

New York State budget crisis will mean draconian cuts for public education

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According to many estimates, New York State's cumulative budget deficit is forecast to exceed \$50 billion by as early as 2012, unless, according to Governor David Paterson, austere cuts are made to spending on health care, public education, salaries and benefits to public workers, and other programs that benefit working people.

Paterson, who only months ago praised the billions of dollars in bonuses paid to the same Wall Street bankers responsible for the economic debacle of 2008, and who more recently attempted to force tens of thousands of state workers to take unpaid furloughs, is now vetoing over a billion dollars in state aid to public schools. The result is already the loss of approximately 14,800 teaching jobs across the state in the upcoming school year alone. Predictions of cuts in 2011 and beyond paint a far grimmer picture.

New York State School Boards Association Executive Director Timothy G. Kremer declared recently, "Governor David A. Paterson seems to be on a mission to destroy public education in New York State." Kremer went on to add, "even after proposing a record \$1.4 billion cut in state school aid followed by thousands of job losses in school districts, the governor wants to limit the ability of school districts to raise funds locally."

By this, Kremer is referring to a property tax cap that would allow a minority of voters (as low as 10 percent) to defeat a school district budget, rendering "months-long budget development process [es]—including obtaining public input—worthless." Kremer concluded his criticism of the Governor by reiterating that "the last two years have been a litany of punitive proposals detrimental to public education: state budget cuts, mid-year payment delays, property tax caps, and mayoral control."

With the recent defeat of a bill in Congress that would have provided Medicaid assistance to the states, New York will be forced to make further budget cuts to public programs, including education, to help cover these burgeoning costs. Paterson has positioned himself alongside other politicians in both major parties, arguing that the primary concern is to eliminate federal and state deficits through austerity measures that punish the working class. There is bipartisan agreement in both state and federal government in opposition to even the most modest reforms, such as increasing taxes on the wealthy and additional government spending to protect public sector jobs and extend unemployment benefits for the long-term jobless, even as the big business politicians approve massive spending for endless war in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

According to the New York State Council of School Superintendents (NYSCOSS), a primary category of public education funding that is being cut in New York is Foundation Aid, a "formula enacted as part of the state's resolution of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity challenge to its school funding system," the purpose of which was to increase financial aid to higher-need school districts in order to create greater educational equity between wealthy and poor districts across the state. NYSCOSS describes this an "under-appreciated reform," which "was producing the desired outcomes" (greater funding for poorer districts with smaller tax increases than those for their wealthier counterparts; rising test scores; reduced dropout rates; extra help for struggling students through after-school programs and tutoring, and reduced class sizes).

However, in April 2009, following the collapse of Wall Street, Governor Paterson and the NYS Legislature froze Foundation Aid at 2008-2009 levels through 2011. Paterson's proposed budget further extends this freeze through the 2011-2012 fiscal year, meaning that the state will be more than \$4 billion behind in its implementation of the formula, which was to be fully phased in by 2011. Paterson is seeking to delay full phase-in until 2016-17.

Foundation Aid "accounts for two thirds of total aid. Freezing this primary operating aid category for three years—even if there were no aid reductions—would impose great hardship on poorer communities which tend to be heavily dependent on state aid." Without additional tax increases on Wall Street and the income of the wealthy, and/or increased federal aid to states, public education in poor districts across New York faces the most severe and immediate threat.

The likelihood of federal aid coming through is improbable on several levels. First, the hopes for a second federal stimulus package to assist states experiencing financial crises are being undermined by a new fixation on reducing the federal deficit, leading to further austerity measures. Second, federal education aid is being doled out in fairly small packages through Obama's competitive grant program known as Race To The Top (RTTT). This program, rather than providing equitable education aid to states, requires states to compete for funds, and in doing so they must agree to such odious demands as doubling the number of privately-run charter schools allowed to operate in the state and revising teacher evaluation criteria, including adoption of test scores as a primary evaluative tool.

New York State is preparing a second application for RTTT

funds, after losing out on its first bid. In its second application effort, it has received the support of the New York State Union of Teachers (NYSUT), whose union leadership has given its approval to tie student test scores to the teacher evaluation process.

