

California schools face continued budget uncertainty

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Over the next week, announcements of catastrophic cuts to public education in California are expected from the administration of Democratic Governor Jerry Brown. On May 15, school districts will make final many of the 19,000 layoff notices sent out to teachers last March. On May 16, Brown will make public his May Budget Revise, which by all accounts promises to contain billions in reductions in spending on education.

For school districts throughout the state under the shadow of these impending cuts, uncertainty and confusion prevail.

According to the State Legislative Analysts Office, the maximum likely cuts this year are \$4.3 billion to K-12 (kindergarten through twelfth grade) education, which would be around \$750 per student or \$22,500 for a 30-student classroom. Such a cut would undoubtedly devastate the K-12 system and would require the suspension by the state legislature of Proposition 98, a 1988 voter-approved measure that requires that the state spend at least 40 percent of its general fund on primary and secondary education.

Tom Torlakson, the state superintendent of public education, told the State Senate Budget and Fiscal Review Committee that around 90 percent of school districts have planned for only \$2.1 billion in cuts. This is not simply wishful thinking on the part of school districts; the \$4.3 billion in cuts demanded by the Brown administration are so extreme that the districts face significant legal as well as practical obstacles in implementing them.

Brown has proposed a referendum on the extension of certain taxes that overwhelmingly target the working

class as an alternative to even further punitive cuts. Uncertainty over whether Brown's tax proposal will be passed is causing even further planning problems for schools.

In Orange County, south of Los Angeles, although 27 districts are submitting budgets based on the lower cut estimate, a contingency plan has been developed should the \$4.3 billion in cuts be actually imposed.

County Superintendent of Schools William Habermehl told the Sacramento Bee, "We know what we would have to do. Most schools have gone down to the minimum 175 days a year [of instruction]. We would have a reduction in that, down to 150 or 165." Not only would reducing the school year by up to 25 days severely impact the quality of education, it would require breaking currently negotiated teachers' contracts, most likely through weeks of unpaid furlough days.

If shortening the school year to a mere 30 school weeks cannot be arranged, any cuts will have to be covered by firing teachers, taking loans, and closing schools. Firing all 19,000 teachers who received pink slips would not cover even half of a \$4.3 billion cut. Firing any more than that would break current requirements that educators be given a notice in March if they are to lose their jobs in September.

Schools may take out loans to cover budget shortfalls, but without any increase in funding they would quickly become insolvent. As many as 110 California school districts are already facing insolvency. That number will continue to increase as debt servicing costs rise. Fitch Ratings has downgraded 30 percent of school

districts reviewed since January 2010.

While the public education system in California is being essentially dismantled, the teachers' unions are playing a positively treacherous role. Over the past three years, California's schools have eliminated 30,000 teaching positions. Meanwhile, the teachers' unions have thrown their support behind Brown, who now promises even harsher measures against teachers than the previous governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

When 7,000 layoff notices were sent out this year in Los Angeles Unified School District, the local union United Teachers Los Angeles responded with a policy of "every man for himself." The union is encouraging teachers to appeal their layoff notices on an individual basis. This amounts to encouraging the teachers to compete with one another; outside of any increase in funding, a successful appeal by one teacher can only mean that a different teacher will be fired.

Similarly, the California Teachers Association (CTA) has thrown its weight behind Brown's regressive tax proposal. Since Republicans blocked Brown's proposal to put the regressive taxes to a public vote in June, the CTA has encouraged passing the taxes without voter approval. The taxes in question—sales, automobile registration, and dependent tax credits—all target the working class.

CTA President David Sanchez told the *Sacramento Bee*, "Once you put it on the ballot after June, it's no longer an extension, it becomes new taxes. And once they're new taxes, the people won't support that. I think the legislature ought to do that themselves."

On April 28, in support of his proposed referendum, Brown remarked, "You can't tell the people of California, 'shut up, we don't want to hear from you.'" Brown's attempt to don the mantle of democratic principles by demanding that his regressive taxes be put to a popular vote as an alternative to further cuts is simply a sham. According to a recent survey by the Public Policy Institute of California, 68 percent of Californians favor increasing taxes on the rich. This is one proposal that will never appear on one of Brown's referendums.



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