

# Detroit Public Schools financial manager dismisses pleas at public meeting

Our reporters  
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At a public meeting on Thursday, students, parents and community members urged Robert Bobb, the emergency financial manager of the Detroit Public Schools, to reverse the decision to remove the principal, Rebecca Luna, from Western International High School in southwest Detroit. The pleas fell on deaf ears.

Luna has been fired as part of the implementation of massive cuts in the Detroit public school system. Bobb recently announced that 29 schools will be closed this year and another 20 next year—eliminating one quarter of existing schools. At least 900 teachers and staff will lose their jobs. Many teachers have already received layoff notices, including several at Western International.

Some 33 principals will be fired, apparently based on Annual Yearly Performance (AYP) results, which are largely derived from testing. The firing of the principals has produced intense opposition at some schools.

Last month, students at Western International and Kettering on the east side of Detroit walked out to protest the decisions (See, Detroit students demonstrate against school restructuring). Bobb will address a public meeting at Kettering Wednesday morning.

The cuts and restructuring are being pushed by the Obama administration, which is conditioning the provision of federal funds on their implementation.

At the meeting on Thursday, parents, community members and students outlined reasons for opposing the removal of Luna. They cited her close personal relationship with the students and her success in improving graduation rates and test scores. Many complained bitterly that the decision was made without any input from those affected.

Other parents complained that the meeting had not

been properly advertised and that many people did not know about it.

Jane, a resident of southwest Detroit, said she was “appalled at how this went about without representation.” The closing of schools would devastate communities, she said. “Schools can’t be successful if they are overcrowded and are not given proper tools.”

Gloria, a parent, noted that the school’s budget was cut by 75 percent last November. “How do you expect us to run the school without adequate funds?”

Another parent explained that the decision to close schools in the area would make conditions at Western more difficult, because the number of students attending would increase significantly, thereby pushing up class sizes. “None of us have a voice in the future of our children,” the parent complained.

Students at the meeting made emotional appeals for the decision to be reversed, with one breaking down in tears.

Luis, a junior, said: “We feel empty without her. ... This community had no input on this decision.”

Rebeca said, “Unfortunately, representatives have stood in front of us before, like now, and have told us our principal, teachers and administration have failed us. But you must not be referring to Western, because Mrs. Luna as well as our staff has certainly not.”

Bobb—who arrived to the meeting half an hour late—listened without comment to the statements. At the end of the meeting, he spoke for about five minutes, saying that it was a “difficult decision,” but, “This school will have a new principal in the fall.”

“You don’t want me to come here and just tell you what you want to hear,” Bobb declared. He said that Luna would be given a “broader role” in the Detroit public school system, without specifying what this would be. He did not say explicitly why the decision

was made, but referred at one point to AYP scores.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to many of those attending. Supporters of Socialist Equality Party candidate for Detroit mayor, D'Artagnan Collier, distributed copies of a statement opposing the school closures and budget cuts. (See, "Defend Education! Stop the shutdown of Detroit" [PDF])

Maribel Hernandez, a parent living in southwest Detroit, spoke to the WSWS before the meeting. She came to oppose the firings and school closures. "We really need education," she said. "There is nothing in Detroit. There are so many students in the classroom. Teachers don't have the time they need to help children."

She continued, "Bobb just made the decision to remove the principals. He gave no information or anything. No consultation. We have the right to know. We are not going to let this happen without a fight."

Louie, a small business owner in the neighborhood, said he also opposed the firing of Luna. "Bobb has been canceling meetings and avoiding direct questions. He is always going the other way around to avoid it."

Louie spoke about the broader economic crisis in the southwestern Detroit community. "I came from Yugoslavia to Detroit, and I have seen it get worse. We got killed when the Cadillac Fleetwood plant closed in 1987. I had 17 employees and I went down to 3. I suffered big time. Now the depression is hitting the suburbs too. If GM and Chrysler are liquidated, millions of jobs will be affected."

Speaking of Yugoslavia, Louie said, "Where I came from education was free. Everything was paid for—books, everything. It didn't cost you a dime. Here, can my son go to Harvard or Yale or Princeton? No, you are not going there."

Louie gave vent to widespread hostility to the bank bailouts even as social services are cut. "Wall Street does not pay taxes—they know how to beat the system. The banks aren't loaning any money. How do the banks survive? Asking money from the government."

Following the meeting, Louie said he was not impressed by Bobb's statements. "See, just as I told you—no answers!"

A Western International High School teacher with 34 years in the Detroit schools explained before the meeting: "I went to school here. I know this area well.

We are graduating 306 students this year, a big improvement. We work like dogs to keep our community educated."

She denounced the role of Bobb and the Detroit Public Schools administration. "They just want to control everything. I think Bobb was told to go in and do a job and not say anything."

She pointed to the stressful conditions under which Detroit teachers work. "We have class sizes of 35 compared to 25 in Troy, where my son attends school. They complain about how much Detroit teachers make." Everything considered, she said, "We don't make that much."



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