

Northern Virginia public schools face budget crisis, layoffs

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Last week, officials from Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) in Northern Virginia announced a \$140 million deficit in the district's \$2.5 billion operating budget for 2014. Attributing the crisis to the costs of higher student enrollment, rising health insurance prices and declines in taxes, Superintendent Karen Garza has proposed more than 50 individual budget cuts that, if enacted, will devastate the public school system.

Some of the proposed cuts include the elimination of 1,722 staff positions, including guidance counselors, kindergarten teachers and assistant principals, as well as every FCPS employee being furloughed for one day per year. Also to be attacked are programs teaching foreign languages and sports, the latter seeing a user fee attached to it as the condition for its continued existence. Class sizes would also increase by at least one student.

This is the most serious fiscal challenge that FCPS has ever faced," said Garza in an announcement on the FCPS website. The *Washington Post* quoted her as saying, "we will have to make cuts and it will affect schools, it will affect student programming, unfortunately, and it will affect just the operation of our system as a whole. So it's to the bone, I would say."

Garza also predicted a 2 percent increase in enrollment by 2015, which would entail an added expenditure of \$34.3 million. "We will need the best thinking of our employees, families, and community members to help us find solutions. Unfortunately, at this point, we will need to explore all options for reducing our expenditures," stated her FCPS announcement.

Fairfax County, home to hundreds of private contracting firms tied to the US government, is one of the wealthiest regions in the country. The median

income of the county is nearly \$106,000, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The county's school system serves nearly 185,000 children.

FCPS has undergone budget cuts numerous times in recent years. Class sizes have shifted upward as teacher-student ratios have been increased by the school board. The Washington Area Board of Education has noted that Fairfax County currently possesses the largest class sizes in the metropolitan-D.C. region.

A recent property tax bill passed by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors reflects the current budget crisis within the public school system. Last spring, a bill that increased the property tax by 2 cents for every \$100 of value in homes was rejected by the Board of Supervisors, which instead enacted an increase of a single cent. The estimated loss due to the failed legislation amounts to \$30 million in revenue, or nearly 20 percent of the current budget gap in the school system. Garza's call for the significant downsizing of FCPS has been a major theme since she was hired by the school system this past summer. Before joining FCPS, Garza was superintendent of the Lubbock Independent School District in Texas, where she oversaw significant budget cuts and closures.

Since 2008, Fairfax County has seen an increase of student poverty within its schools by nearly 40 percent, or 2,500 individuals. This number is almost 10 times the amount seen by the region 15 years ago. <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2012/12/31/dchu-d31.html> The attack on public education in Northern Virginia comes right after the passing of a "Doomsday" austerity budget in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). The austerity budget has created massive shortages, a loss of nearly 4,000 faculty positions, increased class sizes, and the layoffs of one third of school nurses. Last month, a student from William C.

Bryant Elementary in West Philadelphia died of an asthma attack when there was no qualified nurse at her school to tend to her.
<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/10/22/phil-o22.html> Likewise, earlier this year, the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) system underwent a closure of 15 schools, or about 10 percent of all schools in the district. The assault on public education is a bipartisan policy being pushed by both Democratic and Republican politicians alike, in both President Barack Obama's Race to the Top program and George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind. These programs aim to close down public schools and promote the growth of charter schools in their stead.



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