

Boston Public Schools students walk out over proposed budget cuts

Our reporter
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More than a thousand Boston Public Schools (BPS) students walked out of classes Monday to protest planned budget cuts to close a projected \$50 million budget shortfall for the 2016-2017 school year. Schools across the district face the loss of teaching positions, extracurricular activities, librarians, music and arts classes and language programs.

Students walked out of classrooms at high schools and middle schools across the city at 11:30 a.m., and made their way to the Boston Common. They rallied at the State House, where inside a hearing on state funding to education was taking place, and then moved through downtown to Faneuil Hall.

Students chanted “Save BPS,” “What do we want? Education!” and “You say cutbacks? We say fight back!” as they made their way through city streets. A BPS notice sent out to parents indicating students would be marked absent if they walked out did little to dissuade many from participating in the protest.

According to Mayor Marty Walsh, a Democrat, the city of Boston anticipates allocating \$1.27 billion for public schools in fiscal year 2017. Although this is a \$13.5 million increase over current year spending, it still leaves a shortfall of as much as \$50 million.

Republican Governor Charlie Baker’s budget for Massachusetts includes \$213.9 million in state aid to BPS for next year, up only 0.6 percent over this year. Walsh claims that the \$50 million budget shortfall is an overestimate, and that increased charter school reimbursements the city is asking for from the state may somewhat reduce it.

Schools have already been notified of the cuts they face next year. Boston Latin School parents in collaboration with the Citywide Parent Council Budget Subcommittee have drawn up a list of cuts anticipated next year at 21 high schools across the district.

Brighton High School is losing \$434,000 in funding. History, math, physical education and language arts teachers and a librarian are slated to lose their jobs, along with other administrative positions.

Brighton High students Naomi Chaney and Sonome Braxton took part in the Monday protest. “There have already been cuts made,” Sonome said. “They already told us the teachers that will be leaving. I know they are cutting a history teacher, some guidance counselors.

“And it’s not because there are less students, we have a good amount of students. I feel the protest is good, but I feel like they’re just not hearing us.”

Sonome and Naomi were also concerned about the threat to MBTA (Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority) passes for students. BPS pays the transit agency to provide M7s, free passes for students who live more than a mile away from their schools.

“I hear that they’re trying to cut off M7s,” Sonome said. “M7s are really important. If they cut it off, how are we going to get to school? If we had to pay for the bus every day, without a job, that’s just not possible.”

Later Monday, the MBTA’s fiscal and management control board voted to raise fares an average of 9.3 percent for riders across the system beginning July 1. The student passes will remain intact, but BPS will pay an average of 5.4 percent more per ride for student fares.

In a letter circulated on Twitter last week, Snowden student Jailyn Lopez urged all BPS students to participate. “No matter what class you’re in get up and walk out of school,” the letter read. “Let’s stand up for our future, if we don’t then no one will.”

Snowden faces a loss of \$370,000 in funding, which means elimination of the Japanese program, loss of a part-time librarian, calculus teacher, guidance counselor, and the reduction of two English teachers to

part-time status.

Simon Mariano, a freshman at Snowden, told WBUR, “We’re losing our Japanese class. We’re losing somebody in the math department, somebody in the guidance department, and I think there was one more ... a librarian.”

Schools across Boston face similar cutbacks, as BPS proposes \$10 million to \$12 million in cuts to the district’s per-pupil funding formula. High school students, along with students with autism and emotional impairments, face some of the biggest cuts.

Governor Baker, a strong proponent of charter schools, has also short-funded charter school reimbursement by \$28 million, leaving the district with a deficit. In February, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to grant four Boston charter schools’ request to expand, adding more than 1,000 charter seats to city schools.

While siphoning off increasing numbers of students to the charter schools, the public school system is paying the cost. In a statement on its Facebook page, the parent group Quality Education for Every Student estimates BPS will lose \$17 million per year due to the seat expansions.

Monday’s protest was part of a growing movement by students and teachers to unite against budget cuts that are targeting teachers’ jobs and school conditions. Earlier this year, Detroit Public School teachers defied their union leadership and launched a series of “sickouts,” calling attention to pay and benefit concessions, as well as exposing the dilapidated state of school buildings.

Detroit Public Schools students subsequently walked out or called in sick to show their support for the struggle begun by teachers. Student walkouts have also occurred in Chicago where teachers face job cuts and an attack on their pensions.

Students’ and teachers’ concerns have largely been ignored or marginalized by teachers unions, which have collaborated with the Democratic administrations imposing the budget cuts in many large urban school districts.



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