

Portland teachers face huge job cuts

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10 April 2012

The superintendent of Portland Public Schools (PPS) proposed on Monday to cut over a hundred teachers, eliminate nearly 40 other positions, close schools, and enact other measures to meet the 2012-2013 budget.

The proposals by Superintendent Carole Smith, most of which require school board approval, would eliminate 110 teaching positions (seven percent of all teachers), 38 central office positions, close two schools, delay purchase of new textbooks, cut teacher training, and eliminate the popular Outdoor School program. In the central office 23 employees have already been notified of their dismissal. Fifteen other positions that are or will become vacant will not be filled.

The wiping out of 110 teachers' jobs is estimated to save \$10 million while \$9.5 million is to be saved with the cuts to central expenditures.

Alluding to the draconian nature of the cuts Superintendent Smith said, "Given the fact that we have been reducing service levels for a number of years, this budget proposal will sound familiar. However, it is precisely because of the successive years of reduction, that the impact of this budget will feel dramatically different." Over the last decade 12 schools have been closed, on top of greater student to teacher ratios and reduced support staff.

Smith noted the qualitative impact of the proposed cuts on the ability of PPS to provide a basic education, "A reduction of 110 teaching staff out of our schools poses a real threat to our ability to offer a minimum core program to our students at all levels—especially after we have whittled away at school staffing and programs with successive years of budget deficits."

The school district, Oregon's largest with 47,288 students, is responding to a budget shortfall of \$27.5 million. To maintain programs just at their current, already reduced level, PPS requires \$483.2 million. The percentage of the state's budget dedicated to school funding has fallen since the 2003-2005 biennium, then

at 45 percent, to 39 percent in the present 2011-2013 biennium. The impact of the recession on the state's budget has been exaggerated since it receives most of its funding through a volatile income tax.

The budget proposals for Portland schools will be repeated across Oregon, with similar cuts; closing of schools, shorter school years, fewer teachers, the elimination of programs, increased class size, and reduced support staff.

The Portland suburb of Beaverton, Oregon's third largest school district, is facing a shortfall of \$40 million dollars. It has yet to specify what cuts it plans to make but has stated that layoffs are certain and that Terra Nova High School will be closed at the end of the school year.

Salem-Keizer School District, the state's second largest district with over 40,000 students, of which nearly 60 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch, has laid off 400 employees and reduced the school calendar by five days as part of cutting \$54 million this school year.

Portland schools also saw a reduction in federal anti-poverty (Title I) funding for the coming school year of nearly 30 percent, from \$20.2 to \$14.4 million. This cut will affect the most vulnerable students who rely on additional teachers and specialists provided by the funds. Smith proposes to change the percentage of low-income students from 40 percent to 60 percent in order for a school to be eligible for anti-poverty funds. Currently almost half of Portland schools receive Title I funding. For the elementary schools losing funding parents will now have to pay \$335 a month for their child to continue full-day kindergarten.

Meanwhile, the teachers' union, the Portland Association of Teachers (PAT), has not issued a statement on, much less challenged, the attack on the jobs of its members. This reporter was told that, "they are currently working on it."

The two-year contract approved in March of 2011 froze cost-of-living adjustments for all teachers, librarians, school psychologists and other educators. High school teachers saw their workload increase with the requirement to teach six out of eight periods instead of five out of seven. Along with other concessions, this allowed PPS to claim that the school would save \$2.8 million under this contract. Then PAT president Rebecca Levison stated, “We are in tough times and everyone has to make sacrifices.”

The PAT will do nothing to carry out a struggle in defense of teachers’ jobs and working condition because such a struggle will immediately cut across their alliance with the Democratic Party, which controls the state and Portland city government. Teachers have to organize rank-and-file committees that will take up an independent political fight, uniting teachers, students, and parents for a socialist alternative.



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