

Pennsylvania school district prepares to end public education past the eighth grade

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The public school district in the city of Erie, Pennsylvania is considering massive cuts that would create potentially costly and disruptive barriers to any of its students interested in obtaining an education past the eighth grade.

The district is currently facing a deficit of more than \$10.3 million. Over \$6 million in cuts have already been decided upon, leaving \$4.3 million more to be cut. As a result, Superintendent Dr. Jay Badams has proposed to close all four of the city's public high schools. Erie residents wishing to obtain an education past eighth grade would be forced to attend a charter school or travel to schools in other districts outside the city. The school district would only provide "limited transportation" to students who chose to attend a public school outside the district.

According to the district, the closing of all public high schools is "pursuant to section 1607 of the Pennsylvania Public School Code (the "School Code"), which does not require school districts to provide education beyond Grade 8. According to the School Code, students in districts that no longer offer high school would be permitted to attend "the nearest or most conveniently located high school" in another district. In such a situation, the home district is required to provide "limited transportation."

Among the cuts already approved are the elimination of all art and music classes, sports and extracurricular activities, and full-day kindergarten. School libraries at all grade levels would also be closed. If the closing of the high schools goes through, Erie would be added to a growing number of Pennsylvania school districts which have eliminated high school including Wilkesburg and Duquesne, both near Pittsburgh.

The potential closing of all of Erie's public high schools is a result of the ongoing nationwide attack on

public education, carried out by both capitalist political parties. The Obama administration has deepened this onslaught under its "Race to the Top" educational program. "Education reform," as promoted by both politicians and corporate-funded foundations, blames teachers for the shortcomings in public education and seeks to turn education into a new source of profit for investors, charter school administrators and other private companies and consultants looking to enrich themselves with public funds. Several major cities in the United States, such as New Orleans, no longer have any public schools at all.

Like many American cities, Erie has suffered greatly from the corporate policy of deindustrialization and suffers from high levels of poverty. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, over 80 percent of the approximately 12,000 students who attend Erie schools come from low-income families, making it one of the poorest districts in the state.

The district has also been hit by the decline of state funding to public schools. Under the state's formula, public schools are guaranteed the same level of funding as in previous years, even if they lose students. Erie's public school student population has remained relatively stable, while the percentage of students living in low-income houses has greatly increased, thus leaving it unable to rely on local property taxes to increase funding that it is not receiving from the state.

Last week, the state passed a bill meant to address the funding imbalances. However, that would still not address the closing of public schools in working class school districts throughout the state in favor of charter schools.

Parents and students in Erie opposed to the cuts traveled to the state capitol in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on Tuesday to attend a rally against the policy.

The destitution of public education in Erie has received cynical responses from politicians in both major political parties, such as Democratic State Senator Sean Wiley, who stated, “There is no greater responsibility of the Pennsylvania General Assembly than to invest in the future of this Commonwealth and that future begins and ends in public education.”

This responsibility is apparently not shared by the State Senator’s own political party, as Pennsylvania, historically one of the most heavily Democratic states in the country, has seen state funding of K-12 education drop from 50 percent in 1972 to less than 35 percent today.



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