

Nashville parents, teachers and students decry public school cuts

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9 April 2018

Public schools in Nashville, Tennessee face proposed cuts to free food programs and elimination of funding for schools with impoverished students, while teachers have seen a paltry 2 percent raise in a city which experienced the greatest one-year jump in the cost of homes of any municipality in the nation.

Teachers, backed by many parents, packed a recent school board meeting to complain of proposed cuts to remedial reading programs and a “robbing Peter to pay Paul” strategy of shifting Title 1 funds from 49 schools with less than 75 percent of students impoverished to 87 schools with poverty rates of 75-100 percent among students. The previous threshold was 50 percent.

Title 1 is a federal program enacted in 1965 to provide federal funding assistance for schools with low-income students.

“We shouldn’t be pitting schools against schools and students against students,” parent John Haubenreich told the school board. “Expand the resource pie so everyone gets the resources they need.”

There is also a proposal to begin charging for pre-kindergarten education.

Another parent told the board she and her husband were teachers and with both their salaries they made too much for assistance, making it impossible for them to afford the pre-K fees for one child “except by living from paycheck to paycheck.”

This teacher echoed the stories of teachers in Arizona and Oklahoma holding second jobs like driving for Uber or Lyft or having to give blood to pay for car repairs.

The school system also announced that it will need to scale back use of a federal program providing free lunch to students. Currently the program provides free lunch to all students. Next year, however, the program will only be offered in 74 schools, and those needing

assistance in the other 75 schools will have to file paperwork for free or reduced lunches.

The school district announced it will limit its participation in the National School Lunch Program, offered by the USDA, because it will cost around \$8 million. The number of students needing assistance has dropped from 60 percent to 47 percent since 2014. District Operations Manager Ken Start told the *Tennessean* he believes many immigrant families are reluctant to apply for assistance despite the need.

“It’s hard to quantify,” he said, “but the issue with immigration and legal status means there is a reluctance among parents to participate or fill out paperwork for fear of other repercussions.”

The cuts will have serious consequences for children. One elementary school teacher said, “All I can say is that I have seen many hungry children over the years and I know firsthand that they have a very difficult time focusing on their school work when all they can think about is their hunger pangs” She said, “The only solution is to feed them. That’s why so many of us keep snacks in our classrooms.”

She added, “Also, I’d like to add that MNPS (Metro Nashville Public Schools) had the information about free meals going away due to errors they made in tracking the number of students that were being fed at each school each year. This could have been prevented.”

In early March, teachers were notified of a purchasing freeze until July 1. For the remainder of the school year, all non-staff expenses will no longer be funded. This includes supplies, software, transportation, field trips, IT purchases, among other things. There also have been layoffs in support staff, including truancy specialists and family involvement specialists.

But for the rich and well-to-do who visit the “IT

City,” as Nashville is known, city officials pull out all the stops. Last year, then mayor Megan Barry, a Democrat, and the city council approved almost \$14 million in tax breaks to help build a \$90 million private hotel water park. Despite public funding, the water park would only be for hotel guests and their families.

Meanwhile, one of the only remaining indoor swimming pools, at a local public high school, was turned over to the YMCA, which can use it exclusively for YMCA members and charge students, many of them from low-income immigrant families, \$3 each a day to use the pool.

Nashville is awash in charter schools and expensive private schools. Public schools have become, with rare exceptions, the dumping ground for the children of the working class and poor.

But pupils and teachers starved of funding saw the construction of a new minor league baseball stadium, approval for funding a \$250 million soccer stadium and plans to spend more than \$450 million over the next 20 years to renovate Nissan stadium, home of the National Football League (NFL) Tennessee Titans, and Bridgestone Arena, a mixed use downtown facility and home of the National Hockey League (NHL) Nashville Predators.

City residents will vote May 1 on a proposal to spend \$8 billion for a transit plan which includes improved bus routes, but also a light rail system. The plan is supported by the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable.

Nashville and the state of Tennessee handed the television program “Nashville” \$30 million in tax incentives and outright grants over four years, while the city’s Meharry/General Hospital, established as a “charity” hospital, is seriously underfunded. The former mayor sought to turn the hospital into an outpatient clinic to save money

According to a 2015 Brookings Institution analysis of Census Bureau data, Nashville is one of the most unequal cities in the nation, ranking sixth out of the 50 largest metropolitan areas for income disparity. Residents in the 95th percentile have an average annual income of around \$170,000, 7.9 times more than those in the 20th percentile, who earn little more than \$21,000.

According to the finance website GoBankingRates.com, Nashville last year experienced

a cost of living increase of 15.4 percent—the fourth-largest increase of all major US cities. The median cost for homes rose by 30 percent in 2015-2017, from under \$260,000 to nearly \$340,000.

Home prices like this are well out of range for a starting Nashville teacher, who can expect to make barely \$43,000 a year, well below the Nashville median income of \$61,000. According to GoBankingRates.com, to live “comfortably” in Nashville today requires \$70,150 a year. A teacher starting today could work 25-plus years and not reach a salary level of \$70,000!

Maggie, 26, is in the construction industry. “My sister is a teacher and in public school systems. I agree that they are not paid enough for the amount of work they do every day,” she said. “They are raising our children to be the leaders of this world. I think they have a very important job. They are not just teaching little subjects, but teaching them to be human beings and citizens of this country, and to be good citizens of this country, and I think that is very important.”

Veronica, a junior at the University of Tennessee, said, “I have a family member who just moved to Nashville and is teaching at an inner-city school. That is where everything starts from, so why would that not be something you would focus on? Why would you not want to build a strong foundation and put a lot of money into that, because that’s going to be our future one day, and I think it is really important.”

She added on the Nashville teachers, “Stay strong and keep with it, don’t falter. If it is something they believe they need, then I think it is very important to fight for.”

Anna, a parent, said, “I think education for our students is vital for the future of our country, and if we can’t provide adequate budgets for teachers we are failing our future. We are behind you and we support you.”



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