

Tampa, Florida teachers speak out against proposed layoffs and expanding class sizes

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A consulting group hired by Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS), the school district for the city of Tampa, Florida, has recommended increasing class sizes and cutting 1,761 jobs as part of a larger effort to cut \$404 million over the next five years. HCPS is the eighth largest school district in the country and educates more than 200,000 students.

All of the language in the report, authored by the Gibson Consulting Group, is based around cutting as much money as possible. Nowhere are there any considerations of the educational experiences of children or how these recommendations are going to improve the quality of the school district.

Gibson's main focus for cost cutting is increasing class size. The report recommends increasing the district's pupil-teacher ratio from 14.7 to 1 to 15.9 to 1. Meeting Gibson's recommendation would mean, therefore, severing the jobs of 1,031 teachers. The report notes that "at an average salary and benefits of \$64,246, this equates to \$66 million [in cost reductions] per year."

For this recommendation and several others, Gibson compares HCPS to "peer districts." In other words, Gibson is basing its recommendation on keeping pace with budget cuts in major school districts throughout the country, not quality of education or services provided.

The cuts also target clerical workers, who are more numerous compared to "peer districts," according to Gibson. While the number of clerical workers in other districts in Florida have decreased in recent years, HCPS numbers have remained constant. Gibson suggests that this is at least partially due to voicemail systems being underutilized, and the use of manual processes for time and attendance. Implementing Gibson's recommendation would mean eradicating 156

clerical jobs, which they define as \$6 million in annual savings.

For custodial workers, Gibson has made recommendations to make custodial work more efficient and force workers to cover about 30 percent more square feet on average than they do currently. This recommendation was based on "industry standards for efficiency," not necessarily on what circumstances school custodians are faced with daily.

For transportation workers, Gibson recommends saving money by addressing the alleged problem of absenteeism among bus drivers and maintenance workers. The company suggests that HCPS' current practice of providing one day per month paid time off for personal leave encourages absenteeism, and recommends that the district begin an educational program that will educate transportation workers on how much their personal time off hurts the ability of the district to save money. Gibson suggests, in particular, that HCPS encourage its workers not to take personal time off unless they are ill.

Since hiring Gibson in late 2015, HCPS has shrunk its budget deficit from \$110 million to \$4 million through a host of spending cuts. Nevertheless, the district still intends to use the report as the basis for further attacks on school workers.

HCPS chief of staff Alberto Vazquez Matos has stated that while they would like to avoid any types of layoffs, they are hoping that retirement and attrition can get them closer to the levels recommended by Gibson. While Vazquez insists that these are only recommendations and that nothing will be decided without careful consideration, it is telling that this report was released to the media before it was sent to teachers and other employees.

According to the *Tampa Bay Times*, district officials

are meeting with labor union officials, and Vazquez has stated publicly that the Gibson study “will guide a lot of these conversations, and I’m looking forward to the conversations because the numbers are in front of us now.” In other words, HCPS has more ammunition now to potentially attack jobs and frighten teachers and employees into submission.

Three teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the situation, but asked that their real names not appear.

Cathy, who has been with HCPS for four years and teaches special education, stated that more students in each class means more distractions, more behavior issues, and less learning. “They say that this will benefit students,” she said, “but it won’t if they are making classes bigger. A large class size is never going to benefit students.” Cathy explained that when her class was split into two separate, shorter sessions last year, she was able to teach her students two times if not four times as much, even though she had less time with each half.

Cathy explained that her school’s principal supports a class size of 15 in special education classes even though special education department specialists recommend no more than half that amount, or seven or eight students. “There is a big gap between what administration thinks is acceptable and what the special education specialist thinks is appropriate, and that is a constant battle,” she claimed.

Melissa, who has taught for HCPS for 14 years, said that a big factor that plays into the teacher-student ratio is the large variety of classes that aims to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB). “For example,” she explained, “we now have four levels of seventh-grade math, when we used to have only two. However, it’s a double edged sword because, of course, you do not want to ‘leave a child behind,’ but the reality is that not every kid can be put into that box of 12 grades plus college. That is not the reality or even the dream of every kid.” Rachel, who has taught many grade levels in several different schools throughout her 13 years at HCPS, stated that she actually read about the report in the newspaper before she received it from the school district. She explained that many teachers are already seeing negative side effects from a new behavior management system that was put into place this past year, and that larger classroom sizes will exacerbate

that situation. “[Teachers] are putting up with too much; our backs are against the walls.” When asked whether having more kids in each class would make the situation worse, Rachel answered, “Yes! You deal with negative behaviors so much more than you actually teach. Clearly, the more kids in each class, the more issues and fewer academic gains.”

Rachel also commented on clerical workers who are having their jobs threatened. “Those women work like dogs. They are so hard working! They deal with so much, with little to no pay. These people are especially needed in low income schools because they have no volunteers like other schools.” She explained that much of the work that would normally be performed by clerical staff is instead performed by volunteers, yet the report recommends laying off even more staff.

When asked whether she thought the teachers union would put up a fight in the event that the district decides to follow through with the recommended cuts, she replied, “The union will do nothing. They will talk about how terrible the recommendations are, but in the end nothing will happen like always. I am not a member, nor have I ever been. I do not feel like they do any good for me, and you’ll find that a lot of younger teachers feel the same way.”



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