

In face of New York City school cuts: a new strategy needed to defend public education

By Steve Light
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Teachers, parents, students and their supporters are rallying March 19 at City Hall in New York City under the slogan “keep the promises” in opposition to a new round of budget cuts to public education being imposed by state and city governments in an attempt to offset the effects of the mounting economic crisis.

An objective analysis of the source of these attacks on the city’s schools poses the necessity of a new political strategy to defend the right to quality public education.

A \$528 million increase in New York State’s basic classroom operating aid to New York City was promised for the 2008-2009 school year as part of a court-ordered plan to overcome the longstanding underfunding of the schools by the state government. But the recently ousted Governor Elliot Spitzer proposed to reduce this amount to \$193 million. The 2006 New York State commitment to increase building funds for New York City by \$11.2 billion to complete its \$13.1 billion capital plan faces proposed delays. The New York City Department of Education (DOE) commitment to increase school funding by \$2.2 billion over four years is being cut \$180 million this school year, with an additional \$324 million reduction next year, the latter to be accomplished by hacking 5 percent out of each school’s budget. The City Budget Director, meanwhile, has demanded that all city agencies slash an additional 3 percent from their budgets, meaning another \$200 million taken from the schools, and over half a billion dollars over two years.

Of the immediate mid-year cuts, \$100 million was taken directly out of individual school budgets, averaging \$70,000 per school and ranging from \$9,000 to more than \$400,000 at some of the larger high schools. A survey by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) of 375 schools showed 49 percent of the schools reducing orders for textbooks and instructional supplies, 48 percent scrapping after-school and weekend classes and tutoring services, 36 percent eliminating student clubs and extracurricular activities, and 23 percent cutting teacher training programs. The union newspaper also reported a Manhattan principal telling staff that there will be no more substitute teachers hired for the rest of the school year in case of teacher absences.

Billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg told the media, “I’m sorry. You can always cut 1.3 percent. In fact, it’s healthy to go and say let’s cut a little bit and force the principals and the teachers and the administrators to say, ‘Is this program worth it?’”

Particularly affected will be schools with large numbers of low-income students (well over half a million New York City children live below the poverty line), English-language-learner students or special education students. For example, shortages of teachers certified to teach special education in content areas in grades 7 to 12 require additional monies for team teaching and for developing incentives to assist general educators to become certified in special education and special education teachers to certify in content areas. There is little chance of this being funded now. Recently, the New York Times reported that only 4 percent of the city’s public schools meet the state requirement for arts education.

The new cuts come in the face of repeated denials of full funding for schools over the years. Expanded educational spending during the Wall Street boom of the 1990s was neither sufficient nor effectively utilized for solving the dire problems of the city’s schools. School programs faced

cuts starting in 2002 with the decrease in tax revenue caused by the Wall Street slump that followed the bursting of the dot-com bubble. Budget surpluses after 2004 were eaten up by inflation that diverted money for education into pre-existing expenses like health costs and pensions.

Successive rounds of cuts and restorations by the Mayor, the City Council, and the State government allowed for the politicians of both business parties to claim apparent budget increases while specific programs were saved at the expense of others. Thus, according to the Mayor’s Management Report, the city decreased its annual creation of new school seats every year from 22,267 in fiscal year 2003, down to 4,903 in 2006. Any slight gains in the last few years now face being wiped out.

There has been a constant battle for the allocation of funds that were won through a 13-year fight in the courts by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, a coalition of teacher, parent, and education advocate organizations. A decision by a lower state court ordered the New York State government to provide each year an additional \$4.7 billion in operating expenses and \$9.2 billion in the capital budget for additional classrooms, which the court agreed was necessary to provide a “sound basic education” from kindergarten to 12th grade. Leonie Haimson, Executive Director of Class Size Matters, has pointed out that the court decisions were in effect stating that there was no fat to cut from the city’s schools, and that underfunding had left the largest school system in the US—with over a million students and 80,000 teachers in more than 1,400 schools—unable to provide an adequate education.

On an appeal by Governor Pataki, the highest state court then allowed the increase to be limited to \$1.93 billion per year, but nothing was forthcoming as the state legislature was divided over how to pay for it. The state was paying about \$7 billion, almost half of New York City’s \$13 billion budget.

In 2007, Governor Spitzer increased education funds statewide, with New York City to receive \$1.03 billion in the first year, still substantially less than the amount mandated by the court. However, New York City Mayor Bloomberg balked at signing an agreement with the state detailing how \$258 million of the money had to be spent, including on a reduction in class sizes. The Mayor finally agreed to spend about \$152 million on reducing class size in 75 schools. Last October, it was reported on the NYC Public School Parents blog that the minimal class size reduction targets included in the city’s proposal (one-third of a student in Kindergarten to 3rd grade and four-fifths of a student in grades 4 to 8) were exactly what would have been predicted by enrollment decline alone - that is without adding a single additional class or classroom teacher in any of these grades.

New York City’s Education Department did not meet its requirement under the agreement with the state to provide a 5-year class size reduction plan with goals and benchmarks. The DOE has not tied its class size reduction plan to changes in its capital budget. In fact, while the DOE said it predicted its classroom needs based on a 23 percent decline in the school-age population by 2015, the Mayor has been promoting his long-term proposal for dealing with population growth—dubbed PlaNYC—which assumes a million more inhabitants of New York City by 2030. Either “they’re assuming that the million extra people coming to New York will not have kids,” commented Leonie Haimson, or, “they assume that we’re all rich enough to send our kids to private schools.”

