.

The Democrats—who control the governorship and one of the two houses of the state legislature—have also reduced state aid to the Milwaukee schools by \$81 million in 2024-25. In addition, the Biden-Harris administration has allowed federal COVID school funding to expire. Wisconsin received \$2.4 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER, funding.

The Milwaukee school district used three rounds of ESSER funding—totaling \$786.42 million—to hire staff, purchase technology and textbooks and improve air quality in the classrooms. After the funding ended, the district laid off nearly 300 school workers.

MPS’s announcement is part of a nationwide assault on public education. Most recently, Seattle Public Schools (SPS) declared it will close between 17 and 21 elementary schools next year, leading to hundreds of teachers and staff being laid off. In Chicago, more than 100 schools are on the chopping block. In an email sent by Chicago Teachers Union leaders to the entire union membership on September 13, they stated, “Over 100 schools are being analyzed for possible cuts,

closures, or consolidations.”

The leaders of the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and their state and local affiliates, which are aligned with the Democratic Party, have been complicit in the school closures. Strikes, walkouts or protests have not been called, and the history of school closures—especially in Chicago, where the Democratic Party government implemented the closure of 50 schools following the CTU’s sellout of the 2012 teachers’ strike—serves as a sober lesson to educators everywhere. The fight against school closures must be taken up by educators forming rank-and-file committees to wage a struggle independently of the union bureaucracies.

The district hired Perkins Eastman—an architectural, urban design, and strategic planning firm based in New York—to draw up its school closing and merger plan.

Last week, the district held a “town hall” session at which both school officials and representatives from Perkins Eastman presided. The event was open to the public and attended by parents and teachers. The findings and recommendations of the firm were presented from a deck of 56 slides, which bore the logos of both MPS and Perkins Eastman.

The firm used a “sorting tree” strategy to apply one of seven recommendations to each building. The “closure or merger” recommendation applied to buildings with a utilization rate of less than 50 percent, with a steady or declining enrollment, and that were within one mile of another building. Presumably, redirecting students to a nearby school with capacity could enable closure of a building and realizing any associated cost savings.

One parent who attended the town hall session challenged the plan, declaring, “You’re saying, ‘merge a school, and give that one school more investment,’ versus putting investment in each and every school and community.”

It is important to note that students in the school system are not geographically bound to a particular school. Parents are permitted to send their children to any school in the entire district.

MPS is divided into eight “school board districts.” The slide deck noted that in fact, if all children in school board District 3

went to schools in that area, utilization would be over 100 percent. Actual utilization is only in the 50-75 percent range because parents in District 3 have been sending their children to schools in other districts.

The reasons parents choose not to send their children to local schools is primarily twofold. First, as stated by the presentation slides, certain specialty programs such as advanced placement, international baccalaureate, dual enrollment, and English as a second language, do not exist in some school board areas.

Typically, the schools with the fewest specialty programs are underutilized. Schools in District 3 in particular as a whole have among the lowest number of specialty programs.

The second reason parents send children outside their district is the differential in academic performance between their neighborhood schools and more distant ones. This factor is largely ignored by reporting on the proposed closures to date.

These gross disparities in specialty programs and academic performance follow the relative wealth of the neighborhoods in which the schools exist. Besides the lack of specialty programs, District 3 also exists in poorer neighborhoods with traditionally underperforming schools. By contrast, wealthier areas in central and southern Milwaukee have higher academic performance and higher numbers of specialty programs.

The targeting of schools in ZIP code 53206 is not new. In March, the school system announced that it had terminated four trauma counselors from schools located there. This action took place just weeks after voters approved a referendum to increase funding to Milwaukee Public Schools by \$252 million.

Another factor impacting the school system is that Wisconsin has a voucher program that enables parents with incomes up to pre-specified limits to send their children to private schools. Just over half of all students eligible for public education in MPS attend. The large remainder of students are using vouchers to attend private schools, who receive a per-student payment from the state government.

The net effect, ignored by nearly all reporting to date, is that historic underinvestment in public schools in areas of high poverty have been driving children out of those schools. This creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby lower utilization of these schools is then in turn used as a tool to further starve them of resources and even bludgeon them out of existence.

Teachers attending the town hall session condemned the proposed school closures.

One teacher said, “You’re ripping the carpet out from some of our underserved, highly trauma-informed students. Where are (those kids) going to go, if their one source of stability is gone? How is that really going to help them?”

Another teacher in only her second year with MPS, said, “At the school where I’m at now, we don’t really offer any extracurriculars,” the teacher said. “The attendance rate is very low here, as well, and I think that is a viable reason why.”

The hostile attitude of the ruling class toward MPS was exemplified by John Schlifske, the CEO of financial firm

Northwestern Mutual, in a scathing editorial in the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* in July. This representative of parasitic financial capital lambasted MPS and recommended wresting the limited governance and control from elected school board members and putting it in the hands of the city’s mayor. Tellingly, he failed to recommend additional public investment in public education or returning investment from private education back to the public schools.

The president of the Milwaukee Teachers Education Association (MTEA), Ingrid Walker-Henry, unsurprisingly promoted identity politics rather than addressing the class issues at the core of the situation, stating, “As you can see from that list, closures are overwhelmingly in black communities...” While there are undoubtedly racial disparities, the fundamental issue here is class and the right to high-quality public education for all.

Absent from Walker-Henry’s remarks or any statements from the MTEA was any call for teachers, parents, or workers more generally to organize and struggle against the ruling class and its deprivation of the right to quality education. The rich hoard the world’s wealth while the government allocates nearly unlimited funds for war and genocide. Meanwhile, students are left with school closures, teacher shortages, and crumbling school infrastructure.

Milwaukee teachers have a proud history of struggle in defense of public education. Hundreds of city teachers carried out sickouts and protests at the state capitol in 2011, sparking the massive statewide demonstrations against Republican Governor Scott Walker, who rolled back collective bargaining rights, slashed workers’ pay and cut state aid to education by 9 percent.

But that and other struggles since prove that the working class cannot defend the right to quality public education through appeals to the two corporate-controlled political parties and the limits set by the trade union bureaucracy. Educators must look to themselves and develop rank-and-file committees to fight school closures and layoffs.



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