

Boston parents, students oppose public school budget cuts

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Several hundred people turned out Wednesday evening for a budget hearing in downtown Boston organized by the Boston School Committee. The public hearing was one of three such events planned by the committee to address a more than \$100 million shortfall in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) budget for fiscal year 2015.

Dozens of students, parents and others testified in opposition to the proposed cuts, which threaten more than 200 teacher and instructor jobs and as many as 125 administrative staff positions. Also proposed is a controversial plan to expand the number of seventh and eighth grade students who will be required to ride public transportation instead of receiving dedicated school bus service.

Opening the hearing, School Committee Chairman Michael O'Neill claimed that the cuts were needed despite BPS receiving a 4 percent increase in its budget. It is clear the public hearings have been organized to allow those affected by the cuts to let off steam, while the decision has already been made to implement the cost-cutting measures.

Parents spoke out against the impact the staffing cuts would have on the quality of education in neighborhood schools, with the jobs of teachers, bilingual aides, and special education teachers on the chopping block. In addition to job cuts, many schools face the elimination of arts and music, physical education and other classes.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Erica Sanchez, a parent from East Boston, after the hearing. She is particularly concerned about the availability of early childhood education. "We have a lot of need," she said. "They have built a new school, but we're afraid that there won't be enough space for all the children.

"Some of the kids can go to Head Start when they are little, but all of the children are not accepted into the program. I didn't have the opportunity to send my kids there. I have three kids: ages 17, 14, and 9.

"I know there are money problems, but we need to use the money for the schools that really need it. The students are the most important thing. The priority should be for the students, since they are little.

"For me, as a mother, I think it's not fair for the parents to hear every single day that the child is not making improvement, the parents are not doing well. I'm not a teacher, I'm just a mother, even when I do my best."

Erica said there should be more extended daycare provided, and that teachers told her "they don't receive the support they need to help the students." She feels it is the responsibility of the schools to help the children, adding, "We should come together and work together—BPS, BTU [Boston Teachers Union], and the community."

A strong contingent attended the hearing to oppose cutbacks in adult education and programs that assist at-risk students. Daina Amazan, 17, from Dorchester, attends the West Roxbury Academy, enrolled in the Academy of Business in Career Services.

"The Re-Engagement Center helps teenagers who have dropped out, and they want help and they don't know what steps to take," she told us. "So the center helps with a lot of things: GED, night school, online classes and more."

Daina said she has benefited so much from the program and it should not be cut. "They're saying that they need to cut some of the staff," she said, "when more resources would be better for the students."

She added, "I had dropped out, and now I'm enrolled in school and they help you to keep on track. It's a nonprofit organization; they should work with us. They should support the kids because they are the future."

Samuel Pierce testified at the hearing about the proposed cuts to student transportation, which would see the elimination of school bus transportation for some students, requiring them to take public transportation

instead. BPS aims to save \$11 million through the cuts.

Speaking to the WSWWS after the hearing, he said, “I think that if the School Committee can approve a budget to allow over \$10 million to fix doors, they can definitely find \$11 million to allow students to get to and from school safely every day.”

He added, “We’re not talking about high school students who are 16, who might have their own vehicles. We’re talking about 13-year-olds, 14-year-olds, because in seventh grade you’re talking about kids that age.

“If you think about the history of the United States, Benjamin Franklin dropped out of school in the sixth grade in Boston. So now you’re basically asking future Benjamin Franklins to navigate some of the challenges of any urban community. Who knows what those will ultimately be? And now they’re being exposed to high crime, and violence, and that’s unnecessary.”

Samuel pointed out that the city was granting financial breaks to private businesses such as the Boston Bruins hockey team: “I love the Bruins, but when they’re giving millions of dollars to people like the Redstones who own Viacom, and to build supermarkets and things of that nature, they should be able to allocate \$11 million to our school children to be able to get to and from school.”

He added, “This specific area is a concern of mine, mainly because of the historical significance of transportation in the city with school busing in the 70s. So in order to really make one Boston, one of the things we need to do is to make it easier for our young people to navigate the city. We should not be expecting some of our young people, who are still developing, to deal with one more challenge when they’re trying to go to school.”

Judy Rouse received strong support from the hearing audience when she testified that the public schools were being asked to sacrifice when the city’s millionaires and corporations were not.

“The poor, we’re constantly begging for little services that should be provided to us because we do pay taxes,” Judy told us after the hearing. She said the rich “overwork us, underpay us, then charge us for the products and don’t give back to our kids or our community. Where’s the justice in that?”

She asked, “When is it going to be the poor people’s turn to be able to get a good education and come up out of poverty and be equal with everybody else? That’s all we’ve been asking for the past 40 years: equal education, equal living wages, equality.”

Referring to the cuts in student transportation, Judy said, “I have a 12-year-old. They have to be in school by 7:00

or 6:45 and in the wintertime it’s still dark. I live in Dorchester and it’s dark—the crime never sleeps.”

Gesturing to the School Committee members at the front of the hall, she added, “They’re not thinking about us at all, they’re just thinking about themselves and self-interest. I’ll bet you anything that none of those people right there have kids in Boston Public Schools. They are not going to be affected by the budget cuts. It’s going to be regular people like me and my friend.”

Referring to the threat to the jobs of school bus drivers, she told us, “They’re trying to get rid of good union jobs, good workers, good residents that pay their taxes, for cheap labor, for a cheaper price. That’s what they want to do. Put all the kids on the T, get rid of the bus drivers, it’s union-busting.”

“We need to stick together and we need solidarity,” she said, adding, “The corporations are international, and we need to organize internationally to stop them. Austerity is not limited to Boston or anywhere else. We need to stand up and let them know that we the voters have a say-so, too.

“All the major people, players, in Congress are heirs and heiresses; they’ve got money. We should have it so that if you’ve never worked a day in your life, you haven’t been a laborer, then you shouldn’t write laws or legislation because it doesn’t affect you. Hopefully, in a better world, that’s what it’s going to look like.”

A final public hearing is scheduled for March 18, and the School Committee will vote on the budget on March 26.



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