

Closure of Detroit's Marygrove College will worsen teacher shortage crisis

By Walter Gilberti
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Marygrove College, a private Catholic college in Detroit which primarily offers advanced teacher training, has announced that it will terminate all graduate programs by this coming December. The school had offered unique Master of Arts programs with concentrations in autism spectrum disorders, curriculum assessment, and reading and literacy K-6.

Two years ago, the school ended its undergraduate programs. Officials have cited lack of enrollment as the reason for the closure. Founded in 1905 by the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters in Monroe, Michigan, the school moved to its current 53-acre Detroit location in 1927.

At present, 300 students and 50 faculty and staff will be affected by the closure. A spokesman for the school is claiming the fall semester will be devoted to placing students at other schools so they can complete their education.

The announcement comes as education departments at universities in Michigan and across the country are shrinking. Fewer students are opting for education as a career, and a high percentage of those who become teachers leave the profession within three years.

An article in the July edition of *Education Week* cites a recent study in which researchers describe the “leaky pipeline” for prospective teachers in college. The article explains, “More than 41 percent of new graduates in the study reported that they had at least considered teaching as a career in college, but less than 17 percent actually ended up in the classroom a year later.”

The article cites low starting salaries as a disincentive for graduating students. However, other factors would most certainly include the increasingly oppressive conditions generated by decades of budget cuts, along with the obsessive concentration on standardized testing and other punitive schemes used to scapegoat teachers for educational problems stemming from poverty and underfunded schools.

As bad as things are generally, Michigan stands out, with the number of students entering the field dropping by a staggering 66 percent between 2008-09 and 2015-16. Michigan has endured the steepest decline in education funding in the nation since the financial crash of 2008. The state ranks 43rd in student-teacher ratio and 45th in its support for higher

education.

The current Michigan governor, Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat and the darling of the American Federation of Teachers' Michigan affiliate as well the Michigan Education Association, has already distinguished herself by pressing for the closure of the Benton Harbor schools, located in one of the poorest cities in Michigan.

Whitmer, with encouragement from the AFT, is also campaigning for the passage of a regressive gas tax that would ostensibly be used to bolster declining school funding, as well as the repair of Michigan's disgraceful roads and infrastructure. Meanwhile, companies like General Motors and Ford, which are wiping out tens of thousands of jobs, continue to get massive state and federal tax cuts.

The proposed state gas tax, “a great step in the right direction” according to AFT-Michigan President David Hecker, will further undermine the living conditions of the working class, already saddled with declining wages and benefits.

Ironically, Marygrove marked its peak enrollment as recently as 2013, with 1,850 graduate and undergraduate students in attendance. So what has happened in the intervening six years is indicative of a deep systemic crisis in education, in which a constituency among the ruling elite for the education of the vast majority of working class children simply no longer exists. Public education is being dismantled by a capitalist class that rejects wholesale the once widely held notion that a high quality, free and public education could be the “great equalizer,” lifting ordinary people out of poverty and ignorance.

As if to place a punctuation mark on their attitude, it was announced this week that Detroit's Charles F. Kettering High School has been bought by Dakkota Integrated Systems, and will be transformed into a parts plant supplying Fiat-Chrysler's Toledo Jeep facility.

Kettering High School was once a flagship school on Detroit's working class east side. Named after the famous automotive engineer, it opened in 1965 to educate the sons and daughters of auto workers. However, the wave of deindustrialization during the late 1970s and 1980s devastated the neighborhoods around the school, and it was shuttered in

2012.

Dakkota bought the building for a song, a mere \$2.6 million. Naturally the company is asking for a 10-year tax abatement, which they will no doubt be granted.

Meanwhile, the closing of Marygrove is being touted as a beginning for the implementation of a new education model for the 21st century. Thus far the great beneficiary for the decades-long spate of parochial school closures in Detroit has been the charter schools that have leased many of these shuttered properties. Whether this will become the ultimate fate of Marygrove remains to be seen.

