

# Classes resume in US amid school closures, teacher layoffs

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K-12 students are returning to schools throughout the US with larger class sizes, reduced staffs, expanded standardized testing, and the gutting of arts and humanities programs.

In Chicago, where nearly 50 schools closed over the summer, and Philadelphia, where 24 schools were shut, students are forced to walk longer distances to overcrowded schools through neighborhoods blighted by abandoned buildings and gang violence.

Meanwhile, as a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* put it, the new school year brings “the biggest revamps of U.S. public education in a decade,” referring to the widespread adoption of the corporate-backed set of testing standards known as the “Common Core.”

The “Common Core” is a set of national testing standards that emphasizes the so-called STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) while cutting out liberal arts and art classes. The drive to implement this program is in line with the demands of major corporations, which are seeking a workforce competent in these subjects, but without the “luxuries” of the liberal arts.

Over 45 states have adopted the Common Core standards for math and English, and over 40 states have said they will prioritize test scores in evaluating teachers over other measures. According to the *Journal*, four states have gone so far as to threaten to revoke the licenses of teachers who do not meet minimum test scores.

Charter schools—which are privately run but receive state funding—and voucher systems are likewise growing. The *Journal* reported that the number of charter schools in the US has more than doubled between 2003 and 2012, from 2,559 to 5,997.

The closing of public schools, the expansion of

charter schools, the victimization of teachers through the expansion of standardized testing—all have all been central elements of the Obama administration's education policy, which is supported by both parties and the teachers' unions.

Since Obama took office, over 300,000 state and local government education jobs have been eliminated, and hundreds of schools in cities throughout the country have been closed.

In the aftermath of the strike by 29,000 Chicago teachers last year, Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced the closure of 49 public schools throughout the city, and the layoff of over 3,000 teachers. As a result of the closures, 12,700 students are walking longer distances as schools began on Monday.

To ameliorate public outcry over the unsafe conditions created by the closures, the school district has hired 1,200 “safe passage” workers to watch the extended school routes. There were two homicides along these school routes in the summer alone, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*.

On Wednesday, Chicago's Board of Education approved an annual budget for the school system, including hundreds of millions of dollars in additional cuts. The proposal cuts spending on classrooms by \$68 million, and central office expenses by \$112 million.

The *Chicago Tribune* noted that some schools, located in the city's poorest neighborhoods, had their budgets slashed by \$3 million or more. They have been forced to slash arts, history, and science programs. Other schools are increasing student fees, with one school raising its fees from \$120 a year to \$200.

Philadelphia has implemented equally draconian measures. In May the Philadelphia school district's School Reform Commission voted on a radical budget that eliminated nearly all support staff from schools,

including librarians, secretaries and assistant principals.

In June, the city closed 24 schools and laid off almost 4,000 people, including 1,200 administrators, 646 teachers and 127 assistant principals.

Even after these cuts, Superintendent William R. Hite Jr. threatened to delay the beginning of the semester unless the district was able to raise additional funds. Earlier this month city officials said that they would provide \$50 million in additional aid to the district. The emergency funds are tied to the demand for \$133 million in new concessions from teachers and school employees, including a 10 percent pay cut for teachers.

The attack on K-12 education comes as Obama has opened a new offensive against higher education. Speaking earlier this month in New York, Obama outlined a program to slash higher-education funding and cut liberal arts programs from colleges in the name of “lowering tuition.”

Obama called for the creation of a national ranking system for universities by 2015, with federal and state funding tied to these rankings by 2018. Schools that do not cut costs sufficiently will face reductions in aid. In fact, his proposal consists of extending the market-based “reforms” of K-12 schools into the sphere of higher education.

All of these policies are part of a sweeping bipartisan attack on public education, designed to completely eradicate the institution as it has existed, wiping out educational opportunities for poor and working-class students.



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