

Detroit teachers call in sick to protest unhealthy, crowded schools

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Western International High School teacher Debrah Baskin, 53, and other teachers from Detroit schools protest outside the Cobo Center only hours before President Barack Obama's visit to the auto show, Jan. 20, 2016. Photo: Todd McInturf/Detroit News via AP

Most of Detroit, Michigan's schools were closed Wednesday. Teachers shut down the schools by staging a sickout.

A sickout is a form of protest. It happens when many workers call in sick at the same time.

Teachers are angry about the condition of Detroit's schools. They held Wednesday's sickout to protest overcrowded classrooms and crumbling buildings. More than 85 schools had to close.

Teachers say they are sick of working in schools that are dangerous for them and their students. Classrooms are full of rats and cockroaches. There are holes in the ceilings. School buildings are often unheated even on cold days.

"It Was Time To Take A Stand"

Teachers say they do not have textbooks or other supplies they need to teach. They also have not had a raise in 10 years.

"We felt it was time to take a stand. No more, enough is enough," said teacher Marietta Elliott. Schools need to be healthy and safe, she said. Teachers need books and supplies to teach students well. They also should be paid fairly, she added.

Ann Mitchell runs a teachers group, the Detroit Federation of Teachers. She said some Detroit teachers have 45 kids in a class. A class that size is around two times the national average. It is hard for one teacher to teach that many students at the same time.

Wednesday's teacher sickout was the largest of several sickouts this month. It was the second to close most of Detroit's schools.

Teachers Want City In Charge

A group of teachers planned the protest. The group is called Detroit Public School Teachers Fight Back.

Teachers want the schools to be controlled by Detroit again. Detroit's schools have been run by outside people for the last six years.

The state government brought these outside people in. It said the move was necessary because the schools were failing.

The outside people now running Detroit's schools are known as emergency managers. A manager is someone who runs things. An emergency is something that needs to be fixed right away.

Teachers claim the emergency managers have done nothing to help.

"Things have just gone from bad to worse" for the past six years, Mitchell said. No one is paying any attention to the schools, she said.

The schools' current emergency manager is Darnell Earley.

Teachers were angered by what Earley said after a Jan. 11 sickout. Earley claimed sickouts are unfair and selfish. He said teachers are robbing students of a school day to win something for themselves.

Leaders Are Reacting

Teacher Vanessa Dawson said Earley had no right to call teachers selfish. Just look at "the condition of our schools," she said. Teachers are only trying to help.

Dawson admitted sickouts are a big step to take. However, she said things have gotten so bad that they were necessary. "Someone had to hear what we were saying."

The teachers' Jan. 11 sickout got some lawmakers to pay attention. Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan has toured several schools. He declared that conditions in some of them "break your heart."

The mayor said the city will check every school building by April. He set up a way for people to report unsafe and unhealthy conditions in schools.