

Budget cuts lead to teacher and student injuries at Massachusetts school

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A grievance filed this fall by the Northampton Association of School Employees reveals that recent district budget cuts have led directly to injuries and concussions among teachers and students.

Last year the Northampton School Committee put in place what it calls a “full-inclusion model” for students—a euphemism for cutting special support for students with major behavioral and learning challenges. These “special needs” students instead were thrown into regular classrooms, without increased staffing to help teachers manage the inevitable difficulties.

The changes, rammed through this past year against dire warnings from staff at the small west Massachusetts school, included the elimination of 19 educational support positions, and the addition of only five fulltime special education teachers, along with one general education teacher.

According to the local *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, the grievance documents reveal “understaffed classrooms, chaotic hallways, injuries and constant stress for teachers and students... problems exist at every grade level in the school; unsafe workplace conditions [attributed] to a lack of adequate staffing.”

Specific problems identified in the grievance include students being sent back to class before they have been “fully de-escalated,” teachers being left alone to “de-escalate students who are physically aggressive,” and “restricted access to bathrooms and hallways, and classrooms being held in place because of students in distress throughout the day.”

In response to the publicity generated by the report in the *Gazette*, school superintendent John Provost lashed out at staff at the Bridge Street School, complaining that the union shared the grievance with the media before submitting it, in contravention of grievance procedures.

“I really don’t think it’s fair for NASE to portray Bridge Street as unsafe for staff,” Provost said, blandly dismissing concerns over violence at the school. “Mostly I’ve seen teaching and learning [at Bridge Street School].” He did not comment on specific allegations in the grievance.

Provost, whose annual salary is \$147,500, did admit that the new full-inclusion model, which has been touted by the school committee as socially progressive and educationally sound policy, was in reality an attempt to balance the budget on the backs of teachers and staff at the elementary school.

“We were as responsive as we could have been [to teacher’s input] with the changes that we made in our budget proposal,” Provost said.

Several parents spoke up at a school committee meeting on January 11th, including a parent of a special needs student enrolled at the school. “With a new program bumps are to be expected, but not a consistent, systemic failure,” the parent said.

Another parent, commenting on the first article to appear in the *Gazette* about the grievances, spoke about her own daughter’s experience at the school, saying “she’s getting physically hurt” by the actions of an aggressive child, and that the changes that were made are “an approach that my grandmother would call bass ackwards”.

A special meeting of parents and school staff the following day provided further damning testimony on the chaos engulfing the school.

Assertions contained within the grievance that “Students and faculty members have reported injuries (including concussions) due to aggressive/assaultive behavior, and have seen the school nurse and/or visited their doctor or the emergency room,” were partially corroborated by Jessica LaCroix, the school’s nurse,

who stated that “Since September...there have been many injuries...There have been kids being hurt and teachers being hurt in front of kids... Kids don’t really flinch anymore...Even when somebody hurts them.”

One parent indicated that she and others would be withdrawing their children from Bridge Street, saying “They won’t be coming here,” she said. “And you are going to have a mass exodus of parents who are invested in their children’s well-being.”

Numerous issues are bound-up with the appalling and dangerous conditions facing students and staff at Bridge Street School, including the expansion of charter schools in the area, which siphon off resources when students transfer from the central public school system. Pro-charter and anti-public school legislation has led to a massive expansion of charter schools throughout the state.

The Massachusetts Teachers Association, of which the Northampton Association of School Employees is a member, has done nothing to improve working conditions for teachers, launching no significant strike in over a decade. According to Andrea Eggito, bargaining coordinator for the union, the NASE is in favor of the “full-inclusion” model, meekly complaining that teachers’ requests for a “slow-rollout” of the program was not taken into consideration during the budgeting process.

The nationwide destruction of public education is set to significantly escalate with the recent passage of the Republicans’ massive tax cut bill, a frontal assault on the American working class that will put tremendous pressure on towns and cities to lower the property taxes that fund public schools, while simultaneously expanding financial benefits for parents who enroll their children in private schools.

A National Education Association estimate concludes that the tax bill could cut as much as \$370 billion dollars of state and local revenue, resulting in 370,000 education jobs being axed over the next decade.

Resisting the onslaught against public education, one of the greatest gains wrested from the government by the working class in the 19th and 20th centuries, will require workers in schools to form new rank and file committees to present their demands, breaking the stranglehold of the established teachers’ unions, which function as virtual appendages of the Democratic Party, selling out school employees’ interests and suppressing

strike activity.



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