

# Nearly \$50 million in cuts planned for northern Virginia school district

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In late May the Fairfax County, Virginia school board adopted its \$2.8 billion budget for the 2017-2018 school year. The board's budget included \$50 million in cuts from its initial proposed budget.

Fairfax County has the third highest median income among all counties in the United States. Nevertheless, the cuts in the county, just outside of Washington, DC, underscore the fact that even relatively better-off areas are struggling to provide inadequate funding for basic social services.

Due to the cuts, Fairfax County will hire fewer teachers than expected, with a resultant increase in class sizes for the upcoming school year. In addition, the school system will charge students a \$50 fee for participating in after-school activities.

The 2017-2018 budget reductions come on the heels of steep cuts in the previous school year when the district faced a \$70 million deficit. In fact, the school system has made cuts every year since 2008. Due to the budget issues, Fairfax County has struggled to offer competitive salaries to teachers, resulting in a 50 percent turnover rate in the first five years of employment. At the start of the 2015-16 school year, there were 200 vacant teacher positions.

Prior to the cuts, class sizes in Fairfax County were already among the highest in the DC region. In 2016-2017, the average elementary school class size was 22.4 students per classroom teacher. Middle and high school class sizes were 24.6 and 25.8 respectively. With the cuts, the board says average class sizes will grow by about half a student.

In addition to school cuts, due to budget woes, Fairfax County cancelled a 1.65 percent "market rate adjustment" salary increase for county employees, deferred facility upgrades, sidewalk/trail maintenance, eliminated a program that allowed people with mental

health issues to get treatment instead of jail time, and underfunded by \$6.7 million a program for employment and day services used by individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Seventy-two percent of the school system's funding comes from county tax revenues, with most of that from real estate taxes. The county has faced a declining real estate tax base in recent years, with average home values flat and office real estate values declining in 2016. The county also has a high office vacancy rate, with more than 20 million square feet empty out of the available 116.4 million square feet.

To raise additional revenues, instead of raising taxes on the wealthy or corporations, Fairfax County proposed a regressive meals tax, which was put up for referendum in the November 2016 election. The proposal called for an additional four percent tax on prepared food and beverages. The measure was defeated.

A large part of the decade-long revenue shortfall for the school system is due to substantial reductions in state funding for Virginia schools. Since 2010 the state government has cut \$6 billion in funding for K-12 education.

On the federal level, Trump's fiscal year 2018 budget proposal calls for \$9.2 billion in spending cuts for education, a 13.5 percent reduction from 2017. Among the proposed cuts nationally are the elimination of a \$2.3 billion program for teacher training and class-size reduction, the elimination of a \$1.2 billion after-school academic enrichment program, which serves nearly 2 million children, and the elimination of a \$190 million literacy program.

Trump's austerity measures follow eight years of the attacks on public education by the Obama administration, which used federal dollars to encourage

cash-strapped school districts to expand for-profit charter schools, push merit pay schemes on teachers and other corporate-backed “school reforms.”

As the Trump administration slashes educational funding, it will sharply increase military spending. On June 22, both the House and Senate and Armed Services Committees proposed a \$706 billion military budget, nearly \$100 billion higher than the 2017 budget. Fairfax County is home to numerous military contractors, including Raytheon, BAE Systems, SAIC, and Booz Allen Hamilton. According to the Fairfax County Economic Development Authority, in 2015, \$9.4 billion in federal procurement contracts were awarded to Fairfax County businesses to directly support the US Army, Air Force and Navy.

At the same time the defense giants have been handed hundreds of millions in tax abatements and other incentives by state and local governments at the expense of the public schools and other essential services. The financial starvation of education and other social programs in even the wealthiest districts is yet another exposure of the fraudulent claim that the US is experiencing an “economic recovery.”



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