

Northern Virginia school officials hold meetings on cuts to public education

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The Fairfax County Public School system (FCPS) is facing a funding shortfall of \$100 million for the 2016-17 fiscal years, which school officials have proposed to address by slashing over \$100 million from vital school programs.

Cut from school curricula would be band and drama courses, and school athletics for a grand sum of nearly \$9 million; the eliminating of special needs teachers in schools designated as “high poverty” for a savings total of \$7.5 million; cutting all after-school busing services as well as expanding class sizes in all grades (estimated to save over \$26 million).

Located in Northern Virginia, Fairfax County is one of the wealthiest jurisdictions in the country. In addition to possessing a median household income level of over \$104,000 a year, Fairfax County is home to hundreds of federal military and defense contracting firms reaping billions in yearly profits from the federal government. Despite this, the meetings, convened by FCPS Superintendent Karen Garza, adopted a familiar trope—declaring to parents, students and teachers that there is not enough money to fund the nation’s tenth largest school system, with over 187,000 students.

A set of community meetings meant to address the shortfall were recently held in Northern Virginia, where public officials were given an opportunity to present a one-sided account of the crisis facing the school system.

Matt Haley, head of the budget task force charged with formulating the proposals, sought to justify considerations to eliminate vital school programs on the spurious grounds that such methods demonstrated an effort by the school system at “transparency.”

Such claims are shot through with cynicism. Despite the enormous size of the school system, only two meetings were held throughout the entire county. To

protect themselves from having to answer the onslaught of angry and pointed questions, the leaders of the meeting used a tightly controlled process to determine which questions they would answer. Audience members were asked to submit questions written on index cards, and only those deemed acceptable, were responded to.

Since 2009, FCPS has slashed nearly \$500 million from school budgets, including \$97.8 million in FY 2015 alone. FCPS officials noted that the school board has fired over 2,000 faculty since 2008. The teachers who remain are among the most underpaid in the region, if not the country. A 2014 study of 125 school districts by the National Council on Teacher Quality ranked Fairfax at 98 in adjusted lifetime earnings. Even teachers in Newark, NJ, where the median income is \$34,000, can expect to make more over the course of their careers.

At a little over \$5,000 per pupil, the state of Virginia’s funding to the county still has not recovered to 2009 levels, when spending per student was \$5,274. Similarly, 44 percent of all elementary schools in the county are forced to teach more students than their facilities can contain. Over 15,200 students in all grades are schooled in adjunct trailers rather than classrooms.

Demonstrating the growth of poverty in the region, children qualifying for free lunches in FCPS alone would, if grouped into their own school system, form the sixth-largest school district in the state.

According to FCPS officials, the causes of such deficiencies lie not only with teachers’ pay, but with the cost of educating students themselves. During this presentation, parents learned that the main “cost drivers” are children of immigrants and those with special needs. Speakers went to great pains to remind

parents that 28 percent of students are receiving free or reduced-price lunches.

In addition to the burden of having a “diverse” student body, speakers cited the state’s Local Composite Index (LCI), a funding formula that deprives wealthier districts of state funding under the assumption that they can dip into local revenues to make up the difference.

While funding at the state level is no doubt insufficient, the budget crisis in FCPS is attributable to the pro-business policies of consecutive Democratic and Republican administrations at all levels of government. In essence, Garza and other school board members sought to argue that the reason Fairfax County schools don’t have enough money is because they have too much money, and the second-richest county in the country cannot handle 7,000 students who speak English as a second language without help from the state.

Finally, parents were shown how to use the “budget proposal tool,” an app on the task force’s website that allows parents to choose which cuts they would make by choosing from a menu of options. Haley claimed that the options were very expansive and gave parents the freedom to choose any cuts they wanted, but then explained that only large programs were available as choices because “we can’t get there \$25,000 at a time.”

The callous nature of the process was driven home by the fact that each menu item lists the number of teachers who will be fired with each click of the mouse.

Although the app is meant to make parents feel in control of their child’s school funding, Haley was quick to remind them that it is “not an election” and the results would only be used for advisory purposes. Garza affirmed that she was the one entitled to make final decisions, but generously declared that the community “needs to have a say.”

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to parents and teachers at Mount Vernon High School in suburban Virginia.

Many who worked for the Fairfax County school system seemed fearful of speaking on record. One teacher who spoke under the condition of anonymity talked of the difficult circumstances facing teachers. “Things are very bad already for [teachers],” she said, adding “one of the things Garza is doing is placing the burden on us to appeal to the community on top of our

regular workload so we can keep these programs.”

Marcia, who attended with her two children, was particularly concerned about the manner in which cuts are being carried out. She cited a decision to delay the school day for high school students as evidence of mismanagement by the board, saying, “Why would you add \$16 million to the budget with something like that, and then tell us we have to make cuts to our kids’ schools?”

Another community member, who asked not to be named, pointed to tax deals for corporations as the cause of the budget problems. Noting the attacks on living standards across the country, he said, “I’m not sure my grandsons are going to have the opportunities I had.” He went on to express support for the WSWS’s perspective, adding, “I think Trotsky had some very good ideas,” referring to the revolutionary founder of the Fourth International.



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