

Virginia: Hampton Roads schools face major budget cuts

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Schools and other vital social services in the southeastern Hampton Roads region of Virginia, which includes the cities of Newport News, Hampton, Norfolk, Suffolk, Portsmouth, Chesapeake and Virginia Beach, face millions of dollars in budget cuts as a result of state cutbacks.

The 2010-2011 budget, signed by Republican Governor Bob McDonnell in mid-March, cuts over a billion dollars in public health funding and \$646 million for public schools. The state legislature passed the budget with overwhelming majorities in both houses: 73 to 23 in the Republican-controlled House of Delegates and 34 to 6 in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

McDonnell praised the bill for funding his top three priorities: charter schools and other “alternatives” to traditional public schools, balancing the state budget without a tax increase, and promoting so-called “job creation.” The last of these refers to \$45 million allocated as incentives for business to locate operations in the state.

The city of Virginia Beach, with 440,000 residents and 69,000 students enrolled in its public schools, faces a \$43 million budget shortfall. Like much of the region, the city’s economy relies heavily on the tourism industry. Last month Virginia led the nation in state layoffs, with some 32,600 jobs being cut; officials have attributed the continuing collapse in the jobs market to severe weather and to the crisis in the housing and construction industry. The contraction of the economy has brought to bear a sharp reduction in state revenues for education and other critical funds.

The Virginia Beach school board is considering various measures, including fee hikes on students, to cover the budget gap. Among the proposed fee hikes are a \$600 tuition charge for area students not residing in Virginia Beach itself who take online courses through Virginia Beach’s public schools. Students taking driver’s

education will likely pay a \$219 fee next year, up from \$100. The school board has also proposed a \$700 tuition hike for non-resident students whose parents work for the school system.

The nearby city of Portsmouth, home to 100,000 residents and a public school student body of 15,000, has a budget shortfall of about \$17 million. The public school board’s proposed budget includes cutting over 100 positions, including 22 teachers, 39 teaching assistants, 33 custodians and 15 clerical and administrative workers. Remaining employees will be forced to start paying 3 percent of their paychecks toward their retirement, on top of a staggering 33 percent increase in health insurance premiums.

The proposed budget also mandates a 15 percent cut in materials, supplies and tutoring services. These cuts will inevitably translate into more working hours and out-of-pocket expenses for teachers and staff already struggling with limited resources. Portsmouth’s school system has a history of difficulty in achieving accreditation for all of its schools. In the past year all Portsmouth public schools were accredited for the first time. Teachers and parents fear that maintaining accreditation will not be made any easier with the loss of \$17 million in funding over the next two years.

Opposition to the tremendous state and local budget cuts is beginning to emerge from the region’s working class population. On March 5, over 1,000 local residents in the rural city of Suffolk attended a school board input session. Attendees filled all 800 seats in King’s Fork High School’s auditorium; the school cafeteria served as an overflow area.

The line to address the board by microphone stretched to the door more than two hours after the meeting began. Parents and residents spoke, asking the board to continue funding various programs, including the arts and a pre-kindergarten program. A local news report quoted parent

Shaylyn Baker, who told the board, “Our children must still grow up and compete in a global economy ... They cannot do that without the best possible education.”

Among other measures, the Suffolk school board’s proposed budget saves \$1.7 million by closing three local elementary schools—Florence Bowser, Mount Zion and Robertson—and eliminating 37 positions. Parent Jeff Meade told a local newspaper that he credits the small classes and dedicated teachers at Florence Bowser elementary for the success of his five-year-old daughter, who was born prematurely and deals with some vision problems and other developmental delays. He expressed concern that, at a larger school with larger classes, his daughter may never have learned to read or use arithmetic.

The board faces an estimated \$10.4 million in state funding cuts, as well as a projected 5 to 10 percent decrease in local funding. It has considered offering early retirement packages to 129 employees.

In keeping with the agenda of the Obama administration, Governor McDonnell has championed charter schools in the 2010-2011 state budget. The governor’s “Opportunity to Learn” education reform agenda was signed into law on March 17, having passed through the state legislature with broad support from Democrats and Republicans.

One component of the new legislation is the creation of College Laboratory Partnership Schools, which are nonsectarian magnet schools sponsored by an approved state university with a teacher education program. These charter schools are designed to avoid the “administrative constraints” of traditional public schools, i.e., contractual obligations requiring specified benefits and workplace standards.

Governor McDonnell had the following to say about the Laboratory Schools at a signing ceremony held at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville: “Lab schools offer students more flexibility, innovation and autonomy, while providing access to the state of the art resources possessed by our Commonwealth’s institutions of higher learning. Students who attend lab schools will gain expertise in subjects crucial to success in our global economy, such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

“They will be better prepared for today’s highly-skilled, high-demand jobs. College laboratory schools are just one way by which we will continue to provide Virginia’s students with the educational opportunities they deserve. I have said many times before, a child’s educational

opportunities should be determined by her intellect and work ethic, not by her zip code.”

In other words, a select few students from the most underfunded schools in the poorest municipalities will have the “opportunity” to leave their homes and learn only those subjects meeting the immediate technical requirements of big business. The necessary premise of such a system of schools, always unspoken, is that the ruling elite will no longer tolerate the cost of educating vast sections of working class youth who have no realistic prospect of employment in the increasingly competitive and integrated global economy. Its pseudo-populist packaging notwithstanding, McDonnell’s formulation is an admission that youth in every zip code in the state face the threat of losing their right to a public education.

The Virginia governor’s accomplices in this reactionary attack on the right to public education include Democratic and Republican legislators and mayors, the trade unions that represent workers facing job losses and cutbacks, as well as the media, which uncritically accept the politicians’ demagogic egalitarian pretensions.

It was Jennifer McClellan, a Democratic delegate from Richmond, who served as chief co-patron of the College Laboratory legislation in the House of Delegates. Standing shoulder to shoulder with the governor at the University of Virginia, she declared: “Virginia has one of the best college and university systems in the world. Encouraging our primary and secondary schools to partner with these top-notch institutions of higher learning will increase the opportunities available, and the potential for achievement, for our school-age children.” She neglected to mention the hundred million dollar cuts to *university* level education under the recently passed budget.



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