

New school year starts with educational funding crisis in US

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As the new school year begins throughout the US, many school districts across the country are struggling with huge and systemic funding crises. The cuts have severely undermined conditions in the nation's 99,000 public schools, which teach 50 million pre-kindergarten to 12th grade students.

The Obama administration's policy of declining federal support to public education has been compounded by state-level tax cuts, austerity and budget cuts. Education is under siege from all quarters: states have never restored the massive cuts imposed from 2007 on, costs are rising, there are demands for round after round of standardized testing, more students are living in poverty and student populations are increasing.

Last week a judge declared Texas's school finance system unconstitutional for the second time. In 2011, Texas cut public education by a whopping \$5.4 billion, prompting 600 school districts to sue on the basis that they no longer had the resources to educate children.

Schools sought protection from the cuts under the state constitution's mandate for a "fair and efficient" system to provide a "general diffusion of knowledge."

In the course of the litigation process, the governor reinstated over \$3 billion worth of the cuts last year, but as Texas is the fifth most unequal state in the nation, huge portions of the school system are drastically underfunded. The court ruling found that the state fails to provide adequate funding or distribute it fairly among wealthy and poor districts.

The issue now goes to the state legislature, which is tasked with designing a new system for the state's 5 million K-12 students. Since 1993, Texas has been under a "Robin Hood" funding formula, which requires districts with high property values to turn over part of what they collect to poorer districts. The poorer districts argued that the funds are not sufficient and the court concurred that the system "cannot provide a constitutionally adequate education for all Texas schoolchildren."

Earlier in the spring, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled that

the state's funding of public schools was also unconstitutional, demanding that two matching funding streams, which helped poorer school districts, be restored. The matching funds had been slashed after the recession.

News reports revealed that Kansas schools were eliminating teachers aides, school specialists and classroom teachers, cancelling textbook orders and even removing light bulbs from the school to cut utility bills. This year Tea Party proponent Republican Governor Sam Brownback has proposed K-12 cuts, which will put per-pupil general school aid at an unworkable level of 17 percent below pre-recession funding.

In response, the Kansas lawsuit demands the state adhere to the "adequacy" of education defined under the so-called "Rose standards." Courts in Alabama, Arkansas, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas have also adopted this series of seven general competency requirements arising from a landmark 1989 Kentucky case. The Kansas decision may influence courts considering other similar cases including in New York and Connecticut.

In Ohio, the state's constitutional standard itself, for "thorough and efficient" public schools throughout the state, is under attack by those seeking to profit from the proliferation of cheaper for-profit charter schools.

Across the board, the drastic increase in social inequality within public education has created terrible and apparent deprivation and lack of opportunity, mirroring the rising income disparity within the US as a whole. The egalitarian and democratic conceptions advanced by the early champions of American public education, including Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann, have been repudiated by the political establishment. The "general diffusion of knowledge" to all young people, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, is being replaced with a class-based system for the privileged few.

The sources of the crisis are both national and local. On the national level, state budgets are providing less per-pupil funding from kindergarten through 12th grade than they did

six years ago—and often far less, according to a Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) study issued last March, the most recent statistics available. The organization points out that at least 35 states are providing less per-pupil funding than before the recession, and 14 states have cut this allocation by more than 10 percent. Additionally, 15 states made further cuts for the 2013-14 school year, when the supposed “recovery” was in full effect.

In the US, education is subject to an anarchic patchwork of funding, with 44 percent of total education resources coming from the states, subject to differing rules and regulations. In the wake of the 2008 financial collapse, this funding model was largely upended by unprecedented cuts. Localities, if they could, resorted to raising property taxes on homeowners or businesses or other levies to address these state shortfalls. Today, property taxes are also on the decline, down 2.1 percent in the 12-month period ending March 2013, according to the most recent figures.

In a few states, funding has been increased this fiscal year, but it is not sufficient to make up for the cuts over past years. For example, the Alliance for Quality Education found a \$5.9 billion shortfall in state funding for the New York schools. Staffing levels in Pennsylvania are at a 10-year low. In North Carolina, education funding is \$500 million less than before the recession despite a dramatic gain in student population.

This assault has been spearheaded nationally by the Obama administration, which has promoting competitive grants and business opportunities to secure the privatization of education and the enrichment of the financial sector. Educational inequality is clearly US policy.

Under conditions of rising poverty in 2013-14, Obama oversaw a cut in spending for Title 1, the major federal assistance program for high-poverty schools, to the tune of 12 percent. Title I is the largest federal program supporting elementary and secondary education in the US and was implemented in 1965 during the short-lived “War on Poverty” to improve the education of disadvantaged students.

In a parallel fashion, the net effect in 2013-14 on federal spending on disabled education was an 11 percent cut. Meanwhile there has been a huge increase in the number of students qualifying for special education.

According the Federal Education Budget Project, “The population of students served under IDEA [federal special education] has grown at nearly twice the rate of the general education population. During the 25-year period between 1980 and 2005, the IDEA population increased by 37 percent, while the general education population grew by only 20 percent. Moreover, students served under IDEA today account for about 13 percent of the total education

population, up from about 10 percent in the 1980s.”

These cuts in Title 1 and IDEA, include the effects of the sequestration budget cuts, sold by Obama to the American people as a “fair and balanced,” while cutting billions of dollars from core government services.

This school year’s Title I and IDEA levels promise to be higher than last year, but are not restored to pre-sequestration levels.

However, while leaving the ever-growing numbers of poor and disabled children behind, the federal budget agreement found substantial funds to increase “school safety” programs to \$140 million to facilitate the increased militarization of K-12 schools. It also provided \$248 million to charter school grants—to further the privatization of education—\$288 million for Teacher Incentive Funds (pay-for-performance)—to undermine teachers’ standards of living—and \$378 million for standardized state assessment tests—to justify the assault on public education.

In the clearest single statistic demonstrating the unremitting assault on public education, the CBPP study pointed to the continued national trend of increasing class sizes. A survey of school administrators found that 54 percent of schools nationally increased class sizes for the 2011-12 school year and projected a growth of 57 percent for 2012-13.

Another measure of the same trajectory is per-student spending. This has declined in almost all US states over the period FY2008 to FY2014. This makes explicit the fact that the profit system no longer seeks to educate youth.

The biggest losers in per-student spending were: Alabama (declining a staggering \$1,242 per student), Wisconsin (-\$1,038), Kansas (-\$950), Idaho (-\$930), New Mexico (-\$874) and California (-\$873). Multiply these numbers by tens of thousands of students and it becomes apparent why cities are closing dozens of schools, after-school programs are drying up, and art, music and physical education are becoming a thing of the past.

Early childhood education was also been hard hit, with 27 of the 40 states that funded pre-K reducing the per-child funding amount for the 2011-12 school year. Among educators, early childhood education is often cited as the single most critical factor in a child’s future education development. Last year, 16 states cut enrollment in these pre-kindergarten programs.



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