At present, however, it appears that the Detroit Public School Community District, with the help of the Kresge Foundation, has stepped in to fill the breach. The DPSCD is the greatly reduced post-bankruptcy manifestation of the former Detroit Public Schools district (DPS) that in recent decades had been intentionally destroyed by a succession of Republican and Democratic state administrations dedicated to the spread of for-profit charter schools. Since 2009, a series of state-appointed hatchet men, the so-called “emergency managers,” have wreaked havoc on Detroit’s public schools, with massive school closings and the destruction of jobs.

Representatives of both Marygrove and DPSCD are claiming that the campus will remain an “education center,” with a new K–12 school, a preschool and a teacher education program, modeled, according to its advocates, after hospital residency programs. The project is being called the “cradle to career” approach to education.

According to DPSCD Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, this so-called “P-20” partnership, backed by \$50 million from the Kresge Foundation, will “Revive the spirit of the Marygrove campus while creating multiple pipelines of talent for all DPSCD schools.”

Kresge Foundation President Rip Rapson intoned, “This new 21st century education model promises to not only produce high achieving and community-minded students, but also to invigorate a renewed faith and interest in the community, which is integral to Detroit’s inclusive recovery.”

But what is this “21st century model” they are so glibly advocating? The DPSCD is currently plagued by crumbling infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and an endemic teacher shortage. Teachers are underpaid and overworked, and under constant scrutiny and pressure to elevate standardized test scores. In addition, the state of Michigan is in the process of relaxing its requirements for substitute teachers, many of whom are already minimally qualified, and are occupying permanent positions in the city’s public schools.

Thus it is unclear how a teacher education initiative supposedly modeled after residency programs at major hospitals would adequately train teachers. According to a Marygrove College spokesperson, the education department at the University of Michigan will be supplying graduates for this teacher training program.

But questions remain. A doctor in residence has completed all the requirements for being a full-fledged and licensed physician. According to the plan outlined by Superintendent Vitti, who would qualify for such a program? Are these young people being plugged into this program certified teachers, or is this a kind of the job training or internship? In all likelihood this is another example of lowered expectations, a scheme to fill the classrooms with underpaid and semi-qualified teachers who will abandon the profession at the first opportunity.

How will students be selected to attend this new school? Who will be excluded? None of this is clear. And finally, with US Education Secretary Betsy DeVos consciously blurring the historic separation of church and state by relaxing the restriction on religious schools accessing federal funds for their operations, what will be the involvement of the Catholic Church in the new “education center” at Marygrove?

The proposed initiative to “revive the spirit” of Marygrove does not begin to adequately address the real causes for the present crisis. Interestingly, John Cavanaugh, chair of the Marygrove Board of Trustees, injected some reality into the proceedings when he commented: “Part of the longer-term arc of the story has to do with the changing rules in public school systems. ... They no longer require people to get master’s degrees, and many districts don’t pay when a teacher gets a master’s degree in terms of increasing salaries. All of this has swerved over the last decade, and you look at other programs in the country that have either closed or dramatically shrunk their traditional graduate programs in education. Ours had a good reputation, so we lasted longer than most.”

Cavanaugh’s remarks speak to the so-called residency proposal. Many older teachers are seeking advanced degrees to somehow offset the lowering of teacher salaries and benefits, even as these advanced degrees are increasingly being devalued by the political and corporate elites that are dictating educational policy. In Michigan, average teacher salaries dropped by a whopping 16 percent between fall 2009 and fall 2017! Is there any other profession whose credentials are so easily dispensed with?

Thus, under a crisis-ridden capitalist system, in which a handful of billionaire oligarchs control vast amounts of wealth, the entire system of public education, nay, education in general, is becoming largely superfluous, an impediment to the drive for profit. Better to turn schools into parts plants and low-wage sweat shops. No wonder young people are writing off becoming an educator as a career choice.

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