

Brutal state budget cuts hit schools in Philadelphia

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In the wake of Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett's brutal 2011-2012 budget proposal—a measure which eliminates \$1.2 billion in state education money—the Philadelphia school district is now facing an expected deficit of \$629 million.

The district has responded to Corbett's budget by announcing that it will have to increase class sizes, scale back on “fluff” such as arts and humanities classes, replace full-day kindergarten programs with half-day ones, and fire 3,820 employees. Bus transportation and SEPTA passes for 45,000 students at both public and private schools will disappear as well, making it harder for some students to attend their remaining classes.

For several weeks, parents and teachers have been staging protests outside schools in the Philadelphia area and in other locations throughout the city. Nearly 200 people rallied in the East Mount Airy area on May 15, and there have also been protests and petition campaigns based in Manayunk, Center City, and North Philadelphia.

The education cuts in the city are exacerbated by the loss of additional federal stimulus money that had been granted to support Superintendent Arlene Ackerman's plans for education reform. The stimulus was only supposed to be provided for two years, and it was put toward hiring 1,200 new employees and jump-starting Ackerman's “Renaissance School” program.

This involved the district turning over some of its buildings to charter-school operators while transforming several of the remaining schools into “Promise Academies,” receiving additional funding to pay for longer school days, longer school years, and Saturday classes. Yet even these schools will be affected by the cuts, with the Promise Academies' per-

pupil aid being cut to about an extra \$200 per student.

A School Reform Commission hearing on Wednesday discussed the possibility that the district may use an existing law to try to protect Promise Academy staff from the layoffs that will be implemented throughout the educational system, meaning teachers at other schools would face disproportionate layoffs.

It is hard to overstate the enormity of the cuts to education that will sweep across the state July 1 under Corbett's budget. An April survey distributed by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* received responses from slightly more than half of the state's 500 school districts and, of the districts that participated, 71 percent are planning to cut instructional programs in 2011-2012. Most of these will be elective courses, tutoring services, and summer school programs. A comparable percentage of school districts will be reducing or eliminating extracurricular activities, and the overwhelming majority (86 percent) will see increases in class sizes. About 25 percent may have to close some of their schools. Layoffs are expected in virtually every one of the districts.

Although the cuts will be felt nearly everywhere, working-class areas will be hit the hardest. In a worst-case scenario, school officials in Bristol Township predict that kindergarten, Advanced Placement, and elementary art and music classes will simply evaporate, along with 60-90 percent of paid employees. These losses will be coupled with a 1.8 percent tax increase on area residents.

When it comes to higher education, Corbett's budget will enact a radical 50 percent reduction in funds allocated to the 14 universities within the State System of Higher Education as well as schools such as Penn

State, Pitt, Temple, and Lincoln. Students attending these schools are already saying that they will be forced to take out larger loans, abandon the state system to attend community college instead, or drop out of higher education altogether.

These draconian cuts are deemed necessary because Corbett is trying to erase a \$4 billion state deficit without resorting to tax increases. Indeed, during the gubernatorial election, he took a campaign pledge promising not to raise taxes and, furthermore, is now proposing to cut corporate taxes by hundreds of millions of dollars.

Within his first few months in office, the governor has opened up more state land to Pennsylvania's expanding natural gas industry (tying state park funding to the lease fees in the process), eradicated a state health program providing insurance to 42,000 adults who did not qualify for either Medicare or Medicaid, and reduced state Medicaid benefits by \$150 million. This last cut was coupled with the removal of \$183 million in federal matching funds.

And, in a remark that reads like something out of surrealist theater, Corbett has suggested that state colleges compensate for the cuts by opening up their campuses to the natural gas companies. Six out of the 14 schools within the state system are located on land sitting above the Marcellus Shale, the underground rock formation that is the focus of energy development efforts in Pennsylvania.

Recently, some alternatives to the Corbett budget plan have been emerging from Harrisburg, but only in the form of a different set of cuts. Republicans in the state legislature are discussing the possibility of "softening" the education cuts by diverting money away from the Department of Public Welfare instead. For example, one plan saddles the Philadelphia school district with a \$610 million deficit rather than the \$629 deficit under the original proposal. Another plan within the House would halve the cut to about \$380 million, dividing the reductions between education and state welfare agencies.

Pennsylvania Democrats have largely hailed these alternative proposals, raising only token resistance in their demands for "inquiry" into the details of how the Department of Public Works will be affected. The

Democrats are prepared to accept the more "moderate" idea of dividing the cuts, while shedding crocodile tears over how badly "working families" might be hurt in the process. There has been some talk about increasing corporate taxes, but such suggestions invariably come packaged alongside a willingness to find "savings" in public welfare programs. Democratic politicians have also offered their own policy recommendation of shunting Medicaid enrollees into managed care programs.

Ultimately then, both parties take it for granted that cuts must be made. They merely differ over where to make them. But all these measures are deeply unpopular.

A *Daily News* poll indicates that 78 percent of Pennsylvania residents are opposed to cuts affecting local school districts and 67 percent object to Corbett's plan to cut college funding in half. The vast majority of people believe the cuts are unnecessary, and that state revenues should be bolstered by taxing the natural gas industry, closing corporate tax loopholes, introducing new taxes on cigars and chewing tobacco, and selling off state-owned liquor stores to private companies.

Furthermore, a Susquehanna Polling and Research Survey of 800 voters conducted in January shows that support for a tax on the gas producers is widespread among all regional and demographic groups, with even 56 percent of polled Republicans saying they would support such a tax if it helped balance the state budget.

And yet none of this will happen. Corbett and other Pennsylvania politicians are adamantly opposed to such a tax, and Corbett himself received \$1 million in campaign funding from the natural gas industry. When it comes down to a choice between the sentiments of the people and the interests of the financial aristocracy, the politicians of both the Republican and Democratic parties know who their real masters are.



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