

Boston School Committee approves austerity budget, school closures

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27 March 2015

The Boston School Committee on Wednesday night voted unanimously to approve a fiscal year 2016 budget that includes the layoff of hundreds of teachers and central administration staff, makes cuts to food and transportation services, and shutters two schools.

The vote followed a series of meetings in which public hearings were attended by hundreds of students, parents and school workers to protest the planned cuts. After allowing city residents to let off steam, Boston Public Schools (BPS) Interim Superintendent John McDonough made clear that in the final analysis decisions about funding children's education would be subordinate to the capitalist market.

"We do have a fundamental structural imbalance that must be reconciled," McDonough said Wednesday. "The cost of doing business is increasing each year at a rate that far outpaces our revenue growth." The interim superintendent made clear that school workers' pay and benefits were top on the list of targeted cuts.

On March 19, hundreds of people packed the auditorium of English High School in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood to protest the budget cuts and planned school closures.

McDonough announced that the original proposal to close five schools was being modified so that two high schools—the Community Academy in Jamaica Plain and West Roxbury Academy—would remain open. The latter, however, will be considered for closure again next year, and the School Committee discussed conducting a review of all Boston high schools, with the potential for future cuts.

Francellis Quiñones, a teacher and Student Government Adviser at West Roxbury Academy, spoke during public comments about its temporary reprieve: "Next year if you decide that this time the budget will cut us, I don't want to sit comfortably."

To loud applause Quiñones said, "These students are not just pieces that we can move around and place wherever it seems necessary and fits the budget."

Cristina Martinez, the student government president at West Roxbury Academy, confronted the School Committee about its attitude toward the proceedings and presented a petition with more than 1,000 signatures opposing all school closings. Asking for a long-term plan for BPS, Martinez told the committee, "You've been avoiding my emails and my mails" for three weeks.

Other schools not slated for closure will nonetheless suffer budget cuts next year under the "Weighted Student Funding" model now being used by the School Committee. Among them is Madison Park High School in Roxbury, the only vocational school in the Boston Public Schools system. Madison Park, which will suffer more than \$33,000 in budget cuts, already does not have enough funds for tools, machine shop equipment, and protective clothing.

Elton Bocage, a member of the Madison Park School Site Council, spoke about the undemocratic character of the School Committee's deliberations: "A lot of times you guys are just the people standing up front and there's someone else that's pulling the strings."

"We don't depend on you guys to make the decisions for us," Bocage continued. "We have to make the decisions for ourselves."

Another Madison Park parent, Matt Coplen, tied the cuts in school budgets to the student loan crisis in the United States. "Not every child has the desire or the funds to go to college," he said. "For them, Madison Park is the means to obtain their goal of self-sufficiency without acquiring the massive debt that will follow them throughout the rest of their lifetime."

Coplen challenged the School Committee: "I would

like to think that you, our civic leaders, would not deliberately sabotage the academic careers and futures of our children in the interest of financial gain.”

Yet that is precisely what the Committee and the Boston City Council plan to do. The first two speaking slots of the public comment period were given to two Boston city councilors—Tito Jackson and Tim McCarthy—who gave only lip service to providing “sustainable funding” to the school system.

Jackson, the chair of the City Council’s Committee on Education, boasts in his City Council resume of being “an active leader in youth development programs such as Citizen Schools.” This organization, which has worked to lengthen students’ school days, receives significant funding from Bank of America and the Jones Day Foundation, a charitable arm of the law firm instrumental in the Detroit bankruptcy.

Michael O’Neill, the chair of the Boston School Committee, is an executive vice president at 451 Marketing, specializing in banking and insurance clients. O’Neill is also a former “U.S. Trust Bank of America Private Wealth Management Private Client Advisor,” according to his resume.

The School Committee presents its Weighted Student Funding (WSF) budget model as a rational allocation of resources that takes into account the needs of individual students. However, materials presented at a March 9 budget hearing make clear that WSF is designed to produce crowded classrooms. An example was given in which a class with only 12 students would cause its school a \$45,000 budget deficit, whereas 25 students in a class would gain the same school a budget surplus.

An acute overcrowding problem will result from the closure of the Rogers Middle School in Hyde Park, with 249 students being forced to find another school next year. The most likely solution for most of them will be the Irving Middle School, which currently has a student body of 350.

The planned cuts and closures are being excused with the hackneyed lie that society does not have enough resources to adequately fund public education. In Boston, with its large collection of millionaires and billionaires, this lie falls apart easily. Using 2011 tax data, the *Boston Business Journal* published a database last year showing nearly 1,500 millionaires in the city of Boston with a combined annual income of \$6.3 billion. This amount would pay the current year’s BPS

budget six times over.

Details on the number of teacher layoffs next year were not given at the March 19 meeting. The proposed budget from the beginning of March included 145 teacher layoffs, but that number may be moderated somewhat by the decision to keep Community Academy and West Roxbury Academy open.

However, 134 jobs in central administration will be cut next year. Of these, up to 80 will be layoffs of existing workers with the remainder being elimination of positions that are currently empty. Vacancies in the latter positions during the current year have already resulted in increased workloads for the workers who remain. The “ambiguity” between new layoffs and attrition was blamed by a deputy chief financial officer on union bumping rights and the transition to a new superintendent.

Virtually no aspect of children’s education will be left untouched by austerity. At a March 11 budget hearing, the School Committee received a report on eliminating school bus service for children as young as 7th grade, who will now be forced to ride public transportation.

Partial implementation of that program this year has cut \$2 million from the school transportation budget and eliminated 44 school bus routes. If next year sees full implementation, the budget will be reduced by \$9.5 million and 79 fewer buses will be needed. The city contracts school bus service to private contractor Transdev, which will be responsible for the resulting layoffs.

In addition to the obvious risks to student safety, forcing students to ride the MBTA will likely result in more work for remaining staff. The materials presented on March 11 by the

Middle School Transportation Advisory Committee recommend that “all BPS staff take responsibility for student safety in and out of school.”

Further layoffs will be imposed in food services, where the budget will be cut by \$4 million through “realignment of staffing to reduce labor costs.”



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