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Schools too often fail when they outsource

IRIS SALTERS

Barbara Love never imagined she would find herself standing in line at a food pantry. But that's exactly what happened when -- despite years of excellent service -- her job was outsourced.

Juanita Vasquez-Howard saw her "American Dream" shattered when she lost her home after her position, too, was farmed out to a subcontractor.

Both women were active, vibrant members of their communities -- hardworking taxpayers who reached out when they saw others in need.

Now, they find themselves struggling to survive, and they're far from alone. The jobs lost alongside theirs mean more foreclosed homes, more unemployment and one more Michigan community ravaged.

But unlike auto jobs that make headlines when they're sent overseas, these women saw their livelihoods destroyed by privatization, which has ramifications far beyond just the work they lost.

Barbara and Juanita were two of seven school custodians whose jobs were eliminated when their school district, about 30 miles outside Jackson, hired a private cleaning company.

Seven jobs might not seem like much, unless you are one of the seven. Seven jobs might not seem like much unless you are the student who lost a member of his school family, a familiar and safe face he could count on. Seven jobs might not mean much unless you were relying on someone who had a stake in the community -- a long-standing, vested interest in that school -- to make sure the desks and chairs and floors were sanitized amid fears of widespread illness.

Seven jobs mean a lot in Michigan. So do the 350 jobs lost in Southfield when that district voted to privatize custodial, maintenance, transportation and food service. So do the 150 jobs now gone in Birmingham, many of which are now in the hands of an overseas company that takes its profits back to England, instead of investing in a state that sorely needs good jobs and sound investments.

These private companies make big promises -- that they will hire existing school employees at competitive wages. They assure school boards that students won't see any changes. But like so many other profit-driven corporations that have made guarantees to Michigan citizens, the promises fall far short.

Students who were used to a variety of hot lunches now see pizza as the sole lunch choice nearly every day. Elementary school students are dropped off at the wrong stop because experienced drivers were passed over in favor of low-wage newcomers who are strangers to the kids and their neighborhoods. Parents, who previously took pride in the appearance of their children's schools, are noticing dirt and grime and poor maintenance of both buildings and grounds.

And across Michigan, communities and workers alike are feeling the loss of those jobs. Despite the promises and assurances, those vital members of school teams are gone, replaced by a revolving door of cheaper labor and steady turnover.

For-profit companies don't have a stake in our schools or our communities. They are concerned with making money. That's not a bad thing, but is it what we want for the people to whom we entrust our children? Do we really want to sell our students to the lowest bidder? Conglomerates with shareholders don't care if students

suffer when jobs are eliminated. They're only concerned with the bottom line.

But Juanita and Barbara care. So do their neighbors, who see property values fall. So do their towns, which now have fewer taxpayers. And eventually, so do their schools, when wage earners are forced to move away, and pull their own children from the classrooms they used to help clean.

Privatization doesn't help Michigan schools. But it does take away good jobs from distressed communities and rip good people from students who depend on them. And right now, killing jobs is a venture Michigan cannot afford.

Iris Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff.

Additional Facts

Labor Voices

Labor Voices columns are written on a rotating basis by United Auto Workers President Ron Gettelfinger, Teamster President James Hoffa, Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and Michigan Education Association President Iris Salters. Look for Labor Voices every Wednesday in The Detroit News.

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