

New Jersey education budget reallocation threatens hundreds of jobs

Erik Schreiber, Sandy English
18 May 2019

In New Jersey, one of America's wealthiest states in per capita income, Democratic and Republican state politicians passed a law last year, Amendment S2, that reallocates state aid to school districts from a severely underfunded education budget. The measure, now coming into effect, will cause hundreds of teachers and school administrative and support staff to lose their jobs in two of the state's poorer cities, Paterson and Jersey City.

The bill, sponsored by Democratic Governor Phil Murphy, a former Goldman Sachs executive, and passed by the Democratic-controlled state legislature, is a revision of the School Funding Reform Act (SFRA), passed in 2008, and was one of a series of purported reforms enacted over decades aimed at addressing inequality in the distribution of New Jersey's chronically underfunded statewide public education budget.

Both SFRA and S2 calculate state aid to local school districts by means of a complex formula. In New Jersey as in much of America, wealthy communities fund local public education by the archaic method of municipal taxation. Poorer and working-class communities, who can raise far less revenue through local taxes, are dependent on state or federal aid.

Some local districts are now finding themselves facing enormous budget deficits and are attempting to address them by a combination of taxation, staff layoffs and lawsuits, all thoroughly reactionary measures that are incapable of addressing the underlying social crisis—the severe, persistent and deliberate underfunding of public education by state and federal governments.

Under S2, Jersey City will lose \$27 million this year. In a vote cast at midnight on May 14, the city's Board of Education (BOE) approved its budget for the coming school year. To close part of the district's \$120 million deficit, the board adopted a last-minute plan that includes the sale of the district's headquarters and the termination of approximately 100 teachers and other school workers.

The board also increased the regressive school tax levy by 10 percent, a painful amount for residents of a city with a per capita annual income of \$19,410.

Originally, the board had proposed to eliminate more than 400 education positions. Its vote adopting the new budget came after three-and-a-half hours of public comment during an open meeting. More than 300 students, parents and teachers demanded that the board save the teachers' jobs.

The Jersey City cuts will total approximately \$208 million over the coming five years. This would lead to layoffs, the elimination of sports and after-school programs as well as school consolidations. The cuts will increase the student-teacher ratio to 28 to 1 from the current 25 to 1, according to Franklin Walker, acting superintendent of Jersey City Public Schools.

Since 2009 Jersey City has had no increase in state aid, and its education spending has become increasingly inadequate. Furthermore, in the 2017–2018 school year, Jersey City endured a brutal \$8 million cut in state aid. This was the highest aid cut in the state and forced the city to reduce its already inadequate spending so that it could balance its budget. Between the 2008–2009 and 2019–2020 school years, Jersey City increased taxes by nearly 57 percent.

In the case of Paterson, during the first week in May, the city's Board of Education approved a budget that will cut 232 jobs. In addition, the district plans to eliminate 44 vacant positions. Superintendent Eileen Shafer told northjersey.com that the number of layoffs is only an estimate and that there may be additional cuts.

In 2018, Paterson was ranked the fifth-poorest city in New Jersey. Twenty-nine percent of its residents live below the poverty line. Nevertheless, the new budget will increase taxes by 14 percent, while reducing funding for reading, math, art and music. Students in Paterson score among the worst in the state on standardized tests and will

continue to face overcrowded classrooms.

A student at the John F. Kennedy Educational Complex in Paterson told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters: “My biology teacher left, and a bunch of the gym teachers also left. Some classes will be bunched up together. My teacher for [science, technology, engineering, and math] is no longer here. I have 50 students in my class. Many teachers are leaving, and others are not even applying, because they are afraid that they will not have a job to keep. We had a discussion about this in class. They are giving most of the money to the charter schools.”

“I have seen a downgrade of the public schools since 2011 up until now,” said Joe, a substitute teacher in Paterson who has taught for 40 years. “There have been tremendous pay cuts because of the increased cost of healthcare plans. Sweeney [president of the state senate] says he wants another plan. What he is trying to do is to screw us.”

John McEntee, president of the Paterson Education Association, the teachers’ union, has asked his school district to join a Jersey City BOE lawsuit against the state’s Department of Education. The suit asks the courts to block the cuts from taking effect and that the state make up for budget deficits that have persisted since Republican Chris Christie became governor in 2009. The legal action, however, is little more than a political stunt by local politicians and the unions, which would, at most, only delay the implementation of the state’s draconian cuts.

The S2 and the 2008 SFRA bills are only methods of shuffling an entirely inadequate amount of state education aid around while allowing further cuts in the total amount of education spending to go forward.

And yet the state is flush with wealth. New Jersey, with a population of nearly nine million, is home to nine billionaires and close to 300,000 millionaire households. The state has found \$11 billion in incentives to shower on businesses and developers in the past 15 years without bothering to establish adequate controls to ensure that recipients are creating new jobs.

The gaping social inequality in the state and the motivations of Democratic and Republican politicians in enforcing it is not lost on teachers. As one teacher from McNair High School in Jersey City told the WSWS about the layoffs, “The problems have been going on for decades now. The funds have been managed in a completely irresponsible way. They are not going to the people who are suffering. It is the people who don’t need it, the rich, who are benefiting. I think there are moves to

outsource a lot of aspects of public education or move everything to charter schools.

“Money is the same language spoken by the Democrats and Republicans. It is bipartisan for them, and what we are seeing in education is an example of this.”

Throughout these attacks on public education, teachers’ unions have worked to tamp down teachers’ disgust with the destruction of public education and bolster the Democratic Party as it defends the incomes of the ultra-wealthy. In March 2018, skyrocketing out-of-pocket medical costs and substandard pensions had caused so much frustration among Jersey City’s teachers that the Jersey City Education Association (JCEA) was forced to call a strike to prevent anger from boiling over.

But behind the teachers’ backs, the union negotiated a deal with the school district that did not address workers’ grievances. The JCEA capitulated to a court injunction, ended the strike after one day, and sent teachers back to work without releasing any details about the agreement. After the union cajoled and bullied them for a month, the teachers approved the deal.

Schools across the country and around the world are facing similar attacks. The number of teacher strikes has increased dramatically since the beginning of 2018, and most of these strikes have originated independently of the teachers’ unions.

As the sabotage of the Jersey City teachers struggle by the JCEA 14 months ago demonstrates, it is only by forming their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, that teachers can advance the fight to defend public education.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact