

Baltimore public schools face \$129 million budget deficit, plan mass layoffs

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The head of Baltimore public schools announced last month massive budget cuts and layoffs intended to offset the \$129 million deficit facing the school district in the fiscal year starting July 1.

“Baltimore city public schools will look drastically different on July 2,” said Sonja Santelises, CEO of Baltimore Public Schools, stated in the announcement. “This is going to hit everything kids love about coming to school,” she said.

The current deficit amounts to 10 percent of the entire budget for the Baltimore City school system, which has an enrollment of around 82,000 students.

The plan calls for \$80 million in cuts in funding for individual schools and laying off 1,000 teachers and staff. A cost-cutting measure last May laid off 171 support staff, but spared teachers and principals.

Santelises said that individual schools can expect to see a “dramatic increase in class size.” The current proposal could increase class sizes by as many as 10 students in some schools.

“My class size is already at capacity, at 30 and 36 kids,” Athanasia Kyriakakos, an art teacher at the Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical School and Maryland teacher of the year, told the *Baltimore Sun*. “What are they going to make it, 46 kids?”

“I want my kids to succeed. I just had another student die the other day. I don’t want them on the street,” she said.

Another \$10 million in savings will come from cutting each department in the school system’s central office by 10 to 15 percent. This will entail a decrease in school services, such as delaying maintenance projects and reducing trash pickup from five times a week to two.

The plan also calls for dipping into the school district’s reserve fund along with a hiring and spending

freeze, which would bring in a further \$20 million.

Finally, school officials are planning salary freezes and imposing up to five furlough days to pare down the budget deficit by \$20 million.

The Maryland state legislature in Annapolis, which met earlier with Santelises and a Baltimore City delegation declined to provide any further financial assistance to Baltimore. Maryland is currently facing a state budget deficit of \$544 million for fiscal 2018.

Declining enrollment has decreased the amount of funding the city receives from the state. Under the budget recently proposed by Republican Governor Larry Hogan, Baltimore schools will lose \$42 million in funding.

The governor refuses to raise taxes or increase debt to address the budget shortfall. Hogan is currently backing bills that would expand charter schools and provide scholarships for private schools.

No genuine struggle against the attacks on teachers, school staff, and public education will be offered by the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU), which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers.

“Our children cannot get the education they deserve with 1,000 fewer people working in the schools,” said Marietta English, president of the Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU), in response to the cuts.

English, who is now serving in her eighth term as BTU president, was narrowly re-elected in May of last year, facing opposition from many of the union’s 6,000 members who have grown dissatisfied with the union bureaucracy’s failure to address large class sizes and standardized testing.

In 2010, English helped negotiate a contract that increased the pay of Baltimore teachers, but tied their pay and evaluations to student performance (i.e., standardized testing scores) instead of automatic raises

based on seniority or number of degrees obtained. The contract was initially rejected by the membership by 400 votes, and passed only after an “information campaign” by the union. At the time, the contract was hailed by Obama’s Secretary of Education Arne Duncan as “making teachers real partners in reform.”

The focus on student performance and testing has nothing to do with accountability, but is instead intended to scapegoat teachers for the problems facing cash-strapped and overcrowded schools, and the impoverished conditions of many students.

The 2014 contract, the last contract approved, largely followed the stipulations outlined in the 2010 contract. This contract expired on June 30, 2016. Since that date, the union has extended the contract six times. The latest extension, agreed to on January 10, is set to expire on March 28.

“The BTU is willing to do its part to save jobs by working with and negotiating in good faith with the School Board,” said the BTU in a statement issued after the announcement of the cuts. In other words, the BTU is prepared to offer up concessions to the school board rather than conduct a real struggle against the cuts.

Rather than calling for unifying the struggle of Baltimore teachers with other teachers and workers facing similar attacks on their working conditions and standard of living, the BTU is instead focusing on placing pressure on “the City of Baltimore, the General Assembly, and Governor Hogan,” the very forces that are spearheading the cuts.



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