The city's public schools were also hit with a new re-organization plan at the beginning of 2007, the third major restructuring under Bloomberg and his schools Chancellor, Joel Klein. Mayoral control of the schools, won in 2002 with the elimination of the Board of Education, was increased by dissolving the 10 regions that had replaced the 32 community school districts, further distancing parents from participation in the school system. However, principals were given increased power over schools, setting them up as scapegoats to be blamed when schools failed under the Mayor's plan.

A new formula to fund schools based on neediness of students set up a conflict with the need to use limited funding to retain higher-salaried, experienced teachers. At the same time, the turnover of new teachers can be expected to increase (one out of four teachers leave within four years), especially in low-performing schools, as granting of tenure becomes pegged to student test scores. One of the last acts of Governor Spitzer before being forced to resign was to sign a plan allowing teachers to retire with no penalty at 55 years of age with 25 years of teaching. This was done with the dual understanding that it would reduce salary payments to older teachers while the increasingly harsh conditions in a test-driven system would insure that few younger teachers would last 25 years.

All the schools are also required to buy into educational programs—both non-profit and for-profit—which serve to expand private business control over public school funds. State education funding increases had also been tied to an increase in the number of permits from the state for publicly-funded but privately-run charter schools from 100 to 250.

These maneuvers expose the real intentions of the political establishment regarding education. Increases in education funding have not been turned toward building the school facilities needed for smaller class sizes, lower teacher-pupil ratios to give students the necessary individualized attention (as opposed to a longer school day and year under the same, overcrowded conditions), or higher pay to attract and keep better teachers. Instead, the political efforts are to turn the schools and their funds to more high-stakes testing, more outsourcing for resources and personnel, and more charter schools - in other words, more privatization of the public school system.

Last May, Chancellor Klein announced the city would spend \$80 million on a contract with the publishing company CTB/McGraw-Hill to hold "interim" standardized tests given students in grades 3 to 8 five times a year, and four tests a year in high school. \$80 million is also being spent on a new ARIS computer system. The increased money for education-related corporations parallels the corporate-style salaries being paid to DOE executives. The number of DOE employees making more than \$150,000 in 2006 was more than doubled from the year before, climbing from 97 to 229. Eighteen executives make more than \$190,000 a year, while Klein is paid \$250,000.

The cuts and the "reform" attacks on public schools are happening in school districts across the United States as the implosion of the housing market cuts into tax revenues and the spreading credit crunch threatens school funding. In the city of Baltimore on February 6, 25 of 150 high school student demonstrators were arrested on the steps of the State House. They demanded that Governor Martin O'Malley be arrested for not addressing what they called a "historic underfunding" of Maryland public schools. Maryland's real estate transfer tax revenue has tumbled by 22 percent this fiscal year.

In California, Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has submitted a budget that slashes \$4.4 billion from public education, a record cutback for the state. School districts are already preparing teacher and staff layoffs to cope with the reduced funding.

Democrat David Paterson, sworn in to replace Spitzer as governor on Monday, will immediately be confronted with demands for spending cuts to offset a projected \$4.4 billion budget gap, which will inevitably translate into new cutbacks for public schools.

The budget cuts are the other side of the coin of an educational system that is being directed in the interests of the financial elite of American society. Mayor Bloomberg, like Chancellor Klein, are former corporate executives, as is Klein's deputy, Chris Cerf, the former CEO of Edison Schools, Inc., one of the country's biggest for-profit school management companies. They opened the school system to the restructuring plan for small schools, but not necessarily smaller classes, of Bill Gates, who has invested \$100 million in New York City since 2002. Small schools, while having some advantages with proper funding and facilities, were often crammed—several at a time—into larger schools, and often with less resources and facilities, resulting in parent and student resentment. (In 2006, 10 of the 11 city school's that failed to meet state minimum performance requirements were small schools.)

Another billionaire, Eli Broad, has directed millions from his foundation to finance principal training programs, systems to track student data and other projects tied to high-stakes testing and Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

While the financial elite use their wealth to experiment with their favorite education reforms in the nation's school districts, their money brings a common effect. Public schools are facing greater privatization and more shaping toward the corporate business model. This brings top-down changes and is moving public education to a tiered system in which schools either flourish or flounder on their own. When schools fail, they are closed. The effect is to drive struggling students out of the schools. In New York City, the four-year graduation rate was 50 percent in 2006 while the dropout rate increased from 15 to 20 percent.

The United Federation of Teachers and its bureaucratic leadership has sought to subordinate the critical struggle to defend the democratic right to an education to both the profit system's business model for the schools and the political establishment that is implementing the cutbacks.

The UFT has set up two of its own charter schools, with a million dollars coming from Eli Broad, thus helping to legitimize steps towards privatization. Meanwhile, UFT President Randi Weingarten last year negotiated a "merit pay" deal with the DOE, tying bonuses to the raising of test scores on the city's lowest performing schools.

At the same time, the UFT has sought to channel all opposition to the counter reforms and budget cuts into toothless protests and support for Democratic politicians who are responsible for these attacks. The UFT backed Eliot Spitzer and Hillary Clinton. They have done this even though the Democratic Party backed the Republican No Child Left Behind plan as well as the war in Iraq, which sucks billions of dollars daily from education and other vital social programs.

Paterson, just like Spitzer and Pataki before him, will claim that there is no money to pay for substantially reduced class sizes, improved education and decent wages. With the steady deepening of the financial crisis, the diversion of social spending into the attempt to bail out wealthy investors and Wall Street banks will mean even deeper cutbacks.

It is impossible to defend public education today without confronting the essential issue of who controls the wealth of society—wealth created by labor but monopolized by the top 1 percent—and who decides how it is to be allocated. Only when working people organize a mass, independent political movement and assert their own social and class interests can the immense wealth of society be utilized to provide high quality public schools for all and meet other urgent needs, such as free healthcare, quality housing and full employment.