

Yonkers, New York facing crippling cuts to education

Our reporters
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Massive cuts in state and federal funding combined with the effects of the ongoing economic crisis are devastating public education in Yonkers, which, with a population of nearly two hundred thousand, is the fourth largest city in New York state.

Located in Westchester County, just north of New York City, the Yonkers school district serves 26,000 students and has 3,500 employees. It now faces an \$83.1 million budget deficit for the coming academic year.

From the mid-19th through the mid-20th Century, Yonkers was an industrial city with a large and increasingly diverse workforce. However, during the decades after World War II, traditional industries, such as textiles and elevator manufacturing (it was the home of Otis Elevators) moved out to find cheaper labor. The city has seen a gradual economic decline over the second half of the 20th Century, and racial and ethnic tensions have been fomented to keep the working class divided. During the 1980s, courts frequently found the city administration guilty of discrimination in housing and public schools.

The city's Board of Education voted last month in favor of drastic cuts to jobs, programs and services for the 2011-2012 school year. These would include:

- The elimination of transportation for 16,532 regular education students, 65 percent of the student body;
- The elimination of pre-kindergarten, affecting 1,773 students;
- The reduction of kindergarten to a half-day of instruction, affecting 2,025 students;
- The elimination of interscholastic athletics and extracurricular activities.

In addition, the board proposes to lay off 732 employees, including 404 teachers and administrators and 328 Civil Service employees, among them 232 bus

monitors and 68 school aides. This would come on top of major cuts that have already taken place in the current school year.

A \$43 million budget shortfall in the 2010-2011 financial year forced the elimination of 439 district positions, including those of 185 Civil Service employees and 254 teachers and administrators. Reductions across grade levels included school pupil support teams of social workers, psychologists and guidance counselors; school clericals and aides; safety officers; parent coordinators; career and technical education courses; and art and music offerings. Elementary and middle school instrumental music was eliminated.

According to the school superintendent, these cuts are taking place under conditions in which school enrollment has been increasing by as much as 700 students annually.

While New York State's Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo claimed that the recently passed state budget—which cut state aid to education by \$1.3 billion—would only reduce school district funding by 2.7 percent, the anticipated loss for Yonkers is more than 8 percent.

This, a reduction of \$21.9 million in state funding, comes on top of a proposed \$25.4 million cut in federal aid and a \$40.5 million increase in expenses.

The state comptroller has reported that more than 100 districts do not have the reserves to avoid layoffs and program cuts. The New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) has estimated that between 18,000 and 20,000 teachers throughout the state will be pink-slipped as a result of the cuts. (See: New York state budget slashes education, health and taxes on the rich.)

After the passage of the state budget, Yonkers Mayor Phil Amicone condemned the cuts in school aid. "The

governor and the legislature have taken the monkey off their backs and put it on ours,” he said. “They have punted on most of the tough choices, leaving local leaders with no choice but to cut hundreds of jobs, slash services and raise property taxes.”

However, the mayor said nothing about the decision of the Democratic governor to scrap the so-called “millionaires tax,” eliminating some \$5 billion in state revenues and putting it into the pockets of New York’s wealthiest 2 percent.

While the state’s millionaires are enjoying a windfall, the predominantly working class residents of Yonkers are being forced to foot the bill. In his 2011-12 budget proposal, Amicone has called for a 4.8 percent city tax rate hike. The average homeowner’s tax bill would increase by \$367, which includes a 20 percent increase in water rates and a 15 percent raise in sewer rates.

The Yonkers Federation of Teachers (YFT) has offered contractual changes that would result in \$3.3 million in savings. However, Mayor Amicone and Schools Superintendent Bernard Pierorazio have demanded \$20 million in concessions from the district’s unions, threatening punitive layoffs and program cuts if the concessions are not accepted. These would include a pay freeze and foregoing the district’s payment to the teachers union welfare fund. According to the YFT, this would result in a loss in income of \$7,500 per person.

Amicone is portraying the give-backs from the workers as well as money from borrowing by the city as a one-time “shared sacrifice.” However, given the cuts already made during the current school year and the massive austerity measures anticipated in coming years at both the state and federal levels, this claim deserves no credibility.

On May 13 more than 700 Yonkers public schools staff members received layoff notices. In response, Bobbie DiBattista, president of the CSEA union, which represents approximately half of those on the layoff list, said of upcoming negotiations with the city, “We’re a team player.” A sellout of the members is clearly in the works.

Yonkers provides a sharp example of the devastating impact of the cuts to public education occurring across the state and country. The right of working class children to a quality education is being ripped to shreds.



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