

Northern Virginia schools face major budget cuts

Nick Barrickman
11 August 2015

Last week, a task force appointed by Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Superintendent Karen Garza outlined a preliminary proposal to cut between \$80 and \$100 million in expenses from the school system's \$2.6 billion budget for 2016-2017. If adopted, the proposal would lead to the reduction or outright elimination of sports programs and activities such as band, drama and pre-school services, as well as the layoffs of teaching staff and an increase in class sizes from pre-Kindergarten through high school.

Fairfax County includes the bulk of the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington DC and is one of highest-income counties in the United States, with a median family income of \$104,000 a year. Even in this relatively affluent area, however, public services are under relentless attack.

The proposals seek to close a budget shortfall of between \$50 and \$100 million, and include the cutting of needs-based staff in schools designated as "high poverty" (with a savings estimate of \$7.5 million) as well as paid librarian positions; all preschool services (\$9 million); all high school student athletics programs (\$8.3 million); and the elimination of student activities such as band, chorus, drama, literary magazine, school papers, yearbook programs, debate, forensics and student association council (\$5.2 million).

Teachers would see class sizes grow across the board for all grades (saving a projected \$26.2 million) and after-school busing services would be eliminated. Additional proposals include the charging of a \$100 fee for students participating in all activities not part of a class (assuming such items are not eliminated outright) as well as the charging of a fee for all registration, test costs and parking.

As causes for the deficit, school officials cited the elimination of over \$20 million in state funds to the

county, as well as the continuous growth of the county's school-age population, which now stands at over 187,000 students. Since the 2008 financial crisis erupted, FCPS has enacted wave after wave of cuts, slashing over 2,175 school staff positions as well as cutting hundreds of millions of dollars from the FCPS budget.

In addition, Fairfax County has instituted salary freezes for teachers in recent years, leaving FCPS teachers among the lowest-paid in the region, at an average salary of \$46,756 per year.

The school system has been operating with a continuous budget deficit. In 2013, Superintendent Garza announced a similar package of cuts intended to close a nearly \$140 million shortfall. Garza then threatened to target over 50 areas for cuts, including foreign language programs and sports, along with the axing of over 1,700 school staff.

"These cuts will likely affect all current academic programming including limiting elective choices, reducing career and technical programs, impacting advanced offerings, and again raising class sizes at all levels," stated Garza in a response to the task force's findings last week.

Garza cynically claimed the cuts were needed in order to restore salary raises to the county's teachers, saying, "We are no longer competitive and are losing talented staff to neighboring school districts. Our teachers are the reason FCPS students excel and achieve. Losing our most experienced teachers will have a significant effect on student performance and will ultimately affect the reputation of FCPS."

Seeking to play down the significance of the proposals to eliminate vital school programs, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors Chair Sharon Bulova, a Democrat, referred to the plan as "alarmist," saying "I

think that cut list is something that is guaranteed to generate speakers, but I think that they probably will not be things that the school board chooses to reduce.”

A series of community meetings intended to give a veneer of public participation were announced by school officials to be held this month and next. According to the *Mount Vernon Patch*, attendees would be given the insulting task of voting on which school programs to keep next year, “with the understanding that not every program can be maintained.”

Headquartered in Fairfax County or nearby are numerous US government agencies and contracting firms responsible for producing the bulk of the weapons systems and equipment used in the expanding US military engagements around the world. Military contractors such as CACI (with revenue of \$3.6 billion in 2014), General Dynamics (\$30.85 billion) and Northrop Grumman (\$24.66 billion) are located in or just outside Fairfax County.

While wealthy businesses manage to obtain lavish funding from the federal government, the average child in the Washington DC region is increasingly impoverished. A study released by Fairfax County found that between 2008 and 2013, the number of children below the poverty line and the number of children receiving free or reduced-price lunches at school grew by 36 percent.

“The growth in low-income residents since 2007 in Fairfax County is a result of current residents losing economic ground and seeing their incomes decline,” the report states, adding, “economic conditions caused by the recent recession along with long-term income inequality are the primary factors that have fueled the increase in low-income residents in Fairfax County and the United States as a whole.” The report noted, “A look at Fairfax County average weekly wages and jobs by industry reveals several patterns. Overall, there were real wage declines and net job losses in the majority of the county’s lower paying industry sectors while there were real wage increases and net job gains in the majority of the county’s higher paying industry sectors since 2007.”

According to a 2012 report by the *Washington Post*, the number of Fairfax County students living below the poverty line has grown by 40 percent. In recent years, the Washington DC metropolitan region has suffered an immense economic downturn, with US Department of

Labor statistics showing that in 2013-2014 the capital area saw a “lost year,” adding less than 6,000 jobs to the economy, mostly within low-paying sectors.

Lori Wagoner, a FCPS teacher, told local news station WUSA, “Between daycare costs and housing costs and all the other things that are just so much more expensive here, with where we want to go with our lives and the life we want for our family and for our girls, we can't do it here. We can't get ahead.”



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