

As school funding cuts continue

Clinton and Trump committed to new attacks on public education

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Schools are being funded at below pre-recession levels in a majority of US states, according to a devastating new portrait of education funding by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Despite the advanced stage of crisis, it is remarkable how little has been said about public education by Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton or her Republican counterpart, Donald Trump, throughout the long course of the election cycle.

The new report documents the systematic de-funding of public schools since 2008. With each annual budget, districts throughout the US are slashing spending and becoming more stratified by class. For the majority of young Americans, education is becoming increasingly barebones.

Thirty-five states (out of 50) now provide less overall state funding per student (as of 2014, the most recent year available) compared with 2008, prior to the Great Recession. Local government funding was also cut in 27 states. Overall, total state and local funding combined fell in 36 states. In addition, federally-funded Title I and Special Education allocations are down 8.3 percent and 6.4 percent respectively from 2010.

These cuts, spearheaded by the Obama administration, have been implemented by both Democratic and Republican state and local governments.

It is instructive that Clinton—who has solidarized herself with Obama’s hated education policies—does not feel the need to make the pretense of promising to restore school funding or address this national crisis, much less pledge to create genuine educational equity. She calls, at most, for a few additional competitive grants, the destructive Obama approach to education funding, and meaningless suggestions about universal pre-kindergarten (roughly modeled on Obama’s Preschool for All program, which did not receive Congressional funding).

With the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) firmly in her pocket,

the candidate has barely made a nod in the direction of teachers’ concerns. When she did, speaking at the NEA convention, she was booed for her complimentary statements about “public” charter schools.

Meanwhile, the sustained assault on school budgets has resulted in fewer teachers, growing class sizes, poor salaries, leading to a catastrophic teacher shortage (and growing numbers of uncertified teachers in the classroom), outdated technology, crumbling school building infrastructure (including lead in water in drinking fountains), and a widespread lack of classes and programs.

Since 2008, according to the CBPP report, there has been a net loss of 221,000 school worker jobs. Yet, they point out, there are now 1,120,000 more children attending K-12 schools.

The states with the most draconian cuts to school funding are: Arizona (-36 percent change in total state funding per student), Idaho (-22.6 percent), Alabama (-22.2 percent), Florida (-21.9 percent), Georgia (-19.9 percent), and California (-19.5 percent). At least 19 states cut per-student funding even further this year, adding to prior deficits. Seven of the 10 states with the deepest cuts since 2008 imposed further cuts this year: Arizona, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma and West Virginia.

Additionally, the report notes that five of the eight states that have cut general funding per student by 10 percent or more have enacted income tax rate cuts. In other words, these states—Arizona, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin—have slashed education and handed the money to the ultra-wealthy.

What do the budget cuts mean for children? Take Oklahoma as an example. Since 2008, nearly a quarter of school spending has been eliminated. In Oklahoma City, 208 teachers lost their jobs, 18 percent of the administration staff were cut, the Fine Arts budget was slashed in half, the library media budget was eliminated, elementary schools will need to fund their own school supplies, and textbook

orders were cancelled. To deal with the loss of educators, the district set up a Fundraising Task Force to appeal for charitable donations to pay “adjunct” teachers.

“I’m here because my education does matter,” Cassidy Coffey told the *Oklahoman* as hundreds of students walked out of Oklahoma City schools last spring to protest. “This whole gathering is to show that just because we are considered children does not mean that our education isn’t valued to us, and it should be valued to everybody else. This is our education, this is everybody’s future,” the high school junior told the press.

Oklahoma teachers, posting on Facebook, describe overcrowded classrooms, being forced to buy all the supplies for their students, asking every child to bring in a ream of paper for the copiers, and cleaning their own rooms. One described spending “at least two hours every day trying to find grants and funds for my classroom.”

Similar conditions exist in many districts and in every state. This week, for example, teachers in Buffalo, New York have agreed to a new contract after working under an expired one for 12 years with no pay raises. Under the deal, pushed by the Buffalo Teachers Federation, the city’s educators will lose credit for years of wage freezes, will have to work a longer school year and a longer day, and will give up health care benefits.

The destruction of public education has been deliberate policy pursued by both Democrats and Republicans in order to open up the “education market” to the financial elite. Trump is a longstanding supporter of school vouchers and privatization. “As your president, I will be the nation’s biggest cheerleader for school choice,” he told the *Washington Post* recently, saying this was a “civil right.”

For her part, Clinton has not only embraced the Obama record, that of the president who has done more to privatize education than any other, but is well known, in her own right, for supporting charter schools, high-stakes testing and competitive grants. In fact, it was Bill Clinton who created the federal grant initiative, Charter Schools Program (CSP), which was expanded by the Obama administration. The CSP has handed out \$3 billion in federal funds to charter school chains.

Clinton admits, “I have for many years now, about 30 years, supported the idea of charter schools,” adding the meaningless caveat that they be “high performing” or “non-profit” charters (just as she supports “better, but fewer tests”).

AFT president Randi Weingarten, Clinton’s top education advisor, acknowledged her candidate’s identification with Obama’s Race To The Top was deeply problematic among teachers. “People are skeptical because the policies [he enacted] through Race to the Top actually worked as they

were intended and they made schools into testing factories,” Weingarten said.

While the two candidates represent factions of the financial oligarchy seeking to enlarge their share of the profits at the expense of America’s children, Clinton has a different implementation track. She aims to rely upon the unions to do the dirty work—as did Obama—whereas Trump would dispense with the services of the AFT and NEA.

The teachers unions have for years played the decisive role in blocking the resistance of teachers and students to the destruction of public education. They have suppressed the independent struggles of educators and sought to corral teachers within the safe channels of pro-capitalist policies—the Democratic Party, “local control” and identity politics. Concerned only about their dues base and a “seat at the table,” the unions have forced through rotten agreements that give a green light to school closures, mass layoffs and privatization.

Support to the Clinton campaign has, of late, been an explicit consideration in the shutting down of teacher struggles by the AFT in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and Long Island University.

Recently released emails to Clinton campaign manager John Podesta from Weingarten and NEA officials give a peek into the more intimate working relationship between the well-heeled union hierarchy and Clinton. They show both Weingarten and NEA officials conspiring to push through an early presidential endorsement, no matter the sentiment of their membership. They discuss how to bend the rules of the AFL-CIO and consider how to secure the necessary results of internal balloting. Unsurprisingly, an email records that the NEA was prepared to call off the vote if things had gone awry for Clinton.

Far from being interested in the plight of educators and schoolchildren, Weingarten is revealed in the Podesta emails as Clinton’s hatchet woman, counseling the candidate on “aggressive” tactics in securing support. In one revealing commentary, Weingarten promises retribution to the Sanders-supporting National Nurses United: “we will go after NNU and there [sic] high and mighty sanctimonious conduct... R.”



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