

Idaho students walk out over education cuts

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Public school students staged a series of walkouts in districts across the state of Idaho last week to protest planned budget cuts and teacher layoffs. Protests began last month after state superintendent Tom Luna called for increasing class sizes in elementary, middle, and high schools and the dismissal of 770 teachers. The state also aims to tie teacher pay to student performance on standardized tests.

Hundreds of high school students walked out February 28 in the capital, Boise, as well as in other cities including Caldwell and Pocatello. At least 100 Boise High School students occupied the rotunda of the state capitol building in a sit-in; 100 others from Meridian High School and 150 from Nampa High also participated in demonstrations. Elsewhere, students held demonstrations and school sleep-ins to oppose the legislation.

The education cuts are contained in three bills, two of which were passed in the state Senate and House committees on education Thursday. The bills will eliminate tenure for new teachers, introducing temporary one- and two-year contracts and implement “merit pay” based on performance. The legislation would also restrict collective bargaining to disputes over salaries and benefits.

The third, Senate Bill 1113, has drawn the most opposition from the public. The bill, which was returned to the Senate education committee for revision Tuesday, would eliminate 770 teaching positions over the next two years through attrition, increase class sizes, and issue laptops to high school students. The laptops are part of a plan to replace classroom instruction with online courses.

Superintendent Luna has said that the student-teacher ratio would rise from 18.2 to 19.8. However, class sizes for many districts, and particularly for higher grade levels, are far larger.

In Boise, for example, grades 4-6 would see class

sizes rise from the already overcrowded 26.8 to 29.6. For grades 7-9, classes would increase from 24.3 to 28.1, and in grades 10-12 they would grow to 28.8 from 24.7. In the city of Meridian, classes would swell to more than 31 children per teacher. When the plan was unveiled January 12, Luna insisted, “There’s no correlation between student achievement when you compare student achievement from state to state and student-teacher ratio from state to state.”

Senate Education Committee co-chair John Mortimer said that while the bill was temporarily stalled, a funding cut was inevitable. “We’re looking at a \$62 million hole,” he said during deliberations. “And that’s our starting point. Unless there are miracles, we’re looking at budget reductions.”

Walkouts continued March 1, although they were reportedly smaller because students had been threatened with punishment for truancy. Students said many school administrations punished participants with in-school suspensions.

In addition to high school students, local Boise news station KTVB 7 reported that hundreds of middle schoolers were among the protesters inside the Capitol building as the Senate Education Committee met March 1. On Saturday, hundreds of students from districts across the state carpooled to continue demonstrating on the Capitol steps.

Students organized the demonstrations largely via Facebook and mass text messaging. One of the organizers, Madai Montes, a senior at American Falls High School, expressed the frustration animating the walkouts. “No matter how much we’ve protested in front of the Capitol it doesn’t seem to work and they don’t seem to care,” she told the *Idaho State Journal*. “We wanted to do something around the state to get the state’s attention... There wasn’t anything else left to do.”

The Idaho Education Association, the state teachers

union, swiftly disavowed the protests. On February 28 the union issued a statement that it “had absolutely no involvement in organizing the protests.” On its web site, the IEA calls only for district “rallies” after school hours; in Boise, protesters were advised to wear black on Friday as a “Day of mourning for loss of collective bargaining rights.”

The student demonstrations in Idaho parallel growth of public opposition to budget cuts in Wisconsin, Ohio, and elsewhere across the US. Public education has come under attack, at every level of government, since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. Indeed, the Obama administration is leading the charge against teacher compensation and conditions in the schools with its Race to the Top program, which ties federal education funding for districts and states to draconian cuts and privatizations.

In addition to cutting K-12 education, the Idaho legislature is also proposing \$7.6 million in cuts to the higher education budget. Republican Governor C.L. “Butch” Otter has proposed cutting appropriations for higher education to 2003 levels; Republicans in the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee have called for state funding for the public university system to be cut to levels lower than in 2000.

Tuition and fees will further increase as a consequence. In the past year, the University of Idaho, Idaho State, Boise State, and Lewis-Clark College all raised the cost of attending by more than 8 percent. In December, the state Board of Education granted universities permission to seek tuition and fee hikes beyond the previous ceiling of 10 percent this year.

The legislature’s appropriations committee rejected all requests for funding increases from the cash-strapped community college system. Instead, the committee proposed a 5.6 percent cut in funding, amounting to \$933,800.

Idaho Medicaid funding is also targeted for \$39 million in cuts. Because state and federal governments jointly fund the public health program, any cut at the state level translates into a cut in the federal Medicaid allocations. If the House Health and Welfare Committee passes the proposed budget, Idaho’s Medicaid program would lose \$120 million in federal aid. The legislation proposes cuts to adult mental health, dental care, and physical therapy programs, along with lower reimbursement rates for medical

providers and stricter eligibility requirements.



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