

# State-level Democrats deepen attack on public education

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State governments controlled by Democrats are putting in place some of the deepest cuts in public education funding in history, matching their counterparts in Republican-controlled states. The result is a looming wave of layoffs for teachers, increased class sizes, and school closures.

The Colorado state Senate, which is controlled by Democrats, voted April 12 by a 30-5 margin for a budget bill that will cut \$250 million from K-12 public education, prompting “teacher layoffs, larger class sizes, and shorter school weeks,” according to one media account. The budget also slashes higher education and reimbursements for doctors who treat Medicaid recipients.

The budget is expected to easily pass the state Assembly, which Republicans control by a one-seat margin. Rather than blocking the bill, Colorado Assembly Democrats are preparing 30 or so “message” amendments, symbolic measures they know will not be accepted.

The bill will then be signed into law by Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper, who in February called for \$375 million in cuts to K-12 education. Senate Republicans agreed to reduce the cut to K-12 in exchange for increasing tax cuts that benefit the rich and corporations.

One of the senate budget’s especially savage measures is a provision to cancel a \$3 million-per-year nutrition program that assists about 3,000 poor children who, due to medical conditions, cannot eat solid food.

“Make no mistake, the choices we are making today will hurt,” Hickenlooper recently boasted. “This budget proposal is about tough choices and sustainability. Frankly, it is about living within our means at a difficult time.”

Not all in Colorado are hurting. There are six billionaires in the state with a combined fortune of \$20.3 billion, more than 20 times greater than Colorado’s \$988 million fiscal year 2012 budget deficit.

In Washington state, where the Democratic Party holds the governor’s mansion and controls the state Senate and the lower house by near two-to-one margins, the cuts are even more draconian.

On Tuesday, the state Senate (controlled by Democrats by a 31-18 margin) approved a two-year budget proposal that would enforce a 3 percent statewide pay cut for K-12 public school teachers and strip “underperforming” schools—defined as those with truancy problems—of funding.

“Teachers, who have frequently been under state wage freezes in the past, haven’t seen a pay cut in recent memory,” the *Seattle Times* notes.

The Senate plan also saves \$1.2 billion in spending on K-12 education by not funding a program mandated by Washington voters in a ballot measure that called for increased teacher pay and decreased classroom sizes. The bill cuts a separate K-4<sup>th</sup> grade class-size reduction program by \$212 million.

The attack on higher education in Washington is equally extreme, with the state Senate bill aiming to cut \$530 million. Like the budget plans advanced by the lower house and Governor Christine Gregoire, the state Senate budget forecasts that this cut will be largely offset by tuition increases. Tuition at the University of Washington and Washington State University would be jacked up by 16 percent, while community colleges would impose 12 percent higher tuition.

Taken together, these cuts amount to about \$2 billion in reductions for public education in Washington, a substantial portion of the \$4.8 billion budget-cutting

proposal.

Like teachers, state workers would suffer 3 percent pay cuts. The state Senate budget also forces a new round of furloughs and carves \$361 million out of scheduled pension payment increases. It reduces assistance for disabled adults by slashing \$230 million from the Disability Lifeline program, and the state Medicaid program, the Basic Health Plan, would cut enrollment by 34,000, for a savings of \$122 million.

“It’s not a budget of choice, it’s a budget of necessity,” declared Sen. Ed Murray, a Seattle Democrat and chair of the Senate’s Ways and Means committee.

There is necessity and then there is necessity. Washington’s six billionaires have a combined net worth of nearly \$100 billion, according to *Forbes*, 25 times the state’s fiscal year 2013 budget deficit.

One Washington individual, Bill Gates, has a fortune of \$56 billion, about 28 times the amount of money the state aims to gut from public education. Gates, who postures as an advocate of public education “reform,” could write personal checks to offset public education cuts in all 50 states and still be a rich man.

Teachers unions and public employee unions in Washington and Colorado have offered no resistance to the attacks on the salaries and jobs of the workers they purport to represent. On the contrary, at the state and national levels they funnel hundreds of millions of dollars into the campaign coffers of Democratic Party politicians.

Commenting on the unprecedented attack on teachers in the state, Washington Education Association spokesman Rich Wood offered some criticism, without explaining the ongoing WEA support for the politicians imposing the cuts.

“It cuts teacher pay, eliminates funding for more than 1,000 teachers and crams more students into already-overcrowded classrooms,” he said. “We have the third-most-crowded classrooms in the country, and this budget will make things worse for our kids. Let’s be clear: This budget will hurt kids.”

Unlike in Wisconsin and several other states dominated by Republicans, the budget-slashing in Washington does not attack the dues revenue of the union executives.

Several factors are driving the assault on public education. In the short term, states and local

governments are confronted with sharply declining revenue as a result of declining income, sales, and property tax revenue, which is in turn caused by high unemployment, wage-cutting, and declining home values. At the same time, demand for social services, which is also reflected in new strains on the schools, is at unprecedented levels.

The policies of the Obama administration and Congress are exacerbating the crisis. Obama’s meager stimulus package, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—most of which went into corporate and bank coffers—has dried up for the new fiscal year. The short-term budget compromise worked out last week will force new cuts on state and local spending.

In the longer term, Democrats and Republicans are seizing on the crisis to carry out an unprecedented assault on public education. Obama’s Race to the Top initiative laid out the basic agenda of this attack. By pitting states and school districts in competition for scarce funding, Obama, with the backing of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), is forcing school districts to tear up work rules and promote semi-private charters schools at the expense of public schooling.

The aim is nothing less than the creation of an openly class-based education system in the US.



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