

Philadelphia mayor threatens elimination of school programs, staff

Nick Barrickman**14 May 2013**

Pointing to the worsening budget crisis facing the Public School District of Philadelphia (SDP), Democratic mayor Michael Nutter has issued new plans to impose the costs of the deficit on the backs of the cities' population.

City officials have seized upon the school system's \$300 million budget deficit to demand further cutbacks in education. The news emerges only months after city officials announced the closing of more than two-dozen public schools, many of which were located in impoverished areas. In 2012, the SDP borrowed a near-identical amount in order to continue to pay for its staff and programs.

It is viewed within the establishment as highly unlikely that a new infusion of funds will be forthcoming for the district. Under Republican governor Tom Corbett, the state of Pennsylvania has carried out more than \$1.1 billion in cuts to education in the past several years.

In an effort to stoke the fears of students and parents, Nutter threatened at a Thursday press conference the possibility of schools opening next fall without assistant principals, guidance counselors, sports programs, or other vital necessities if means were not taken to address the shortfall. Nutter stressed that more concessions would be wrung from city workers, saying it was "the only way that we can prevent that nightmare...from happening is by all of us working together."

For his part, Jerry Jordan, the president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), has appealed to lawmakers to find ways to address the shortfall. "How much more can they expect people to sacrifice?" asked Jordan, alluding to givebacks his workforce has already been forced to make. In 2011, the PFT with Jordan as acting president allowed the

district to delay payments to teachers' health care fund, as a means to address the city's then \$629 million deficit. Teachers in Philadelphia on average spend out of pocket between \$300 and \$1,000 yearly on classroom supplies for their students.

Beyond asking for concessions for city employees, Nutter has proposed various other means with which to plug the deficit, including the institution of an increased alcohol and tobacco tax, predicted to net roughly \$60 million. The remaining sum would be borrowed from state coffers. In essence, this plan would impose the cost of the deficit on the city's population while allowing big businesses to skirt the costs. In this vein, the city finance director, Rob Dubow, explicitly rejected the possibility of increasing property taxes as a means to fill the deficit, which would hit larger businesses.

The plans to eliminate school programs come in the wake of the announcement by school superintendent William Hite, Jr., to close more than two-dozen schools in Philadelphia. Announced in 2012 as a part of a five-year plan that would eliminate 50 public schools, city officials see the district's deficit as a pretext to further broaden this assault on public education in favor of private charter schools.

Philadelphia, the nation's fourth largest school district, is at the forefront for the expansion of such facilities; roughly 40 percent of its student population are slated to be enrolled in charter schools by 2017. Early last year, the Philadelphia School Reform Commission, the leading education body in the city, granted \$139 million to the expansion of said charters over their traditional counterparts. Many of the charters given grants had poorer performance records than their counterparts in the public school system, disproving the claims of city officials that children's education is their

primary concern.

The district's plans for the elimination of public education have been met with growing anger from Philadelphia's working class. In January, at a series of "community public hearings" meant to float the closures to local residents, Hite and city representatives met massive opposition from parents, teachers and students.

The past week has been marked by a large outcry from the city students affected against the budget cuts. Coinciding with National Teacher's Appreciation Day last Tuesday, several hundred students from area schools organized protests in front of city hall. "I want the same opportunities available to students in the suburbs," said Mohammed Ben Abdallah, a sophomore at Furness High School in South Philadelphia. Mohammad compared conditions in Philadelphia to those in his native Tunisia, saying, "schools do not have enough money," and remarking of the US: "It turns out it's not much different here."

Philadelphia itself has been wrought by an increasing level of social inequality; a 2011 chart published by the *New York Times* shows that, since 1970, middle-income earners have been hollowed out of the city center, leading to a wider disparity between those classified as "high income" or "affluent" and those who are poor. A 2011 Census Bureau finding showed that nearly 40 percent of the cities' child population fell into this latter category.



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