**DPS teachers at rally: Sick-outs a demand to be heard**

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*(Photo: Lori Higgins)*

Teachers whose organized sick-out shut down more than 60 Detroit schools today demanded that their voices be heard and that the district address what they've described as deplorable teaching conditions.

Their pleas at a rally today received immediate responses.

Mayor Mike Duggan said he would tour schools Tuesday to assess the condition of the buildings. And State Superintendent Brian Whiston called for health and safety issues in the district to be immediately addressed.

Still, both men called on teachers to return to the classroom. And some lawmakers decried an action that had many students missing a day of learning.

The closures affected 64 schools and 31,000 students, DPS officials said. And there were indications that more sickouts could be coming this week.

The afternoon rally — organized by a group within the Detroit Federation of Teachers called DPS Teachers Fight Back — brought a crowd of teachers and supporters to the Fisher Building in Detroit.

"Detroit kids matter," they chanted. Many in the boisterous crowd carried signs that illustrated their displeasure with the district. "Thirty-five is the speed limit, not a class size," said one. "Students support DPS teachers," said another.

Theresa Williams, a first-grade teacher at Burton International Academy, held a sign that said, "I have 39 first-graders in my classroom."

"It's quite challenging," Williams said. "You want to meet the needs of all of the children. You have to do the best you can."

The rally featured state lawmakers, members of the City Council and members of the Detroit Board of Education. Many said the conditions in the district wouldn't be tolerated in suburban communities.

"I stand with you," Councilwoman Mary Sheffield told the crowd through a bullhorn. "We can no longer be silent."

The district closed the 64 schools because more than half of the teachers in those schools called in sick. The closures represented more than half the 97 buildings in the district.

While health care and salary cuts and large class sizes are big issues for teachers, much of the attention today was on health and safety problems.

Teachers —at the rally and during an earlier news conference — described problems such as mold, leaky ceilings, busted windows, rodents, roaches, lack of heat and standing water.

Duggan issued a statement hours after the rally saying he'll visit a number of schools Tuesday along with the heads of the city health department and the city department of buildings, safety, engineering and environment.

"Based on what we find, the City of Detroit will take whatever enforcement action is necessary to make sure all Detroit Public Schools are compliant with all health and building codes," Duggan said.

**Two young sign holders demonstrate during a rally for teachers outside the Fisher Building in Detroit.** *(Photo: Lori Higgins)*

At a news conference earlier in the day, officials from the DFT called on the district to hold public hearings so teachers can air their concerns.

"The situation in the Detroit Public Schools is far worse than we ever imagined," said Ivy Bailey, the interim president of the union, who likened the conditions to what you would see in a Third World country.

"We want the teachers voices to be heard," Bailey said. "We know there's an issue with money, but you know what? We need to do something. It's time for all of us to come together."

Whiston called on the district’s leadership to set up a meeting to respond to the health and safety issues teachers are raising.

“I care deeply about the safety and well-being of teachers in Detroit, just as I do the students,” Whiston said. “They all still need to be in the classrooms teaching and learning, though. If buildings have health and safety issues, they need to be addressed immediately with the district administration and all appropriate agencies.”

DPS officials said in a statement this afternoon that the district works "every day to ensure that our school buildings are safe, clean and in good repair."

"Our operations department works very closely with all regulatory agencies to ensure we meet their guidelines," said spokeswoman Michelle Zdrodowski. "When issues are brought to our attention, we investigate and take the appropriate actions to address them in as timely a manner as possible – even in the face of the very serious budget constraints necessitated by the District’s financial crisis."

DPS emergency manager Darnell Earley said the district agreed with union leadership in December to allow DFT to send representatives into schools to have one-on-one conversations with members to understand their concerns. They also agreed to a series of joint meetings "where teachers will be given an update on the current state of DPS."

"We expect these meetings to take place in the next two weeks," Earley said.

Bailey said that while the union supports the teachers in their efforts to raise awareness of problems in the district, "I don't support the method."

The teachers have the support of Jaime Diaz-Herrera, a parent with a child at Western International High.

"We're fighting for the kids. We're fighting for their dreams."

A group of teachers called Detroit Strikes To Win met Sunday night to discuss the sick-outs and a possible district-wide strike. The group, led by ousted teacher union president Steve Conn, is upset with what they call the ruination of the school system by the state. They met again today, during which Conn described the widespread sickouts a "a huge victory."

"It's taken our movement a huge leap forward," he told the group gathered for the meeting.

Still, Conn said "full-blown strike" is needed.

The group also was critical of the DFT leadership and said the focus on health and safety issues doesn't address all of the problems in the district. The Conn group has been highly critical of Gov. Rick Snyder's plan to splinter DPS into two - one district to pay off the massive debt and the other to educate students.

"It's about saving the district. It's about saving jobs. It's about getting Earley out. It's about getting Steve his job back," said Shanta Driver of the group By Any Means Necessary. "This fight is about something."

<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2016/01/11/dps-schools-closed-sickouts/78618800/>