

Emergency manager announces school closure in Highland Park, Michigan

By Shannon Jones
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Parents and staff at Barber Focus School for children in grades K-8 learned Monday that their school, one of only three public schools remaining in Highland Park, Michigan, will close in one week and merge with Henry Ford Academy. The announcement came only hours after the installation of Jack Martin as emergency financial manager of the Highland Park Schools by Governor Rick Snyder.

Students from Barber will be transported to Henry Ford via shuttle bus. The fate of after-school programs remains uncertain.

Highland Park is the second Michigan school district after Detroit to be run by an emergency manager. There have been suggestions that it may eventually be shut down altogether or merged with another district.

Martin, former Chief Financial Officer of the US Department of Education under the Bush administration, showed his contempt for parents and staff by arriving one hour late for the meeting. The meeting was called at the last minute and was only attended by several dozen parents and staff members.

Those attending the meeting reacted angrily to the announcement. One parent asked heatedly, "Do we have any say on this? This feels like oppression. This is unbelievable." Another parent remarked, "You're opening up again an attack on the public school system from the charter area by closing this school down." Several parents said they would take their children out of the Highland Park schools if Barber closes.

Highland Park schools face a cumulative \$11.3 million deficit that continues to grow. As schools have been closed and staff cut, enrollment has dropped precipitously, falling from 3,179 in 2006 to an estimated 969 currently.

The closure of Barber will further devastate Highland Park, one of the poorest cities in Michigan. More than

50 percent of its citizens had incomes below the poverty line in 2009. Last fall, gas and electric monopoly DTE Energy repossessed streetlights in the city for unpaid bills.

Martin, appointed by Snyder to run the Highland Park schools, is also a member of the financial review board examining the books of Detroit to determine if that city should be placed under an emergency manager. He is a supporter of charter schools and served as executive vice president in 2006-2007 of White Hat Management, a scandal-ridden for-profit company that runs charter schools in Ohio. A state report revealed that White Hat schools were often housed in strip malls and included no extracurricular activities such as music, art or sports and often lacked cafeterias.

Martin's appointment is part of an effort, by both Democrats and Republicans, to force the working class throughout the Detroit area and across the state to force workers to pay for the economic crisis through the destruction of jobs, wages and social services.

Beverly Sanders spoke to the WSWS before the meeting at Barber. Her child is in preschool had to attend a combined class. This meant the teacher he was used to is gone. "I have an eighth-grader who has special needs. His teacher was removed and he had to readjust. I am just one parent but I had two children who had to readjust for something they had nothing to do with.

"I just heard about the baseball player getting \$214 million. I said to myself, 'are you serious? You are telling me that there is no money for the education for these kids? These kids are our future, yet they are saying they don't have money to keep the schools open?' Money is coming from somewhere. But, what is that saying? That maybe our kids aren't important.

“We were taught that education is the passport to the future. But if education is lacking, if there are no teachers ... it’s bad enough the kids have to endure larger classroom sizes.

“I just want my kids to be educated, period.”

Lamar Gray is a student at Wayne County Community College and a former student at Barber. He has a sister that goes to the school and often comes back to see former teachers.

“Kids need an education. If you can’t get an education in your own community, then something is wrong. I’m mad and I feel a lot of people are mad about what is happening here.”

When asked about the emergency manager, Lamar said, “I don’t think they need one. I think people should be able to pull together. There are strong minds from here. There are famous people who went to school here. I’m sure this isn’t the first time they were almost out of money, so just to say that they are going to have someone else manage your money is to say that what they have been doing all this time is wrong.

“I heard they want to bring in charters. It will benefit the private companies but not the students of people in the community. People can’t just pick up and leave. If you move schools out of the neighborhood you are basically telling people to move out of the neighborhood. So what are they saying—you have to move?”

“It starts off small and later escalates. It turns into a set of dominos; you knock one down and all the other ones start to fall.”

Eleanor Blackwell, who directs after school programs at Barber, told the WSWS, “We are in the inner city, and we don’t need any more cuts. We need additional funding for our children.

“Some of the kids we are serving don’t have the resources from home. We’ve got a couple of our kids who are homeless. We have some students who don’t have bus transportation. They are facing parents who have economic problems. And we are trying to help those kids as much as we can. Sometimes we provide coats for them. A lot of our kids are coming in without the necessary clothing. Their parents are thinking about how they can survive. Making sure the kids have enough food to eat; have heat.”

Sherry Sawyer is a parent with two children at Barber and two at Highland Park High School. She said, “We

don’t want our schools to close. They need to put more money into the schools. If they close our schools, our kids will have to get adjusted to other new teachers and they don’t want that. They are happy and comfortable here. Highland Park schools have been here too long for them to come in and close them.”

Valecia Ashford, a kindergarten teacher at Barber, said, “We haven’t had a raise in 8-10 years. The teachers have made a lot of concessions. We still don’t have a contract. There are a lot of scary moments because we know that this emergency manager has all the power, he can do anything.

“Our first priority is the students. But we have to look at our own livelihoods. He could come in with our insurance and say instead of 80/20 we are going to do a 50/50. We don’t know.

“The parents are really nervous wrecks. I have a strong parent base. I have the best parents that I have had in a long time. The kids come up to me crying, ‘is our school going to close?’

“I lived here for 55 years up until about 3 years ago. I was here in the heyday of Highland Park. I have always spent thousands of dollars on school supplies. We do what we must to educate the kids.

“My first concern is with the students because when the Career Academy closed they pulled the rug out from under the students. It was for at-risk kids—like alternative education. It was a real life and death situation literally for a lot of them because many of them had been incarcerated. The attachment we had with the kids was unbelievable. And then they just shut it down. And so some of them are incarcerated, some of them are dead.”

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