Finally, the Obama Administration is revising criteria for providing Title I funds to the states' neediest school districts. Now, rather than basing the provision of Title I funds on the percentage of students living under the federal poverty line, money will be doled out according to student test scores. In other words, as with RTTT, poor students will be forced to compete for inadequate resources to fund their educations. Given the campaign to reduce the federal deficit, the paltry sums available through RTTT and the unlikelihood of receiving an award, and the revision of Title I funding, which no longer takes financial need into consideration, New York State does not appear to have much to hope of receiving federal education assistance.

The cuts to public education mean tough times are ahead for both students and teachers. For students, there will be larger class sizes due to teacher lay-offs and attrition, along with building closures, which will result in fewer opportunities for valuable one-on-one help from teachers. There will also be reduced elective course offerings, watering down the educational experience for millions of students and making it more difficult to take Advanced College Placement (AP) courses. Special area classes including art and music will be reduced or eliminated in many districts, as will access to professionally staffed school libraries and current print and electronic resources, which have been shown in numerous studies to improve student scores on state tests.

Access to current technologies will also be reduced, as schools will be unable to afford purchases and upgrades. Students' ability to succeed in the work force, where a majority of jobs require technological skills, will be negatively affected, and they will be at a growing disadvantage as compared to their wealthier counterparts in affluent districts and private schools. Extra-curricular opportunities such as sports, drama clubs and band will also be reduced and eliminated, impoverishing the educational experience for many students already desperate for activities that enrich their lives. In addition, summer school programs will face reduction or elimination, along with field trips, a traditional means of supplementing the educational experience throughout the regular school year.

For teachers, the cuts will lead to job losses for new and unmandated positions. At the same time, for those whose jobs are still secure, there will be larger class sizes or, in the case of special-area teachers such as art, music, gym, and library, many districts will have one teacher for two or more buildings, oftentimes resulting in double the work, as teachers are forced to serve twice as many students in more than one facility. Furthermore, pressure will be placed on local unions to make concessions during contract negotiations, including pay freezes, increased health insurance costs and, in more drastic cases, incorporating "volunteer days" into contracts, in which teachers will agree to work a number of unpaid days throughout the school year.

Finally, the NYS Legislature, in collusion with NYSUT, has been working out a plan to reform teacher tenure laws, especially section 3020-a, pertaining to teacher tenure review in disciplinary

proceedings. This is being touted as a money-saving reform meant to reduce the amount of time spent on disciplinary cases, as well as a means to more easily get rid of ineffective teachers.

In addition, a system that unfairly evaluates teachers based on student test scores, rather than the overall quality of their teaching, with no consideration as to the socioeconomic conditions of the students whom they serve, is likely to scare away many promising college students from a career in education. Add in the demands for concessions in salaries, higher contributions toward health insurance and pensions, increased class sizes and job responsibilities, and demands such as mandatory unpaid work days, and it is clear that this is hardly a recipe for luring the best and brightest into the profession. Also, college educations are expensive, and most teachers begin their careers saddled with large student loan debts. If the salary for teaching does not make repaying these debts feasible, this will also discourage prospective teachers.

Wealthier school districts in New York State will not suffer as badly from the cuts to education as will poorer districts. They do not depend on Foundation Aid to the degree that poorer districts do, depending instead on a higher level of local support from property taxes. With reduced state aid, wealthier districts have access to local resources that poorer districts do not. In addition, poorer districts rely more heavily on Title I funds from the federal government than do wealthier districts. However, with proposed reforms as to how Title I funds are allocated, poorer districts risk losing this important source of funding as well.

Governor Paterson and the NYS Legislature are working hand in hand with the Obama Administration and both major political parties to further the capitalist agenda of forcing workers to accept massive cutbacks in public services, including public education, health care, unemployment benefits, salaries and job benefits, and a host of other services that the elite view as a drain on their resources. The future of public education, as well as every other program and service that benefits working people, can only be assured through a struggle against the two party system. A mass party of the working class must be built to fight for a socialist program that reorganizes economic life to meet the interests of the vast majority and not the tiny ruling elite.



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