

Erie, Pennsylvania school district passes austerity budget with emergency funding

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The Erie School District passed a balanced budget last week after the Pennsylvania State Senate agreed to a \$31.5 billion spending plan that included an additional \$7.6 million overall for the impoverished district.

Prior to passage of the additional funding, district Superintendent Jay Badams had proposed closing all four of the district's high schools, closing full-day kindergarten, as well as the elimination of all art and music classes, sports and extracurricular activities. School libraries at all grade levels were also to be closed.

Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, a Democrat, has yet to sign the state budget, stating that it fails to specify over \$1 billion in revenue. Wolf has until Monday to veto the plan, sign it into law or do neither, which would allow the budget to become law without his signature. If he does not veto the plan, it will mean that drastic spending cuts will be made during the year.

While the inclusion of additional state funding for the upcoming school year will help the district avoid the most onerous cuts, such as the shuttering of the district's high schools, the crisis in Erie is far from resolved. As reported by Erica Erwin of the *Erie Times News*, a state commissioned review by the consulting group PFM Group found that "over the past four years, the district's expenditures, driven by rising healthcare costs, pension payments and charter school payments, outpaced its revenues. Without changes to both revenue and spending, the long-term structural deficit will only grow."

Superintendent Badams has projected Erie's budget deficit to grow in each of the next three years, reaching over \$20 million. Even with the additional funding, the upcoming school year budget will do away with the positions of 10 central office workers, five elementary

school workers and 22 instructional coaching positions. Sports, art and music classes, along with school libraries, will face severe cuts.

In addition, the district will most likely need an advance on the promised state funding in order to meet payroll, which could cause the state to designate the district as a "financial recovery" district, allowing the state to take over the financial decisions of the district and appoint a "chief recovery officer." The four other school districts in Pennsylvania already in "financial recovery" include Chester Upland School District, Duquesne City School District, Harrisburg City School District and the York City School District.

In such a "recovery" scenario for Erie, there is little doubt that the "chief recovery officer" would be charged with attacking the health care and pensions of teachers. According to the *Times News*, Badams has already signaled that "financial recovery" status would also put the closing of city's public high schools back on the table if an agreement on cuts to pensions, health care and charter school costs could not be reached.

The potential closing of an entire city's public high schools received both widespread national media coverage and condemnation from the city's working class. This undoubtedly played a part in the state adding the emergency funding for the district.

The WSWWS spoke with several local residents of Erie who expressed their anger at the proposed cuts prior to the passing of the school budget. Sonia Andersen, an elementary school teacher with 19 years of experience, called the proposed cuts "absurd." She said, "The wealthier districts are able to avoid this type of situation. The state should provide the money the district needs rather than forcing us to beg."

"I think it's absurd. The state took 10 months to finalize a budget last year, yet the school district will be

fined \$300 a day for not having a balanced budget. They want to get rid of public education altogether. The Erie school district has nothing. They are really trying to create the haves and the have-nots.”

Anderson also warned against blaming Erie’s teachers for the crisis. “Many times we as teachers are spending our own money to get school and classroom supplies that the district doesn’t buy,” she said. “You can’t blame us as teachers for this crisis.”

Karen McIntyre, mother of a 17-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter, said, “They shouldn’t be cutting anything. My son plays for East [High School] and I don’t want him not to have that.

“If the children don’t have school and programs, all they are going to be doing is running the streets and end up doing something stupid.

“I think they are pocketing the money. Everyone is paying school taxes and they have already closed enough schools. Where is all the money?

“I think they should tax the rich, they have more money than we do. The rich don’t have to struggle day by day the way we do. They need to keep the schools open and tax the rich. They are not suffering, we are.”

Debra Wall’s 16- and 17-year-old children go to East High School. “I feel I am against them closing the high schools,” she said. “Some people don’t have cars to get their children to another school. Parents are already struggling with work and now they have to spend extra time in the morning and evening trying to get their kids to school. Many parents will end up having to decide between a job and their kids being in school.

“They need to find out what they are doing with all the money. There should be more after-school activities to keep them busy and out of the streets, not less.”



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