

Massive cuts to education in Pennsylvania budget

Samuel Davidson
1 August 2011

Massive cuts in public education, universities and other social programs were among the major items in a \$27.15 billion budget passed by the Pennsylvania state legislature and signed into law by Republican Governor Tom Corbett.

The budget contains a series of draconian cuts especially targeting education. Corbett has made it very clear that he wants to cripple education on both the K-12 and university levels.

K-12 education will see the deepest cuts, totaling nearly \$900 million or 7 percent of the state funding. On average this amounts to \$410 per student. School districts throughout the state have been laying off teachers and not filling positions that have gone vacant.

The Pennsylvania State Educational Association estimates that 3,000 teachers statewide are being laid off and another 2,000 positions are not being filled. This does not count nearly 1,500 layoff notices that were sent out earlier this year in Philadelphia, the largest school district in the state. PSEA officials believe that the number will rise as more districts finalize their plans for the fall.

Pittsburgh, the second largest school district in the state, has cut nearly 250 positions and is closing and consolidating several schools.

The statewide cuts will mean larger class sizes, fewer teacher's aides, and cuts in programs. In many districts students will have to pay for extracurricular activities such as sports and music. Many districts are also cutting back on foreign language, art and music and many are even cutting core classes in science, math and language arts.

The cuts are also targeting early childhood education. The state has cut funding for full-day kindergarten from \$260 million down to \$100 million, and many pre-school and Head Start-type programs. Many districts

have been forced to close pre-school centers and cut kindergarten down to half day.

The Corbett administration is especially targeting poorer school districts. Pennsylvania has one of the most uneven distributions of funding for education in the country. The 500 separate school districts are funded primarily through property taxes, so wealthy districts have more resources while poorer districts have less.

In 2008, after many years of lawsuits by poorer districts, the state adopted a formula to make up part of that difference. The Corbett budget rolls back many of those changes and actually cuts more funds from poorer districts than wealthier ones.

For instance, Philadelphia saw state funding cut by \$557 per student, while nearby and more wealthy Lower and Upper Merion districts were cut by less than \$20 per pupil. Many of these cuts were revised by Republican state legislators to favor their home districts.

In addition, the Corbett administration is pushing for the expansion of charter schools and a voucher system to funnel public resources to private education. As part of the budget, the state will no longer reimburse school districts for payments to charter schools. Again, this will disproportionately hurt poorer and urban school districts where a greater number of students attend charter and cyber schools.

State lawmakers are expected to approve a voucher system later this year that will funnel another \$75 to \$100 million to private and religious education.

Higher education has also taken a massive cut. The 14 state-owned universities are having their budgets cut nearly 20 percent. They have already announced that tuition will increase by 7.5 percent. In addition they are cutting \$33 million by eliminating teaching positions

and course offerings.

The four state-supported universities, Penn State University, Lincoln and Temple in Philadelphia, and the University of Pittsburgh, are each seeing their state support cut by 19 percent. Temple University is raising tuition by 10 percent. Lincoln is expected to follow but has not yet announced its decision.

Penn State University raised its tuition 4.9 percent. Full-time in-state freshmen and sophomores on the main campus at State College will pay \$15,124 per year. The University of Pittsburgh announced that it is raising tuition by 7 percent.

PSU and University of Pittsburgh already had the highest tuition for four-year public universities in the country in the 2009-10 school year, according to the US Department of Education.

Other areas cut include social services, welfare, Medicaid and support for libraries, museums and programs for the arts.

One of the most detrimental measures is a change to the Department of Public Welfare that will allow the department to make changes to benefits, eligibility requirements and programs without the customary notice, public hearings and reviews.

Among the items that DPW will most likely cut are: Allowances for welfare recipients to buy clothes and tools or get job training; transportation reimbursement for people on welfare-to-work programs; subsidies for parents of children with autism or other behavioral disorders whose families need services, but earn too much to qualify for Medicare.

Governor Corbett appointed Gary D. Alexander to head the DPW. Previously, Alexander was the head of Rhode Island's Department of Human Services, where he cut the duration of eligibility for public assistance from 60 months to 24 months during the height of the recession. Alexander is likely to do the same in Pennsylvania.

Many construction projects throughout the state have been eliminated, leading to thousands of layoffs.

In addition to cutting education and social programs, the budget cuts over 1,500 jobs for state workers. Many of those are positions that have gone unfilled after several years of a hiring freeze, and it is not clear yet how many layoffs will take place.

State workers will also see their wages frozen and have to pay more for their medical care.

This is the third year of massive budget cuts in the state budget. In the previous two years, Democratic Governor Ed Rendell made massive cuts to social services and public transportation but was able to spare education with the use of federal stimulus funds totaling over \$3 billion. This year those funds ran out.

When Corbett took office in January, he promised that he would cut social spending and not raise taxes. In particular, Corbett has kept his promise to the gas industry that no taxes will be imposed on the extraction of natural gas. Corbett received over \$1 million in campaign contributions from the gas industry.

Pennsylvania is the only gas-producing state that does not tax gas production. The Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center estimates that even a minimal tax would generate more than \$200 million in revenue. In addition, many communities are paying heavily for the extraction of the gas in the form of destruction to their roads and pollution of the water supply.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact