

# Philadelphia student dies from asthma attack after schools cut nursing staff

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A Philadelphia, Pennsylvania student died September 25th from an asthma attack she likely suffered at William C. Bryant Elementary School, which had no nurse on duty that day.

The death of Laporshia Massey, 12, highlights the human cost of the sweeping budget cuts imposed this year on Philadelphia schools, which have cut nursing staff by a third since 2011.

The School District of Philadelphia this year passed a “doomsday budget” that cuts funding for individual schools by as much as 25 percent, depriving them of guidance counselors, art and sport programs, even paper and textbooks. The plan also includes 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 school.

After Massey was brought home by a faculty member, her father, Daniel Burch, took her to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, where she was later pronounced dead.

Mr. Burch said he believes his daughter died because the school did not have a nurse on duty who could have diagnosed that his daughter was having a severe asthma attack, and has hired an attorney.

Bryant Elementary has a nurse on duty only two days out of the week. This year, the district had only 197 nurses to cover nearly 200,000 children. This was down by a third from 2011, when the district had 298 nurses.

“There just aren’t enough eyes, ears and hands on deck [to watch all the students]... If we lose even one child, that doesn’t speak well of us,” Philadelphia nurse Eileen DiFranco told NBC.

A survey published by the Education Law Center in May found that the majority of Philadelphia school nurses are forced to attend between two and three

buildings each, also noting that nearly 70 percent of all medical treatment carried out in the district is conducted by unqualified staff and teaching aides.

In Philadelphia, over one in five school students is classified as asthmatic, more than double the national average. This number roughly corresponds to the percentage of children within the city living in poverty.

“Once she got home, it wasn’t like she walked in here like she was [just a little] sick,” said Sherri Mitchell, Burch’s fiancée, “she ran up the steps and got on the [inhaler] machine because she knew the procedures of what she needed to do to save her life.”

Prior to the announcement of the School Reform Commission’s austerity budget in May, the district announced that it would close 26 schools, or 10 percent of the schools in the district, displacing nearly 10,000 students.

Philadelphia’s Democratic Mayor Michael Nutter has called on parents and private donors to make up for the school’s budget shortfall, calling for \$500,000 in donations to pay for school supplies.

Last week Tom Corbett, Pennsylvania’s Republican governor, agreed to release \$45 million in funds for education purposes to the city which had been tied to concessions from Philadelphia schoolteachers.

Jay Pagni, a spokesman for Corbett, said that the decision was unconnected to Massey’s death, and that the money will not be used to hire more nurses.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, “The state had been withholding the money until the district obtained work-rule changes in its contract with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers.”

Charles Zogby, Corbett’s budget secretary, said, “There’s been a lot of movement in the area of reform,” including an agreement with the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers to allow teachers to be

transferred out of schools regardless of seniority.

In a letter responding to the release of funds, American Federation of Teachers union head Randi Weingarten declared that “thanks to the united voices of thousands of parents, students, teachers and community activists from Philadelphia and across the country, Gov. Corbett has finally done the right thing,” without mentioning the union’s cave-in on work rules.

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, and coordinated from the White House. Since taking office, the Obama administration has overseen the destruction of more than 300,000 teaching jobs and the closure of 4,000 public schools.



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