

Budget-strapped Chicago public schools to implement staggered class schedules

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A consequence of dozens of public school closings in the past few years, suburban Chicago's Lockport Township High School has introduced a two-shift school day. In an effort to alleviate chronic overcrowding, school officials have moved to implement a staggered schedule for the nearly 4,000 students on the township's two campuses.

Nearly 800 junior and senior students now begin the school day at 6:50 a.m. The currently voluntary schedule will become mandatory next year, when all juniors and seniors will be required to start school at 6:44 a.m.

Under the plan, juniors and seniors can start at 6:50 a.m. and be eligible to finish the day as early as 11:45 a.m. for seniors and 1:44 p.m. for juniors. Freshmen and sophomores will not be able to complete classes until 3:44 p.m.

Notwithstanding the personal strain borne by the students, teachers, coaches, administrators, as well as their families, the new scheduling has disrupted life at the high school in general. Extracurricular activities and sports have been limited as a result, while school assemblies have been scrapped outright.

The challenges facing Lockport are by no means unique to the township; neither is their early-bird and staggered schedule scheme. In nearby Frankfort, the 4,100-student Lincoln-Way East High School introduced a 7 a.m. start time prior to the completion of the school district's third school earlier this year. Similarly, in neighboring Plainfield, the school day began at 7:20 a.m. at Plainfield Central High School until the opening of a fourth school in the district this year.

The transformation of the school day points to a deepening crisis in the public education system. Urban—and, increasingly, suburban—school districts throughout the US have been subjected to cuts in funding and pressure to replace crumbling public schools with

small, privately administered schools. As a result, remaining public school districts like Lockport Township have seen a swelling of their student populations even as their budgets and staffing levels are attacked.

Recent estimates from the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) put the school district's budget deficit at \$475 million for 2010. Having drawn down its reserves by \$100 million to cover this year's shortfall, no further funds from the reserve will be available without affecting the district's bond rating. Outside of a rise in Chicago property taxes, the burden of the shortfall will be passed on to the district's teachers, officials, retirees, and students.

Newly appointed CPS chief Ron Huberman made this clear when he recently pointed to the \$145 million for contractual pay increases for teachers, the \$130 million for higher pension contributions, the \$30 million to cover rising healthcare costs, and the \$35 million for miscellaneous expenses such as utilities, transportation, and fuel as reasons for the deficit. School district officials have also announced that they will be looking at costs associated with workers' compensation, substitute teachers, and Central Office operations to help balance the budget for the next fiscal year that begins on July 1.

"Let me be clear. We do not believe that we can balance next year's budget through efficiencies and management improvements alone. We need to find new revenues," Huberman said in a public statement last month.

On April 6, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that Illinois Governor Pat Quinn was advocating "sweeping changes" to cut the education shortfall, including "reducing pension benefits for incoming teachers and requiring existing ones to pay 2 percent more of their paychecks toward retirement." Illinois teachers already contribute 9.4 percent of their salaries toward the Teachers Retirement System fund. Quinn estimated the change would allow the state to reduce its payments to the pension fund by \$443

million next year.

Governor Quinn has also proposed cutting more than 30 grant programs, including after-school tutoring programs and those aimed at reducing class sizes, in order to cut state education costs by \$200 million.

This new round of attacks on the living standards of teachers, students, and school officials will be bound up with the continuation of Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley's Renaissance 2010 initiative. The plan has resulted in the closure and consolidation of dozens of schools since 2004, with 16 more to be affected this coming fall.

What at first appears to be a glaring contradiction between suburban school districts that are overcrowded and under-resourced, and the continued drive by the CPS to close and consolidate dozens of city schools for low enrollment and under-performance, is in fact the logical outcome of the same process: the increasing subjugation of social institutions such as education to the profit motive. The irrational and anarchic means by which the market allocates social resources thus produces such contradictions.

However, the crisis confronting Chicago-area schools is only a piece of the rapidly worsening national economic crisis that is impacting the education system at large.

A survey of 850 administrators across 48 states, issued March 24 by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), suggests that the vast majority of schools are facing swelling class sizes, staff layoffs and program cuts. Some 75 percent of respondents characterized their school districts as "inadequately funded"; 21 percent said they had undertaken "short-term borrowing to meet payroll and accounts payable."

Administrators reported that in the 2009-2010 school year, 44 percent of schools were increasing class size, 28 percent were cutting extracurricular activities, 22 percent were cutting academic programs, and one-third were putting off needed maintenance.

The percentage of schools laying off staff quadrupled from an already high 11 percent in the 2008-2009 school year, to 44 percent in 2009-2010. Administrators also identified nearly 17,600 jobs that have been "slated for elimination in the 2009-10 school year." The AASA report notes, "This represents a small portion of the 574,000 jobs that researchers have predicted for elimination in FY09, FY10, and FY11."

The Obama administration has seized upon this crisis as a pretext for an all-out assault on public education. The Obama stimulus package will provide about \$100 billion

for public schools, universities, and early childhood education over the next two years. The figure falls far short of what is needed. Indeed, statements by Education Secretary Arne Duncan make clear that the political establishment sees the desperate state of affairs as an opportunity to enact a vast restructuring of the nation's public education.

Last week Duncan—the former head of the Chicago school system—widely touted the government's \$44 billion in "stimulus" funds earmarked for the education system, plus a plan to put aside \$5 billion as an incentive for financially desperate school districts.

Duncan has made clear that the funds are contingent on the pursuit of various right-wing reforms, including drastically extending the school day and/or year for disadvantaged children, so-called merit pay programs for teachers, and enforcement of testing standards introduced under the Bush administration. Duncan has also aggressively pushed for increased public funding for privately administered charter schools.

The nature of such reforms indicates who is to be held accountable for the nation's deteriorating public educational institutions: the teachers, administrators, and students. Duncan warned that the Obama administration will "come down like a ton of bricks" on districts that do not comply with these policy aims.

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