

Boston Public Schools students walk out over budget cuts

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More than 1,000 Boston Public Schools (BPS) students walked out of classes Tuesday for the second protest this year against budget cuts. Students rallied and marched at City Hall, and some later testified at a City Council hearing on the school's fiscal year budget.

In March, after two hours of testimony by students and parents, the Boston School Committee approved a \$1.027 billion budget, which still includes reductions in spending for special needs students, the arts, librarians, school nurses and other services. The budget still needs to be approved by a City Council vote in June.

Mayor Marty Walsh, a Democrat, tried to discourage students from walking out, calling the protest "ill-timed." He said any parents involved in the protest should "act like adults." Earlier in the day, BPS officials said students would be marked absent for any classes they miss.

Erik, a sophomore at Snowden International School who participated in the walk out, was angered over teachers being cut in special education and languages. "At my school next year there will be no librarian because of the cuts, and the nurse will only be half-time, and one of the two counselors will be cut to half-time."

Referring to comments by Mayor Walsh that students should let adults handle the budget, he said, "I think Marty Walsh should act like an adult. I don't think he cares about the schools."

"He snaps at us because he doesn't like to be opposed. He looks at students as things, and thinks teachers should be more like babysitters."

Mayor Walsh also scolded students for protesting on the day 10th graders were taking the MCAS tests (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System), which are a requirement for graduation. The Boston

school curriculum is increasingly being shifted to standardized tests and away from subjects like music, sports, the arts and other "luxury" subjects, as well as services provided to special education and autistic students.

Aliaa, from Excel High School, said, "The city values income and profits more than the progress of students. Education is important. The budget cuts are going to hit students with autism and special education."

"Next year the computer teacher won't have a job," she said, while the classes will be geared toward the MCAS tests. "They value standardized test scores more than who you are as a person," Aliaa concluded.

High school students Tauriq and Abdul said they had come to protest how severely students will be hurt by the budget cuts. "We're also fighting for our future and for the teachers who are going to get laid off," Abdul said. "They put a lot of work into teaching students, and some of them are now going to be gone."

The students' protests have drawn the support of parents, teachers and workers, who are also concerned about the budget cuts and loss of jobs.

Yolie Brun, a member of United Steelworkers Local 8751, was on her way to City Hall when she came upon the student protest. She had just been fired by Transdev, which operates the buses for BPS students. "I was hired in May 2015 to drive in Boston," she said, "but I have been a bus driver since 1992." A single mother with two kids, Brun was so worried about her situation that she couldn't sleep.

Brun had come to City Hall to speak with Mayor Walsh, who had told her she could speak to him at any time. "I was terminated on May 12. The company cited safety as the reason," she said, "but that's a lie. I have never had an accident or been given a ticket." She said that about 30 or so drivers have recently been

terminated with no real explanation.

Mae Brown's granddaughter attends English High School, and she came to support the students' fight against the budget cuts. "They're the voices; it's their right," she said. Brown said that cuts were being made at English in sports and music. "Music teaches you the ABCs, how to count," she said. "Music is about making people happy; art is also important."

After rallying, students and their supporters marched around City Hall and then lined up to enter the building, where some students were testifying at the City Council hearing on BPS academics, social and emotional learning, and wellness.

After passing through metal detectors, about 100 students gathered in the hall outside the chamber, drowning out the proceedings and chanting, "BPS! BPS! BPS!" and "The whole world is watching."

Inside the hearing, students and parents waited hours to testify. Jahi Spaloss, a senior at Boston Green Academy, said, "I would like you to look behind me at the faces of the students who came here to testify." He continued, "Do they really respect BPS students? Do you even acknowledge that we may be the next doctors, lawyers, presidents of the United States?"

Parent Karen Oil testified that her family is leaving Boston because her daughter will no longer receive the support she needs after the budget cuts. "It has been increasingly difficult to get her needs met," she said, "and that's even before the budget cuts."

Oil added, "I think that's because we have a mayor who is more interested in ensuring the needs of private interests prevail."



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