

New attacks on Boston Public School workers, students

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10 March 2014

On February 26, Interim Superintendent John McDonough of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) proposed a fiscal year 2015 budget that would include hundreds of layoffs of teachers and administrative staff and deep cuts to student transportation services. The School Committee will vote on McDonough's budget on March 26.

More than 200 teacher and instructor jobs are threatened in the proposed budget. Targeted are 43 "regular ed" teachers, 41 bilingual aides, 38 kindergarten teachers, and 34 special education teachers.

The status of 1,000 other teachers is also precarious. In an attack on job security, Massachusetts public schools have a longstanding practice of issuing layoff notices in the spring to teachers who are then rehired later in the summer. On March 4, Boston announced that 1,000 of its approximately 4,400 teacher positions are being posted for next year and that external candidates can apply.

Between 110 and 125 out of 800 administrative staff positions would also be eliminated under the plan. Before publicizing the budget, McDonough sent the staff a letter stating that "we...are now calling on each of you to rethink our notions of service, of support, and of accountability." In other words, he will seek to extract from them as many benefit and salary concessions as possible.

The letter also declared to 800 workers that "absent a final resolution to the budget, I need to inform all central office staff that at this time I cannot guarantee your employment beyond June 30. This extends to all central office employees." To implement this attack, the BPS have opened an "Office of Human Capital."

In addition to layoffs, McDonough's budget proposes to cut \$11 million by forcing thousands of students to

ride public transportation instead of dedicated school buses. It would expand from 1,862 to 4,586 the number of seventh and eighth graders using MBTA transit passes, and "will allow some 6th grade students to access MBTA passes." The budget refers to buses for high school students whose schools are within a mile of a subway stop as "shuttle buses," and proposes to cut them.

These cuts are presented as a favor to students despite the obvious risks to their wellbeing. While McDonough is silent about whether school bus drivers will be laid off or have their hours reduced, a *Boston Globe* columnist wrote in favor of the proposal on Saturday, complaining that school buses cost \$1,300 per child per year, while the cost of a transit pass would be only \$225.

At the beginning of last October, the city's school bus drivers staged a wildcat strike in defiance of union bureaucrats and management company Veolia. Then-mayor Thomas Menino said of the drivers that "we will not allow them to use our students as pawns." The city has no such compunction when it comes to cutting costs.

McDonough projects a \$100 million shortfall for fiscal year 2015, which he blames on increases in workers' wages and benefits, along with cuts in federal and state funding. A chart included with the budget press release complains that average teacher salaries will have risen by 16 percent in the seven years from fiscal years 2009 to 2015. In reality, these increases barely cover the cost of inflation. The starting salary for Boston teachers is \$49,000 per year, in an area where apartment rents can be \$2,000 or more per month.

Teachers and administrators are not the only ones suffering. According to 2011 data cited by the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless, more than

13,000 high school students statewide are homeless. Of these, nearly 6,000 live unaccompanied by an adult.

A second chart in the budget press release predicts a \$37 million cost increase for staff benefits in fiscal year 2015. This amount could easily be covered by a tax on the more than 1,400 Boston residents earning more than \$1 million per year. Millionaires are so plentiful in the city that they have formed a thriving Meetup group interested in “polo, dining, fine coffee, travel, cruise ships...Las Vegas, fine wine, scotch & bourbon, and 12meter sailing.”

Of the projected BPS budget shortfall, \$32 million is the result of cuts in federal and state aid. For fiscal year 2015, the city of Boston has promised to fund slightly more than this amount—\$36 million—from sources not usually a part of the school budget.

While local aid to Boston from the state, known as Chapter 70 funds in Massachusetts, has leveled off since fiscal year 2012, the amount of these funds going to the schools has dropped significantly. In fiscal year 2000, 30 percent of funding for the BPS came from the state. While only 11 percent is projected for fiscal year 2015. Governor Deval Patrick, who boasts about “increasing the ease of doing business” in the state, has seen to it that corporate income taxes are kept well below the national average.

Among the costs adding to the projected budget shortfall is the transition to Common Core State Standards (CCSS). While Massachusetts has formally adopted CCSS, which represent an additional threat to teachers’ jobs, the transition is expected to last at least until the end of calendar year 2015. Nonetheless, PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) tests associated with CCSS will be “field-tested” in more than 1,000 Massachusetts schools this month.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association, which claims to “accept and support the interdependence of professionals and unionism,” is working hand-in-glove with governments on the imposition of CCSS. Its web site links to the national web site of Teach Plus, an organization whose fellows have written op-ed pieces for the corporate media in favor of CCSS.

The web site of the Boston Teachers Union offers its members only a demoralized response to the proposed budget cuts. Rather than calling for any independent action by teachers and staff, it argues that the city is

powerless to raise additional revenue and that “we need to look to the state for relief. Nothing else will do.”

New mayor Martin Walsh, a Democrat with deep ties to local trade unions, poses as a friend of workers but will do little for the public schools beyond some additional city funds committed for fiscal year 2015. His biography on the city’s web site boasts that while in the state legislature he “helped pass a law that allows the city to transform underperforming schools into pilot, magnet and in-district charter schools.” Walsh is the co-founder of a charter school.



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