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“Oversized classes in middle school and high school must be addressed”: Detroit teacher speaks out as contract expires

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As the June 30, 2024 contract deadline approaches for the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), an educator spoke with the WSWS about conditions in the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and the issues that must be addressed in a new contract.

Detroit schools have been subjected to years of brutal budget cuts, emergency managers and privatization. In 2009, the Obama administration named Detroit the “epicenter” of school reform; since then fully half of Detroit students have been shunted to predominantly for-profit charter operations.

While the automakers that dominate Detroit are posting massive profits, public education is increasingly under unrelenting attack. The gross profit for General Motors’ most recent quarter ending March 31, 2024 was a massive \$5.912 billion, a 15.33 percent increase year over year. These astounding profits directly enrich hedge funds and millionaire investors but never find their way into public services such as education.

The Biden administration, which is funneling more than \$1 trillion to the military to fund a vast expansion of US wars of aggression, has allowed the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) to expire this fall. This loss of funding nationwide is plunging schools across the country into budgetary crisis, mass layoffs and school closures.

A Detroit teacher, Beatrice, reviewed how budget cuts to Detroit schools have led to a growth in class sizes. She referred to the well-known harm of large class sizes: “In the 2020-21 school year, my first year of teaching, we had 20 students per class due to COVID restrictions. In 2021-22, that increased to 28 per class. Once the COVID restrictions ended, the class sizes increased to 32-40 students per class.

“At the end of the 2023-24 school year, my middle school had 39 or 40 kids in each of the four 6th-grade class sections.”

The long-term effect of overcrowded classrooms has been understood for decades. Reducing class sizes is the number one measure schools can take to increase learning. In 1979, one of the earliest and most influential meta-studies on the issue demonstrated that learning increased progressively as class size became smaller than 15. Following up, the Tennessee STAR study showed that small class sizes were even more important in poorer communities like Detroit. It found that students assigned to smaller classes were more likely to graduate in four years, more likely to go to college, and more likely to get a degree in a STEM field. The positive effect was twice as large for poor and minority students and thus narrowed the achievement gap.

Not only are these academic needs of the majority of students being disregarded, Beatrice explained, but the normal problems of large class sizes are being compounded by the disproportionate number of special needs students in Detroit.

She said, “A sample class from the 2023-24 school year of 34 8th graders would have 20 students who are second language learners, five of which are non-English speaking, three students with learning disabilities (ESE), nine who had more than 40 absences in the school year, six that are on grade level, seven that are one year below grade level, and 21 who are two or more grade levels behind.”

To describe the struggles of educators under these conditions as “heroic” is almost an understatement. The terrible growth of social inequality and poverty in Detroit was dramatically exacerbated in 2009 when the Obama administration, in collusion with the automakers, halved the wages of the newly hired autoworkers, the same year that the city’s schools were made a model for privatization.

Educational conditions became so dire that in 2016 a group of Detroit Public Schools students sued the state of Michigan over the right to literacy. This resulted in a \$94

million settlement. In an obvious case of too little too late, the district is presently hiring Academic Interventionists (AIs) to assist teachers. The original case, Gary B. v. Snyder argued that rat-infested buildings lacking heat, with crumbling ceilings, mold growing in the classrooms, 10-year-old textbooks and a scarcity of permanent teachers prevented Detroit students from receiving “a basic minimum education,” and that they “thus have been deprived of access to literacy.”

Nearly 10 years later, the DPSCD superintendent, Nikolai Vitti, says the new AIs will decrease class sizes for K-4 teachers. What this really means, however, is that AIs will take breakout groups for English instruction for a brief part of the day. It is not an actual reduction in the number of students they teach each day, as Beatrice explains.

“In my middle school, ELA is divided into two 50-minute sessions. One is for teaching the curriculum and one is for small group instruction. Students are only pulled for literacy interventions during small group instruction, which can potentially reduce the class size to 25 or lower (if some are absent). However, students are not pulled during curriculum instruction. During that time the ELA teacher has class sizes of 30+ with zero support.”

Beatrice pointed out that this is not just a problem for reading teachers. “Math teachers have it worse because there are currently no math interventions being implemented at the middle school level that I am aware of. So they do their curriculum instruction and small group instruction with the same class sizes and no groups being pulled for intervention. While the skills learned in K-4 build the foundation for future learning, the skills acquired in middle school and high school are just as important to prepare students to be successful in college and their future careers.”

The DPSCD teacher emphasized, “Oversized classes in middle school and high school also need to be addressed.”

Beatrice explained that a colleague who teaches English as a Second Language (ESL), told her that her roster of students had been increased by 10 in 2024. She told her that this was a great deal of additional work, for which she received no extra compensation.

During the most recent Detroit school board meeting, one teacher told the meeting that teachers in the city have fallen behind inflation for decades. She cited a recent pay study, saying, “If our compensation matched inflation since 1999, according to the study, we would be receiving \$80,000 a year and higher.”

Speaking to the WSWS, Beatrice explained further what many teachers are discussing, “The study came out in April and is from Michigan State University researchers. They explain that Michigan teacher salaries would have been \$81,703 in 2021-22. Our salaries have not kept up with

inflation since 1999. Michigan teachers’ pay went down over 20 percent [compared with inflation since that time],” she said.

She also said the study shows that “Michigan is 39th among the 50 states plus Washington D.C. in terms of starting teacher salaries. Michigan teachers also have the lowest starting salaries among the Great Lakes States.” Not only are teachers incensed at surviving on less and less, but Michigan residents are overwhelmingly in favor of substantial pay increases for their children’s educators. She pointed to a poll of Michigan residents, showing 76 percent calling for increasing starting pay.

Beatrice said the needs of immigrant youth and their families were urgent: “We are seeing a rapid increase of multi-lingual learners in the classroom. My middle school had nearly 100 newcomers enroll since January 2024. I agree that more interventionists are needed. I believe the district needs to do more to attract teachers to this area of high need.

“ELL [English Language Learners] staff should be incentivized the same way ESE [Exceptional Student Education] teachers have been the past several years (with bonuses). If the district fails to attract teachers to this area, it will likely have future negative consequences as these students have a right to an education. We have a lawful duty to provide accommodations for them. I also agree that the option for a more sheltered learning environment for newcomers would be helpful, however, it’s important to remember that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for newcomers, and the needs of each newcomer should be determined on an individual basis. This further displays the need for qualified staff in this area.”



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