

The dismantling of public education and Obama's education legacy

Part 2

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The Obama administration's promotion of charter schools and privatization has gone hand in hand with its policy of federal cuts to public schools. Title I funding, which provides supplemental funds for the most impoverished schools across the US, has been slashed by 11 percent and Special Education funding by 9 percent.

The bipartisan character of the attack on public education is demonstrated by the fact that nearly every state and local government, overseen by Democrats or Republicans, has followed the federal government in defunding the schools and pouring public resources into edu-businesses. The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the frontal assault on public education in metropolitan areas like Detroit, New Orleans, Chicago, Philadelphia and Boston. This national assault, however, affects literally all regions of the country and at all education levels.

Public education is in an advanced state of decay across **Pennsylvania** due to statewide cuts together with the preferential funding given to charter schools. In addition to the dire straits faced by Philadelphia and Chester (where teachers voted to work for free earlier in the school year), York City School District is set to become the largest school district to be turned over to a single for-profit entity in US history.

At the end of May, the Erie School Board voted to defy Pennsylvania state law and enact a budget containing a deficit. A standing-room-only crowd of parents and students jammed the Board meeting to oppose the pending cuts which would have included eliminating sports and extracurricular activities, art and music programs, and eliminating full-day kindergarten. A "balanced budget" also would have meant closing the high school and school libraries.

After **Kansas** slashed personal income taxes in 2012-13, state funding for education has essentially collapsed. Overall, between 2009 and 2015, the state's base support for K-12 fell by about \$500 million (adjusted for inflation), with another \$15 million cut in federal aid. In 2014, the school year was shortened as a result of the funding crisis. Most recently Republican Governor Sam Brownback has put forward a bill to consolidate school districts. "If this bill became law," Jared Long, a student from Beloit, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "students would have to commute ridiculous distances for education. Also, I personally don't know how most of the small rural Kansas towns which still have schools could survive without one," adding, "many tiny towns which lost their schools also lost their populations."

In **South Carolina** spending per student has been cut 14.5 percent since 2008. The state fell to 47th in the nation in per-student spending in 2014. Since 2008, more than \$500 million has been cut. The state removed the cap on class sizes and cut teacher pay overall by 13 percent in the past.

Texas has the highest school debt per capita in the country, double the national average. The state owes \$72.4 billion in principal alone. There

are 33 school districts in the state in a deeper hole than Detroit, including nine with more than \$1 billion in bond debt.

Wyoming is facing \$36 million in K-12 cuts over the next two years. **Oklahoma** will cut education by 7 percent, forcing some schools to adopt a four-day school week. In **Alaska**, a \$3.5 billion budget shortfall has sparked proposals to defund pre-kindergarten and early childhood education programs.

The state of public colleges

The United States has seen a veritable collapse of wages for those without a college degree. According to a 2014 study in Michigan, workers without a high school diploma suffered a 46.3 percent fall in wages between 1979 and 2013, while workers with a high school diploma lost 32.1 percent.

Young people have little choice other than to seek a college education if they are to escape poverty, and greater numbers do every year. But as with primary and secondary education, public colleges are being bled white for resources. Forty-five out of 50 states have slashed spending for higher education on a per-student basis, with the average state cutting 17 percent.

Eight states now spend less than 30 percent of pre-recession funding for colleges-- Alabama, Arizona, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. Arizona has cut its funding of higher education by more than half.

These post-recession cuts have translated into a 33 percent increase in tuition at public colleges nationally—and the ballooning of student loan debt. The average cost of college has nearly tripled since 1973, while median income has risen only 7 percent. But this trend has dramatically worsened since 2008; tuition has increased by 30 percent since that time, while median income fell by 6.5 percent.

The average Class of 2016 graduate now has \$37,172 in student loan debt, up 6 percent from last year. The overall share of students graduating with debt has increased since the start of the recession: between the 2007-08 and 2012-13 school years, the share of students graduating from a public four-year institution with debt increased from 55 to 59 percent.

Forty-three million Americans now have student loan debt. For those borrowing for both undergraduate and graduate school in the fields of medicine or health sciences, the average debt level is a staggering \$161,772. Not unsurprisingly, a 2015 Pew Charitable Trusts report states that fully one-fifth of Americans now expect to die in debt, with student loans accounting for a significant portion.

Under the Obama administration, the Education Department (ED) has

joined the banking industry in literally profiting from students facing lifelong indebtedness. Reaping the benefit between the cost of loans and what students are paying, the ED made a profit of \$41.3 billion in FY2013. The department's 2014 projection was to net \$127 billion over the next decade.

Included below are a few of the devastating results of the defunding of public institutions of higher learning. Almost any of the 50 US states could have been selected and the stories would be similar.

