

Philadelphia public school system begins classes amid massive budget crisis

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Classes opened for students in the Philadelphia public school system on Monday in the midst of one of the deepest financial crisis the district has ever faced. Earlier this year the cities' School Reform Commission (SRC), the state-appointed body overseeing the school district, passed a budget that contained a \$304 million shortfall, calling into question the future of education in the city.

Schools within the district, one of the largest in the US, are currently operating with severe shortages. All facilities with fewer than 600 students—more than 60 percent of the total—lost the services of full-time guidance counselors, assistant principals and other needed faculty members. “This budget eviscerates...some of the things essential to schools being [called] school,” said SRC board member Joseph Dworetzky at the time of the budget's unveiling.

In place of full-time staff members, “roving” counselors have been appointed, some tasked with following the activities of more than 3,500 students over several different schools. The same is being done for school nurses, with each nurse now tasked with overseeing the health over 1,500 students.

Arts and sports programs have been restricted to a single semester a year at all schools. Items such as textbooks, paper, and pencils are in short supply. Several schools lacked the means to inform parents of the date classes would even be resuming, due to shortages of postage stamps.

“To be honest, I'm really scared to death,” said Gail Kantor, a teacher at Julia deBurgos School about the atmosphere pervading at this year's opening. “All of the excitement has been replaced with threats, greed, and uncertainties,” she added.

At the end of the previous school year, Superintendent William Hite, Jr. laid off nearly 4,000

teachers and school staff in anticipation of the current budget shortfall. After threats that the beginning of the school year could be delayed due to lack of funds to run facilities, the district was able to borrow nearly \$50 million from the city, enabling the partial rehiring of those teachers laid off.

The budget crisis comes in the wake of the closure of several dozen schools announced by Hite at the end of the previous year. Due to these combined factors, class-sizes have grown, with hundreds of teachers reporting classrooms of over 30, and in some cases 40, students. This is a violation of the contract between teachers and the district, which limits class sizes to 30 students in elementary and 33 in high schools.

The massive influx of students—some estimates placing the number as high as 10,000—entering different schools from last year has raised anxiety and fears about safety. The city has reportedly hired an all-volunteer force of safety-monitors to help escort students to their new destinations.

Hite has sought to preserve the veneer of concern for the plight of students and teachers affected by his policies, saying, “We still want guidance services in every school.... We need a lot more assistant principals. We need a lot more teachers.... We need music the full year. We need sports the full year.” Such comments are meant to paper over the fact that Hite has presided over one of the deepest austerity programs the cities' education system has ever seen.

Political officials at the state and city level, Democrat and Republican, have seized on the crisis to demand further cuts in spending. Republican Governor Tom Corbett has reportedly obtained several million dollars of potential aid but is choosing to withhold it in order to push for further concessions from city teachers, including pay-cuts of up to 10 percent district-wide.

Negotiations are currently being held between representatives of the school district and both the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers and the Commonwealth Association of School Administrators. As much as \$100 million is being demanded of teachers by the SRC, along with another \$30 million from other city workers.

Union representatives have signaled their willingness to participate in the further impoverishment of Philadelphia's teachers. "Our folks will do everything they probably can to make it work for the kids," said PFT Vice President Arlene Kempin, later indicating that the union and city representatives were "still talking."

The unions have already accepted massive givebacks, agreeing to the implementation of a pay freeze as well as significant concessions on healthcare. Thanks to complicity from local unions, since 2011 the city has eliminated over 3,000 teachers, or 28 percent of its teaching force.

The slashing of basic funds in the education system is a violation to Pennsylvania's state mandate, which requires school districts to provide an education that is "thorough and efficient," including arts and sports.

Nearly 40 percent of all Philadelphia school children are enrolled in one of the cities' rapidly expanding charter schools. The SRC has served as a chief facilitator in the attempts to privatize the city's school system, denying funds to impoverished neighborhood schools while awarding them to charter operators.

The attack on public education is a part of a broader policy being spearheaded by both Democrats and Republicans at a national level. President Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" program is designed to force cash-strapped school systems to compete for funds with local charter schools on the basis of standardized testing and merit-based pay. School districts that fail to do so risk their schools being shut down or transformed into for-profit ventures.



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