

School district of Philadelphia passes “doomsday” austerity budget

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The School Reform Commission (SRC), the leading oversight body in the Philadelphia school district, voted May 30 to approve its budget for the upcoming year. Under the plan, schools will be deprived of many needed essentials, including learning programs, supplies and staff.

Adopted by a margin of four-to-one, the \$2.4 billion dollar budget falls nearly \$300 million short of minimum operating needs, forcing schools to forgo even basic essentials. Individual schools will be cut as much as 25 percent, depriving them of supplies, counselors, art and sport programs, even paper and textbooks in some cases. Included in the plan is the layoff of more than 3,000 faculty members, including teachers, with those remaining facing larger class sizes—as many as 30 students for K-8 and 33 for high schools.

The district also faces a 29 percent cut in its federal grant budget, which exists parallel to the funds serving normal operations. The cuts there could lead to a further loss of 1,300 school-related jobs.

The attack on public education is part of a bipartisan assault carried out by both Democrats and Republicans at the local, state, and national levels. Philadelphia Democratic mayor Michael Nutter gave vocal support to Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel’s recent attack on teachers in that city. In April, the Chicago Public Schools announced the closure of 49 facilities, the largest in history.

Emanuel was the former chief of staff in the Obama administration, which has spearheaded an assault on public education across the United States. Since taking office, Obama has overseen the destruction of more than 300,000 teaching jobs and the closure of 4,000 public schools. He has tied meager federal funding to the expansion of charter schools and attacks on teachers

such as merit-based pay.

In the face of the funding reduction advanced by the Philadelphia SRC, popular opposition is seething. On the day of the commission’s vote, more than 800 students, parents and teachers gathered outside the school district’s headquarters to protest the proposed cuts. The budget cuts come just months after the announcement by Philadelphia Public School’s superintendent William Hite Jr. that more than two-dozen traditional public schools in the city would be closing this year and next.

After formally adopting the budget, many city officials feigned concern. School Commissioner Joseph Dworetzky, the SRC’s lone dissenting vote, stated, “I’m forced to consider what are components to school being a school, and this budget eviscerates...some of the things essential to schools being school.”

Declared School Superintendent William Hite, “This is not the budget anyone wants.... I’m doing everything in my power to prevent this budget from becoming a reality,” later adding that “[t]o be fiscally responsible, the Philadelphia school district must live within its means.”

Other members of the commission sought to justify their votes based upon the District’s formal obligation to adopt a budget by May 31. “We should not think that today is the end of anything,” said SRC chairman Pedro Ramos. Both city officials and members of the SRC were seeking to obtain funds from other sources to fill the gap.

City officials have seized upon the district’s current budget deficit as a means to close down traditional public schools to be replaced by for-profit schools, which have flourished in the intervening period. Philadelphia currently possesses one of the nation’s largest charter school operations, predicted to enroll

nearly 40 percent of the city's students by 2017. The SRC itself has played a major role in facilitating the expansion of charters, doling out grants of state money to facilities that often have poorer performance ratings than those of traditional public schools.

In face of the funding crisis in Philadelphia, city officials have proposed a series of regressive measures. These include borrowing funds from the state, the imposition of alcohol and tobacco taxes of between 10 and 15 percent, and imposing between \$100 and \$130 million in givebacks on city workers. The increase in regressive taxes and worker concessions would serve to further impoverish the population while increased borrowing from the state merely sets the stage for even deeper cuts when the debts come due.

On the question of givebacks, Jerry Jordan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) sought to don a phony display of populism.

In a posting on the official PFT blog website in the run-up to a staged "rally" in the vote's aftermath, Jordan lamented that "our schools and educators have been 'sacrificing' for the past 13 years," going on to say "[t]here is simply no more fat to trim from our schools, save for the most vital services." In other words: the PFT has forced its members to accept so many concessions in recent times that there are few, if any, more possible items to cut. Philadelphia teachers regularly are forced to spend out-of-pocket funds in order to make ends meet in their classrooms.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a worker with children in the Philadelphia school system about the district's plans to remove basic necessities from the budget. The parent, who was visibly distraught about the decision, stated, "Why is it that while traditional schools continue to close down, these charters are doing better than ever? They can refuse kids that apply to them; you know if these traditional schools close that they won't accept all those kids."

Speaking about her children, she said, "They love these programs. I have a daughter who plays the violin and piano. A lot of these kids will be on the street if these programs get cut." When asked about various city officials' pledges to find other sources of revenue through cuts to teacher's pay, she replied "they should leave these teachers alone. Philadelphia has some really good teachers, and they have to put up with a lot, most of them have to buy things themselves. They shouldn't

have to do that." She added, "There's got to be other places to get the money, the rich aren't paying anything, the banks are getting away scot-free, why do they have to always go after the kids?"



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