

Austerity and shift to privatization leave Philadelphia schools in tatters

Paavo Grant
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The School District of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the eighth largest public school system in the United States, is experiencing a budget gap of \$304 million for the 2013-2014 school year. As a result, 24 public schools, 10 percent of the total, have been shut down. This has caused a massive displacement of students and significant overcrowding, with reports of up to 60 students in a single classroom.

In response to the implementation of draconian austerity measures, the state government has released \$45 million in federal money that had been withheld from the district until “fiscal, operational, and academic” reforms—including drastic attacks in the wages and benefits of the teachers—were implemented. These included \$133 million in salary cutbacks and health care concessions from teachers. The salary reductions ranged up to 13 percent. Teachers are now required to contribute 13 percent toward their health insurance and there will be no pay increases until at least 2017.

The budget cuts have had a devastating impact on the Philadelphia school system. Staff is ill-equipped to handle the number of students for whom they are now responsible. Sparse instructional materials and inadequate counseling services are now the norm. This reality is in stark contrast to the Pennsylvania state law that requires that all students be provided with a “thorough and efficient system of education.” In response to almost 900 complaints from parents, the state asserted that these problems are the responsibility of the local school district.

The complaints illustrate the depth of the crisis of public education in Philadelphia. Over 80 schools have been accused of failing to meet legally mandated services—especially for special education children. The most common objections include a lack of nurses

monitoring children with severe disabilities and a lack of guidance counselors. Given that there is one counselor per 367 students, counseling services for troubled students who require it are effectively non-existent. The American Counseling Association recommends one counselor for every 250 students, a figure that is itself less than adequate.

The cutbacks have had very concrete consequences. The lack of a school nurse likely contributed to the death of a student who suffered an asthma attack.

The chief financial officer of the Philadelphia school district, Matthew Stanski admitted, “right now we are in a funding situation where we are unable to provide basic education services for students.” This state of affairs, while most acute in the state’s largest city, is part of a long-term trend in Pennsylvania. In 1975, the state government provided 55 percent of funds for public school districts. State funding has now fallen to 36 percent, placing extreme financial stress on many districts. Between 2010 and 2013, state funding for Philadelphia public schools dropped by \$145 million.

It is no surprise that the school closings in Philadelphia have severely affected poor communities. According to the National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, 81 percent of students in the Philadelphia school district are classified as low-income, and it is these young people who are most in need of more services, not fewer.

While one public school after another closes its doors, for-profit charter schools continue to open. About 61,000 Philadelphia students are now enrolled in charter schools, approximately one-third of the student population.

Advocates claim that charter schools perform better than public schools and that they are the key to providing every student with a quality education.

However, such claims have been repeatedly exposed as biased or unfounded. Charter schools lack effective oversight and have been known to cheat on standardized tests. When an anti-cheating regulation was implemented in three Philadelphia charter schools, their test scores dropped dramatically.

In addition, charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately run, are an open invitation to corruption and outright theft of public money. In a recent case, Dorothy Brown, the owner of four charter schools in Philadelphia, was accused of stealing over \$6.7 million.

Further austerity is coming to Philadelphia schools. Even if the city extracts all of the “labor concessions” it is currently demanding, that will not close the budget shortfall, leading to more school closures and staff layoffs. The authorities are trying to lay the basis for future cuts. In 2012, the city’s School Reform Commission hired a private consulting firm, paying it \$2.7 million to design the “right sizing” of the public school system.

At the same time that these cuts are being made to Philadelphia public education, the state is spending \$400 million to build a new prison complex in the city.

The implosion of public education is not exclusively happening in Philadelphia; rather, Philadelphia is part of a national trend to gut education for working class children.

The Obama administration, continuing the work of its predecessors, is undermining public education throughout the country. Major metropolises, such as New York City and Chicago, have experienced similar attacks to those in Philadelphia, including the mass closings of public schools and their replacement by charters. In New York, 26 schools have been closed, while in Chicago the total is 54. These actions have been taken not to improve education, but to cut costs while providing profit opportunities for private business.

The current attack on American public education is being carried out under the auspices of President Obama’s “Race to the Top” program—a counter-reform that is cloaked with progressive rhetoric. The Obama program is a continuation of President Bush’s “No Child Left Behind.” These are part of the bipartisan social counterrevolution that seeks to claw back all of the gains made by the working class over the last

century.



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