Boston schools budget slashes $63 million, cuts 250 jobs

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On March 23, the Boston School Committee voted to approve a fiscal year 2012 budget that slashes $63 million in spending and more than 250 jobs, while attacking teachers' bargaining rights through implementing a new budgeting formula called weighted student funding. Democratic Mayor Thomas Menino will now present the budget to the City Council.

The budget also makes official the closure of ten schools and the merger of six others pushed through by Boston Public Schools (BPS) Superintendent Carol Johnson late last year. (See "Boston superintendent announces more school closures.") The seven members of the School Committee, all appointed by the mayor, have given up any pretense of opposing Johnson and approved the budget unanimously.

The job cuts come on top of the elimination of 800 positions, or 1 of every 12 in the district, in the last two years. The budget proposes to cut $11 million by setting minimum class sizes—until now, only maximum limits have been set—and to cut $2 million from the maintenance budget.

The budget cover memo also boasts of "reducing the annual Food Services subsidy" by $5.7 million over three years, while replacing only $1.1 million of that money with federal funds. This cut will hit working class students especially hard at a time when home fuel subsidies are being cut and parents have to juggle food, medical and fuel bills.

While recognizing that BPS transportation costs are increasing because of the busing of students over greater distances to charter and private schools, the budget memo fails to mention that Superintendent Johnson and Mayor Menino have joined Democratic Governor Deval Patrick in leading the push for charter schools.

The FY12 budget introduces for the first time a new budgeting practice called weighted student funding. Under this model, school budgets are funded yearly based on the number of enrollees. The funds per student are weighted based on grade level—for example, kindergarten students cost more than high school students because class sizes are smaller—disabilities requiring special care, English as a Second Language needs, and the need for free or reduced cost lunches.

According to the web site www.edwize.org, weighted student funding has been championed nationally by powerful members of both big business parties, including former Clinton chief-of-staff John Podesta and George W. Bush's first education secretary. However, in a 2006 posting, edwize.org quoted Columbia University professor Michael Rebell as stating that the system is a "trojan horse" for introducing school vouchers, and a method of "dividing up the scraps" in underfunded school districts.

In her budget cover memo, Johnson makes clear her desire to use weighted student funding for a third purpose: to attack teacher salaries and benefits. Each school would be allotted a base budget of only $200,000 for the principal and one administrative support position, after which all funding would be dependent on enrollment. Such a system would offer no assurance that any teacher would stay in the school from year to year.

To drive the point home, Johnson writes that "we

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would propose this change regardless of the economy." Her memo complains about rising health care costs and teacher raises, including the fact that "that most of our employees receive at least two types

of salary increases every year." She fails to mention that she makes at least $275,000 a year as superintendent.

Johnson has proposed this budgeting change in the same undemocratic way that she "proposed" school closings last fall: through a rushed series of public hearings on the issue taking place March 2-22. Prior to these hearings, there was no mention of weighted student funding.

That this new budgeting method was being planned long before March 2 is evident from the fact that the budget documents contain detailed plans for phasing it in, along with detailed calculations of how it will work and a list of "common questions and answers." However, it was never mentioned during the fall budget hearings, even when BPS Chief Financial Officer John McDonough gave a budget presentation on November 17.

Public employee unions in Massachusetts have offered no principled opposition to either the loss of jobs or to weighted student funding. On March 7, the *Boston Globe* reported on a press conference at which Massachusetts AFL-CIO President Robert Haynes and representatives from teacher and firefighter unions proposed a plan for cutting workers' health care benefits.

Governor Patrick had already introduced legislation requiring cities and towns to abrogate existing union contracts and force workers to enroll in cheaper health plans. In response, "the unions said they do not view their plan as a rival to the governor's bill, but as a way to help him flesh out the details," according to the *Globe*. The unions offered no resistance to Patrick's imposition of a 45-day period for "collectively bargaining" the new benefits, and asked only that he spread $120 million in benefit cuts over two years instead of one.

Emphasizing the logical conclusion of such policies, President Obama visited Boston on March 8 to give a speech at the TechBoston Academy, a BPS pilot school that, according to UPI, has "numerous private sector…partners, including Apple Inc., Cisco Systems Inc., Dell Inc., Harvard University, Hewlett-Packard Co., IBM Corp., Microsoft Corp." and the Gates Foundation. Mayor Menino joined Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan at the event.

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