Brockton, Mass.: Pink slips for 430 teachers

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Brockton Public Schools last Thursday sent out pink slips to 430 teachers, more than a third of the school system's 1,200 teaching staff. The drastic move is the result of a budget gap of $9.7 million for next year and is closely tied to projected cuts in local aid provided by the state of Massachusetts.

In a letter posted on the district's website, School Superintendent Matthew Malone described the move as "one of the darkest days our school system has ever seen." The school district has approximately15,000 K-12 students in 20 schools.

The Brockton School Committee, chaired by Mayor Linda Balzotti, has been presented with two proposals for implementing the cutbacks, one in which Raymond Elementary would be closed, and another where the cuts would be spread among all schools. Under either scenario, class sizes are expected to rise.

In a separate press release on Friday, the school department noted that Governor Deval Patrick's proposed local aid for fiscal year 2011—which is larger than the legislature's counterproposal—is based on 2008 enrollment numbers. Since then, Brockton schools have seen an enrollment increase of 400 students, including about 130 child refugees from the earthquake in Haiti.

Brockton, a city of slightly more than 90,000 people, is located just south of Boston. It is perhaps best known as the childhood home of boxers Rocky Marciano and Marvin Hagler. Until the 1950s it was a thriving area for shoe manufacturers, but like many smaller cities in Massachusetts has since fallen on hard times.

The city's jobless rate averaged 10.7 percent in 2009—about 1.5 percent higher than the statewide rate—and it has since increased to more than 12 percent. The average weekly wage is slightly more than $800, according to the state's website.

The teacher layoffs in Brockton are not directly connected to the Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative targeting "underperforming" and "failing schools." Brockton High, the state's largest public high school, has scored high on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests and has won statewide recognition for excellence among urban school districts.

The layoff numbers in Brockton are staggering, but are part of a crisis developing in cities and towns throughout Massachusetts. Municipal revenues are squeezed on one side by legal limits on property tax increases and on the other by cuts to local aid from the state.

Although the 2011 state budget has not been finalized, the legislature is threatening a 4 percent cut in local aid. The state continues to face its own budget problems, with its revenue commissioner reporting on May 5 that income tax revenue for the current fiscal year is $392 million below the "benchmark" projection.

While some of this shortfall was caused by an extension in the tax filing deadline this spring due to a flooding disaster, and sales tax revenues have increased, the dwindling of federal stimulus funds will add to the state's problems. Brockton receives nearly 50 percent of its revenues from state aid, and many municipalities confront a similar situation.

The city is holding open the possibility that some of the teachers will be rehired once budgets are finalized. State law requires that non-tenured teachers who are to be laid off must receive notice by May 15, and it is a

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common practice for teachers to receive “pink slips” and then be rehired before the beginning of the school year.

In his announcement of the layoffs, the superintendent noted that the school system has already lost 200 teaching positions to attrition over the last five years, and that hundreds of school administrators—custodians, secretaries, and paraprofessionals—could also receive layoff notices in the near future.

The city is counting on the complicity of the unions representing administrative workers to impose the cuts. A May 7 *Brockton Enterprise* article headlined “Brockton Public School District hopeful for productive talks with unions” quotes a school committee member saying, “Everybody who’s responded has said they look forward to meeting with me.” The president of the school district’s police union, who had not yet responded to the school committee, told the *Enterprise*, “I’m sure we can sit down and talk. We’re flexible.”

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