

Crisis in the Schools

Terry Seale
Cindy Felong

1971

The Detroit Board of Education recently found itself in the midst of one of its perennial battles for money and power. At stake this time around are the board's power and the people's education. The students and their parents are being used as pawns in a game with the state.

Troubles began when the board suddenly discovered that it was broke and had to make some budget cuts. It first planned to lay off 258 non-contract teachers but finally laid off only 192. The cutbacks infuriated students, parents and teachers. The Detroit Board of Education found itself in the middle of a school crisis larger than a mere budget deficit.

First to protest was the Detroit Federation of Teachers. The layoffs meant that contract teachers would be shifted around and classes made larger. At a union meeting there was talk of a strike, but Mary Ellen Riordan, president of the DFT, managed to cool it out. Still dissatisfied, teachers went back to work. Also unhappy were administrators and counselors who were asked to cover the classrooms of absent teachers. This comes as a result of another little known money-saver: teacher absences are not always being filled by substitute teachers, but instead by other school personnel.

While the teachers were registering their feelings, the students were organizing to demonstrate their opposition to the cutbacks. Students at Mumford presented a list of fourteen demands to the Parent-Student Council. The first was that teachers and counselors not be removed from Mumford. Other demands pertained to community control, an end to tracking and ROTC, students' right to organize, agents and cops in school, and the removal of all racist, anti-union, anti-communist or pro-war materials from the school.

On Monday, March 1, about 1,000 students at Mumford began a sit-in, which turned into a sleep-in, to enforce their demands. They stayed in the school all week; regular classes were cancelled. They joined with people from Franklin School at the Board of Education meeting on Tuesday, March 9.

At the meeting were speakers who represented several groups of parents and students. One woman who was a representative from the Franklin School Parent Board, asked that the school budget cutbacks be rescinded. Cutbacks at the Franklin School included eliminating the school library. She suggested that teachers and administrators have a payless payday in order to ease the school crisis.

George Atkins, chairman of the Citizens Action Committee of Target Area Four, presented student, teacher, parent and community demands to the board. He told the board that teacher layoffs were not acceptable. He suggested that by laying off one administrator, the money saved would salvage four teaching jobs. Atkins also demanded that the Board of Education take the lead in fighting Lansing for more funds for the Detroit school system.

Mumford and Franklin led the way for other schools. On Monday, March 8, Mackenzie was closed down. The students talked with school administrators and teachers, and they reached a tentative agreement. However, administrators later repudiated the agreement saying that it had been reached under duress because students allegedly had blocked officials from leaving the meeting. Students, parents and community representatives who had been at the meeting denied the use of coercion.

Walkouts or sit-ins followed in schools across the city including Cooley, Pershing and Henry Ford.

Last week about 450 Central High School students went to Lansing to protest directly to the legislature about the financial crisis of the Detroit public schools. The politicians listened to the students' protests. But their attempts to dump the problem back in the Board of Education's lap angered many students. The legislature has no plans to consider aid for Detroit schools' financial problems.

The Board finally went to Wayne County Circuit Court on March 12 to ask for an injunction against high school demonstrations at Mackenzie and Cooley. Judge George T. Martin "reluctantly" signed the order. A suit brought by Franklin parents against the cutbacks the same day was not so successful.

The Detroit Parent-Teachers Association has called for citywide demonstrations on March 23 to protest the board's budget cuts. Each of the city's schools is to decide its own form of picketing and boycott. The PTA also plans a march on Lansing on March 31 to support demands for more funds for Detroit public education.

Actually this is playing right into the hands of the Board. Patrick MacDonald, president of the board, and his friends want students and parents to put pressure on the state for more money for Detroit. This way the board gets more power, if more money is allocated, and yet it doesn't have to get its hands dirty in a direct confrontation with the state legislature.

The students know very well that they're the losers in this game. The cutbacks in teachers and services only makes worse the already mediocre-to-poor education they get in Detroit schools. The Black Student United Front has been actively involved in the school demonstrations since they know that black kids, in particular, will be hardest hit.

The teachers are dissatisfied. Parents are angry. Students are rebelling. There is little money. And adding to the tension are the regional boards, newly created in February. Some are beginning to take actions independent of, and sometimes in opposition to, the central board.

The Detroit Public School System—antiquated, racist, financially creaky, in a struggle to maintain its power. How long can it last???

fifth Estate

Terry Seale
Cindy Felong
Crisis in the Schools
1971

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/127-march-18-31-1971/crisis-in-the-schools>
Fifth Estate #127, March 18-31, 1971

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net