

Students forced to endure sweltering temperatures in Southern California classrooms

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The recent heat wave during the first three weeks of school in September left teachers and students in Long Beach, California sweltering in their classrooms.

Classroom temperatures often exceeded 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37 degrees Celsius). Some district schools recorded temperatures as high as 130 degrees Fahrenheit. With many of its buildings dating back to the 1930s, 70 percent of Long Beach Unified School District schools have no air conditioning. Long Beach is the second-largest city in the Greater Los Angeles Area.

According to the Teachers Association of Long Beach (TALB), the union representing teachers in the district, there were multiple complaints of children sent to school nurses with nausea, headaches, and bloody noses as a result of the heat.

Many parents expressed their anger at a recent school board meeting. Erin Nunez told school board members how sitting in an overheated classroom had affected her son's health. "I have two children being forced to learn in an unhealthy environment," she told the board. She said the temperature in her son's classroom had hit 102 degrees and that he had nearly suffered heat stroke as a result. She questioned why the district had spent no money at all on air-conditioned classrooms.

Nunez was also later interviewed by a local NBC news affiliate. "If a child was left in a 102-degree car, the parents would be indicted for that act. Yet these children are being allowed to sit in these 102 to 104 degree classrooms!" she said.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers at Longfellow Elementary in Bixby Knolls—also a Long Beach Unified District school—about the oppressive conditions there.

The teachers related stories of parents contributing funds to buy window-mounted air conditioning units as the district does not provide any itself. One first grade teacher spent \$600 of her own money to purchase a unit.

A kindergarten teacher said, "The heat wave basically lasted the first 18 days of school. Temperatures in my classroom were in the high 80s, and some teachers had over 90 degrees. The majority of us are without air conditioning."

One fifth grade teacher whose classroom directly faces the sunlight for most of the day kept a log of classroom temperatures which he showed to our reporters. "Last year it was also this hot, and the principal told me I should keep a log. So I did. One day it was 105 degrees! My thermometer broke over the summer, however, and even that wasn't replaced. I decided not to keep another log this year, not only because of the broken thermometer, but also after passing on the previous year's log, nothing whatsoever was done to put AC into our classrooms."

Instead, the teacher added, "The district had the windows tinted, lowering the classroom temperature by only five degrees. It's like sitting in a 100-degree car. If you have tinted windows, it's only 95 degrees. How is that any better?"

Lisa, another fifth grade teacher, said, "It's been over 100 degrees in here. Part of our problem is that we are across from the computer room, which blows hot air into the hallway. Its door has to stay open because it allows the computer system to stay cool. Otherwise, it would shut down the computers in the school.

"Usually the air is stagnant in the room. Some of the parents chipped in and bought a window air

conditioner. I turn it on by 7:15 to cool off the room before the students arrive. But once 35 big fifth graders come in with all that body heat, it's not cool any more.

"There are health issues. I have two students who are asthmatic. During the first week of school when it was really bad, I had three students who had headaches. I sent them to the nurse, who put wet paper towels on their necks.

"It's ridiculous!" Lisa said. "I asked the PTA about the Measure K money that is supposed to help the schools. They were told that Measure K specifically excludes purchasing air conditioners. Our special ed teacher said there were lots of window AC units sitting in the warehouse which were removed from schools that had been closed.

Measure K is a local measure passed to "build, renovate, and improve" schools in the Long Beach School District. When TALB President Virginia Torres was asked if Measure K funds could be used to supply schools with air conditioning, the response was a terse, "I don't think so." The union sent out a letter to parents claiming that "the school district cannot afford to provide air conditioning in all of our facilities in the near term."

The day after news crews were trying to interview parents, students, and teachers, a worried Superintendent Chris Steinhauser was seen walking down the hallways of Longfellow Elementary. A kindergarten teacher approached him and said, "Mr. Steinhauser, I invite you to teach my kindergarten class. It was 89 degrees today!" He smiled uncomfortably and said he "understood what the teachers were facing" as he had taught in a hot bungalow many years ago.

The teachers union, for its part, has done virtually nothing to address the miserable conditions facing teachers and students. On its website, TALB boasts that it has been working with the district to find solutions for schools without air conditioning. This involves a grossly inadequate pilot program at only 12 selected schools which will be equipped with swamp coolers, ceiling fans, pedestal mounted oscillating fans and reflective window film.

The Long Beach Unified School district is the third largest in all of California, employing over 8,000 teachers and staff. The Obama administration, in collusion with state governments and the trade unions,

has worked to systematically starve public school districts like Long Beach of funding and clear the way for private charter schools.

It has done this through the implementation of a multitude of regressive programs at both the federal and state level, including Race to the Top, Common Core, and the billions of dollars cut from public education under the Democratic Administration of Governor Jerry Brown.



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