

Illinois governor proposes 70 percent cut to school transportation budget

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As school districts in Illinois brace for another year of deep budget cuts, Democratic governor Pat Quinn has proposed a 3 percent cut in classroom funds and a 70 percent—or \$60 million—cut to the student transportation budget. Rural districts will be the worst affected, although the safety of children in urban and suburban areas is also jeopardized.

Transportation makes up about 5 percent of overall expenses of Illinois school districts. Districts are required by law to provide safe transportation to and from school, unless the area is deemed to be safe for children to walk or bike.

Quinn's budget spokesperson, veteran Chicago *Sun-Times* political reporter Abdon Pallasch, explained that school transportation cuts proposed last year by the Illinois General Assembly were put off in favor of closing state facilities, including the Murphysboro juvenile correction and Jacksonville correctional centers. Since no other state facilities are set to close this year, the previously planned school budget cuts are to go into effect.

The Plainfield school district, southwest of Chicago in Will County, has been searching for ways to compensate for the \$5 million deficit expected next year if the proposed cuts go through.

"We've frozen pay, we've done all those sort of things, but at a certain point, you get to the point where the only thing left becomes programs," said Angela Smith, assistant superintendent with the Plainfield school district. These cuts have totaled about \$40 million in the last three years.

As in many other states, Illinois school districts have struggled under years of classroom cuts, pay freezes, and elimination of benefits for teachers. State leaders are also looking to cut as many bus stops and miles driven by buses as possible, which includes field trips

for students. High fuel prices have also played a role in the decisions.

As a result, school districts have combined bus stops instead of picking up children in front of their homes. Children will have to walk longer distances to the next bus stop or have their parents drive them either to school or to the bus stops. Bus ride times will also increase as fewer buses cover an area.

The Lemont-Bromberek School District 113A, also in the southwest metro region, decided to cancel bus service to four areas that they have categorized as no longer hazardous for student travel since sidewalks have recently been built. About 200 students are walking to school from these areas.

Half of Illinois school districts cover 52 square miles or more. Small rural towns are having difficulty finding new ways to compensate for the cuts. If fewer buses are used to pick up a larger number of students, ride times for students will become extremely long.

Scott Kuffel, superintendent of the expansive Geneseo school district, covering 262 square miles, called the cuts "Devastating.... We're already at 75 percent pro-ration, they're going to drop that down all the way to 19 cents on the dollar."

Chicago Public Schools has planned a \$5 million reduction to its bus fleet. With 54 schools due to be closed this year, the city's measure of the distance students have to travel to the new schools receiving them is from the closed school to the receiving school, not from their home to the receiving school.

School closures and inadequate transportation pose very serious dangers to students traveling longer distances to school, through dangerous neighborhoods and rival gang territories. Some communities are looking to build safety zones, areas deemed not hazardous to children, in which kids would be able to

walk or bicycle to school instead of taking a bus.

Cuts to basic services like school transportation reveal the class character of the policies of Democratic and Republican officials alike, and the sharpening of the class struggle. In January of this year, after New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg removed school bus drivers' seniority protections in order to make busing contracting bids "more competitive", bus drivers struck for over one month to fight the inevitable wage cuts and layoffs that would follow competitive bidding. The drivers' union, Amalgamated Transit Workers, isolated their strike and conceded Bloomberg's demand for cheaper drivers. More than a quarter of the drivers may lose their jobs this month, and those who remain may face a 20 percent wage cuts, and the elimination of health and pension benefits.



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