

# Detroit Federation of Teachers pushes through contract, as school closures, austerity continue

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Detroit Federation of Teachers members have voted to ratify a tentative two-year agreement with Detroit Public Schools Community District covering the 2026–2028 school years. The agreement is being presented by union officials as a major step forward. Reported “highlights” include a top teacher salary of \$100,100 by 2027–28, continued special education bonuses, new compensation for general education teachers serving some students with disabilities and expanded due process protections.

But the contract cannot be judged by its headline figures alone. It was negotiated inside a district budget framework that includes school closures, staffing shortages, reliance on non-pensionable bonuses and a new operating millage campaign. Taken together, these facts point not to a reversal of austerity but to its continuation.

The clearest expression of this came from Superintendent Nikolai Vitti himself. At a May board meeting, Vitti explained that the district accelerated the phase-out of Ann Arbor Trail, J.E. Clark, Catherine Blackwell, and Greenfield Union because of budget pressures, inflation, federal uncertainty and the need to offset wage increases in the next contract.

“We have a new set of contracts that we have to negotiate with all of our unions starting next year,” said Vitti. “So, with that in mind, the board did approve the acceleration of those phase-out schools so that we could generate more revenue to address the need to increase salaries once again.”

This is the basic contradiction behind the tentative agreement. The district is offering limited raises while closing schools. It is maintaining special education bonuses while disrupting school communities that

include exceptional-needs students. It is announcing compensation for general education teachers serving students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), emotional impairment (EI), and cross-categorical eligibility while leaving the underlying staffing crisis unresolved.

Detroit schools are placing students with significant needs into general education settings without sufficient specialized staffing. Rather than solving that crisis by hiring the special education teachers, paraprofessionals, interventionists, and mental health professionals students need, the agreement compensates existing teachers for absorbing more work.

A substantial share of the new compensation is structured as bonuses rather than base-pay increases. Bonuses may provide immediate relief, but they do not rebuild the salary schedule, do not repair years of wage suppression and do not count toward pensions in the way base pay does.

For veteran educators, the reported \$100,100 top salary is not a historic breakthrough. It is a delayed and partial recovery from nearly two decades of concessions. Under Emergency Manager Robert Bobb in 2009, Detroit teachers accepted wage freezes, minimal raises and deferred pay. In 2011, Emergency Manager Roy Roberts imposed a 10 percent wage cut and shifted more healthcare costs onto employees. In 2012, Roberts imposed a new contract directly, without a membership vote. Every subsequent contract has been measured against a baseline already lowered by emergency management, wage cuts, step freezes, healthcare concessions and inflation.

Teachers have already begun drawing this conclusion themselves. On social media, educators have calculated

what the raises mean per pay period after taxes, healthcare costs and rising living expenses. Others have pointed to the lack of clarity around future healthcare costs and the rushed character of the vote. One teacher described the process as “sneaky,” citing the virtual meeting, the limited review period and difficulty even obtaining the tentative agreement before voting no.

The district justifies school closures by citing “underutilization.” But empty desks could be used to reduce class sizes, expand special education services, create smaller learning environments, and stabilize schools in communities battered by decades of closures. Instead, it is treated as a fiscal justification for eliminating buildings and concentrating students elsewhere.

The DFT did not mobilize teachers against this framework. At its May 14 membership meeting, held two days after the board meeting where Vitti defended the district’s closure policy, union officials did not organize a strike authorization vote, did not poll educators on non-negotiable demands and did not make the closures a central issue. Instead, Vitti was given the floor to promote Proposal S, the August 4 operating millage.

Proposal S asks Detroit voters to approve an 18-mill operating levy on non-homestead property, including businesses, commercial property, rental property and second homes. Homeowners who occupy their homes would not receive the bill directly. But renters can still bear the cost indirectly, as landlords pass expenses through higher rents. In a majority-renter city, this is not a minor point. A tax formally levied on property owners can still become a burden on working class tenants.

The millage campaign also creates a political trap. By settling before the August vote, the DFT helps the district present labor peace as proof of fiscal responsibility. Any strike action between the contract deadline and the millage vote could then be framed as an attack on a financially stressed school district seeking voter support.

The claim that there is “no money” for Detroit schools must be rejected. In 2017, public education tax revenues were cleared for use in subsidizing Little Caesars Arena. The Downtown Development Authority is projected to capture hundreds of millions in school property tax revenue through 2051. Dan Gilbert’s

Bedrock received a \$618 million transformational brownfield package, part of an “up to \$1 billion” tax-capture mechanism created under the so-called Gilbert bills, and later obtained a \$60 million tax abatement for the Hudson’s site. At the state level, more than \$9.5 billion in School Aid Fund dollars have been diverted away from K-12 education and into postsecondary budgets over the past 15 years.

Detroit is not an isolated case. More than half of the nation’s 50 largest school districts are cutting budgets, preparing cuts or facing reported deficits. In virtually every major urban district, this austerity is being carried out under Democratic Party administrations, while the bureaucrats in the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association work to contain opposition through rushed settlements, often followed immediately by budget cuts.

Teachers need a different strategy. Every DPSCD building should begin forming rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by educators and school workers and independent of the DFT apparatus. These committees should link up with educators in Ann Arbor, Pontiac and across Michigan to prepare a common fight.

The demands should be clear: Halt all school closures; make educators whole for decades of concessions; fully fund special education, mental health services and English-learner support; convert bonuses into pensionable base pay; open all future negotiations to rank-and-file scrutiny; and hold a genuine strike authorization vote before any new settlement is accepted.

The resources exist. The issue is who controls them: educators, students and working class communities, or the corporate developers, bondholders, landlords and political officials who have looted public education for decades.



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