Since 2008, state support for **Oklahoma's** 25 public colleges and universities has declined \$241 million. State appropriations—half of higher education's total budget in 2007—now make up 35 percent. Higher education was cut 15.9 percent for the fiscal year that begins July 1, one of the biggest cuts in the state budget. According the local media, "Deep cuts to higher education and transportation were required 'to avoid truly unacceptable funding levels for K-12 schools and hospitals,' said Preston Doerflinger, state finance secretary."

Over \$1 billion in cuts has been inflicted upon the University of **California** system. Between 2008 and 2012, UC's state appropriations were cut by \$900, or 27 percent. UC responded with system-wide staff salary reductions through a furlough program. In addition, UC tuition was roughly doubled. Most recently UC President Janet Napolitano proposed to eliminate defined benefit pensions for new employees.

West Virginia colleges and universities are under the axe as the state faces a 2017 budget debate with a \$270 million funding gap. The state has already cut funding for higher education by 42.4 percent since 2008, a decrease of \$2,060 per student—while the average tuition at four-year public colleges in West Virginia has risen by \$2,135, or 42.4 percent. "Too many students must take on unsustainable levels of debt, and rapidly rising tuition is scaring many low- and middle-income students away from college altogether," said Sean O'Leary, senior policy analyst with the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

Deep cuts are in the works in **Alaska** where the legislature is proposing as much as \$50 million in cuts. The University of Alaska is looking at moving from three accredited universities based in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Juneau to a single accredited institution. Frank von Hippel, a professor of biological sciences at the University of Alaska Anchorage, likened the proposed university cuts to "eating your seed crop during a famine," according to the *Alaska Dispatch News*.

The **Illinois** public higher education system has been operating without a budget since July 1, 2015. Both Democrats and Republicans are attempting to use the unprecedented budget impasse in order to force through permanent and drastic reductions in state funding to public education. In May a "stopgap" funding measure provided roughly 30 percent of the previous year's level of funding for public state universities and community colleges after Chicago State University said it would otherwise have to close its doors.

The **Louisiana** budget passed by the state House cuts higher education another 12 percent. Over eight years higher education in the state has been reduced by more than half. Quoted in the local paper the *Advocate*, Joseph Rallo, Louisiana's higher education commission, concluded aptly, "There's hardly any 'public' left in the public funding."

Defend public education

America's Founding Fathers saw the expansion of education as central to democracy with Thomas Jefferson emphasizing that only an enlightened populace could prevent a return of "kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance."

The last four decades have seen the rise of a financial aristocracy in the

US, which has accumulated vast sums of wealth not primarily through production but through the looting of society's wealth, including public education. Drunk with wealth and power these modern day kings, priests and nobles fear an educated and critically minded populace, which are increasingly hostile to their anti-social policies of austerity, anti-democratic attacks and war.

The two leading presidential candidates—Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump—embody the criminality and parasitism of the American ruling class and the incestuous relationship between the political establishment and Wall Street. For his part, Sanders—who has gained mass support for his criticisms of the "billionaire class"—has promoted a party, the Democrats, which no less than the Republicans, is controlled lock, stock and barrel by the corporate and financial elite.

The teacher unions have endorsed Clinton who has long been identified with the promotion of charter schools and attacks on teachers. This demonstrates that the AFT and NEA do not represent teachers but instead an affluent upper-middle-class layer of union executives who want a "seat at the table" and a portion of the spoils from the destruction of public education.

Clinton has deliberately downplayed her enthusiastic support for charters during the current election campaign. After first delaying financial support, Eli Broad, a major Democratic Party donor and school privatizer, has indicated he will support Clinton.

According to the *Wall Street Journal* Broad said he was "assured after conversations with Messrs. [Bill] Clinton and [Campaign Manager John] Podesta that Mrs. Clinton would in fact support charter schools, and he said he believes she will support teacher accountability measures. He said he now expects to financially support her campaign. 'I think when push gets to shove, she'll be more like Bill Clinton and perhaps [Obama Education Secretary Arne] Duncan that we think right now,' Broad concluded."

There is no significant constituency within the American ruling class and political establishment for universal, high quality public education. The only force, which has a great stake in the defense and vast improvement of public education, is the working class in the US and internationally.

Appeals to the conscience of the powers-that-be will do nothing. If society's resources are to be used to raise the cultural and material conditions of the masses of people, instead of enriching the few, a fundamental and revolutionary transformation of economic and political relations is required. This is only possible if the working class embarks on the road of independent political struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party and its candidates for US president and vice president, Jerry White and Niles Niemuth, are the only ones fighting for this perspective and we urge teachers, students and defenders of public education to support our campaign.



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