

New Bedford, Mass. public schools to cut 250 jobs

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The public school system of New Bedford, Massachusetts, announced at the end of May that it will eliminate 250 positions next year. This massive cut represents almost 14 percent of the school district's existing workforce, and teaching jobs make up half of the total to be cut. Included is the elimination of 52 jobs at the high school.

The city is blaming the layoffs on budget cuts as it plans for its 2014 fiscal year. But a familiar script is being followed as, under the guise of "turning around" underperforming schools, public schools are transformed into charters governed by the Common Core Standards. While the public school jobs are unlikely to be restored, teachers will be forced to compete for less secure charter school positions.

The schools' budget—about \$110 million this year, including one-time appropriations—will drop next year. This situation is worse than a flat-funded budget, which would already represent a cut because of inflation. The web site southcoasttoday.com reported that the schools' overall salary budget for next year will drop by 5 percent.

New Bedford, with a population of slightly less than 100,000, was the sixth-largest city in Massachusetts at the time of the 2010 census. One of the world's most important whaling ports in the 19th century, it still has a large fishing industry but has suffered from the collapse of fish populations off the coast of New England. It also has some manufacturing and textile plants, but suffers from high unemployment (around 10 percent for the first three months of this year) and a low median household income (\$37,500 as of 2011).

The Democratic administration of Governor Duval Patrick refers to New Bedford, Lowell, and other former centers of manufacturing with the euphemism "gateway cities." Patrick sees them as fertile ground for

training workers in vocational skills needed by international corporations. Underscoring that the attack on New Bedford teachers is part of a larger plan, School Committee member Marlene Pollack said at the committee's April 8 meeting that "Innovation Schools will show the state that we are serious about changing."

Pollack has also publicly espoused the cynical philosophy of the Obama administration, stating that "you know that whole thing: crisis in Chinese is the same word as opportunity."

The Massachusetts Senate has yet to pass a budget proposal for the fiscal year beginning July 1. Disagreements between it, the House, and the governor mean that the state budget probably won't be finalized before that date. This impasse will affect the more than \$130 million of state aid New Bedford receives every year.

According to the US census, New Bedford's homeownership rate (44.2 percent) was much lower than the state average (63.6 percent) between 2007 and 2011. As a result, the city's property taxes make up less than half of its total revenues; and nearly all of its public school budget comes from the state.

While New Bedford's per pupil expenditures—slightly more than \$13,000 in 2011—were about at the state average, parents and teachers were already being subjected to inadequate resources before the latest cuts.

In prior years, teachers were laid off at the beginning of the summer with a promise of being rehired once the budget was passed. This tactic—which leaves teachers with no certainty about their jobs—is common in Massachusetts. The web site of the New Bedford Educators Association, which represents teachers, carries no information about the latest attack on jobs.

Under the 2008-2011 teachers' union contract, the most recent available on the state's web site, the

highest possible salary for a teacher with 30 years of experience and a master's degree was \$74,000. By contrast, the incoming superintendent will start with a salary of \$185,000.

School Committee minutes give lists of field trips arranged "at no cost to district" (in other words, paid for by parents). Southcoasttoday.com reported that non-salary expenses were cut by nearly 20 percent in June 2011.

Even a cursory review of the school department's web site reveals that the attack on public education was being planned long before the latest budget process. In March 2012 the New Bedford Public Schools released a Request for Proposals for Innovation Schools, which included a detailed schedule for submission along with instructions for preparing a prospectus.

Between May 21 and June 3 a series of job postings have gone up on the district's web site, all for an Innovation School called the Renaissance Community School for the Arts and all stressing adherence to the Common Core Standards. While the Innovation Schools RFP (Request for Proposals) claims that teachers will not lose their union status, salaries, or benefits, this promise will be lost as charter school administrators force laid-off teachers to compete for jobs.

The Renaissance School will replace only a part of the Gomes School, which, according to School Committee minutes, is "teetering on Level 4 status" as an underperforming school. At the April 8 School Committee meeting, Mayor Jonathan Mitchell threatened that "if the District doesn't make their own changes, more charter schools will come to New Bedford." In other words, the elected School Committee will be ignored by charter school operators.

Similarly, class sizes in the public schools are likely to expand above 30 pupils after the cuts. On this topic the union contract already has no teeth, stating blandly that "the School Committee shall strive to achieve in conventional classes a maximum size not to exceed thirty (30) pupils per class" and that if class sizes go over 30 then "the professional employee shall have the right, with the Association, to meet with the Principal, or Superintendent, or both, to review this matter."

During School Committee deliberations on the cuts, member Marlene Pollack claimed that they are in part an adjustment to lower enrollment at the High School;

she cited a drop of 700 high school students in the past five years. However, state data show total public school enrollment of 12,988 in 2008 and 12,616 in 2013.



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