Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to cut 280 teachers and staff

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9 August 2012

The Pittsburgh school board voted last month to approve the layoff of 280 teachers and support staff as part of the plan to close seven schools this fall.

The layoffs, the largest in the school district history, will mean larger class sizes and fewer courses as the remaining schools are forced to do with fewer teachers and more students.

Already, many students are in classes that average 20 to 25 students each and schools have been forced to cut library, art, music, sports, extracurricular activities and foreign languages. Now schools are expected to cut core classes of language arts, mathematics, history and science.

The layoffs include 176 teachers and other professionals in K-12, 14 pre-K teachers, 59 paraprofessionals, 22 other professionals and nine technical-clerical workers. Another 21 secretarial-clerical and central office workers are also being laid off. With retirements and other unfilled positions, the school district will be down nearly 500 employees this year.

For a school district that is already struggling with a high dropout rate, education experts stress that larger class sizes will lead to a higher dropout rate as struggling students fall through the cracks. Cuts in programs such as music, art and sports will compound the problem as these courses play a large role in keeping many students involved in their education.

Jennifer Pressley, whose daughter Breyonna goes to first grade, said, “I am worried about the classes being too crowded and the kids not being able to focus.”

Jennifer said that last year there were 23 students in Breyonna’s kindergarten class. “That is big. So what are classes going to look like this fall?” she asked. “How are students supposed to learn when there are so many in one class? If a student is not getting something, they may go unnoticed by a teacher with so many in one room.

“There is already a high rate of dropouts. I don’t want to see Breyonna become one because she is not getting the kind of attention that she needs.”

According to the latest report issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, student performance in 53 Allegheny County schools ranked in the lowest 15 percent in the state. Half of those schools are within the city of Pittsburgh.

As has been happening in the rest of the country, poor test scores are not used to address the many social problems they reveal, let alone provide the schools with the resources to address them. Rather, they are used to blame local administrators and teachers, further uproot the students and teachers and, in general, create such havoc that students are ensured not to have the opportunity to learn.

The cuts hit schools in poor and working class communities the hardest, with 14 teachers cut at Pittsburgh Faison K-5 and nine cut at Westinghouse 6-12. Both are in the impoverished Homewood neighborhood. Another 11 teachers were cut at Pittsburgh Milliones 6-12 in the Hill District, another economically distressed area of the city.

The Pittsburgh School District is making these cuts to save $29.1 million as part of an effort to close its budget deficit. Other cuts are aimed at saving another $13 million. In the past ten years, the school district has refused to raise taxes on the wealthy and instead granted many tax breaks to developers. In addition, cuts in federal and state aid have left the district with a growing deficit.

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For the second year in a row, the Pennsylvania State budget for K-12 education was nearly $1 billion below 2010 levels. Pittsburgh was cut by millions of dollars. Poorer school districts, were cut even more, as the Corbett administration eliminated a funding formula designed to partially offset the gap between wealthy and low income districts.

A teacher, who asked that her name not be used for fear of retaliation by the district, told our reporter, “These cuts are really going to hurt the kids. Classes are just manageable now, but if you add four or five students to a class it is going to make it that much harder to teach. Music, art, math, science—every subject is going to be hurt. They don’t care about kids getting a good education.

“They say there is not enough money, but there is plenty of money. It is a question of what you are using the money for. The tax structure is completely out of whack. You can’t have the wealthy paying no taxes and then cut the programs for the poor and the middle class.”

The layoffs in Pittsburgh and the cuts in education are the direct result of the cuts in education and attack on teachers being made by the Obama administration. Obama has made attacking teachers the centerpiece of his education policy, while cutting funds for public education.

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