

US officials use economic fallout from pandemic to slash school funding

Phyllis Steele, Jerry White
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At least 46 states and the District of Columbia in the United States have completely closed schools due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting 54.5 million students. While the closures are necessary to slow the spread of the deadly disease, students are suffering from the loss of social interaction and access to counselors, nurses and a consistent food supply.

Some 22 million low-income students receive free or reduced cost breakfasts, lunches and in some cases dinners during the school year through a federal program run by the US Department of Agriculture. The school meals are the second largest federal antihunger program behind the government's food stamp program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP.

A recent survey of directors of meal programs by the School Nutrition Association indicates that over 90 percent are concerned about students missing meals during the school closures. They are also concerned about the financial impact on their meal programs, which depend on cafeteria sales. Government reimbursements for the recorded number of students will be more difficult to collect during the closures.

Due to the school closures and lockdown orders, the three largest districts in the US—New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago—along with urban and rural districts across the country have been forced to improvise using whatever resources are available to distribute meals as well as learning packets.

In New York City, with 1.1 million students, parents are being directed to 400 centers where they can pick up three meals from 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Roughly three-quarters of New York's students qualify for free or reduced price school breakfasts and lunches.

A public school educator from the New York City borough of Queens told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "Some schools haven't even been able to figure out how to contact a significant percentage of the kids, never mind support those who are in real need, with their parents quarantined and losing their jobs.

"They had their 'training' of teachers last week that provided just one more example of the unpreparedness and really the backward character of the educational system in terms of tech. They have been focusing so much on assessing teachers based on an unrealistic standard, downsizing in every area and forcing principals to rate low that they didn't bother training people to bring them up to current levels of tech proficiency. Now they say they are going to distribute 300,000 laptops.

"Why wasn't there funding for that before? They've left teachers, schools, kids and families in overcrowded, run-down buildings, cramming 34 kids in a room."

Districts are implementing e-learning programs that are chaotic and unprepared. Students will struggle to receive the online instruction because of the impact of social inequality, including access to computers and an internet connection. Where there are restrictions against social gathering, students will not be able to go to libraries or fast food restaurants to access a Wi-Fi network. In addition, students with special needs will not be able to get instruction from trained special education teachers.

A teacher in Kingston, about 100 miles north of New York City, said there is a lack of ChromeBooks to continue coordinated educational programs, and younger students are not being prioritized. Her class is primarily immigrants, and she has been actively speaking with struggling parents, some of whom are not citizens and/or single, who have to continue working, making it very difficult to find childcare and prioritize their child's education.

The Trump administration and the Democratic Party have been focused on propping up the stock market and giant corporations with trillions of dollars, leaving teachers, parents and children to scramble with scarce resources. Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) abruptly cancelled an online briefing with school superintendents, leading the head of the School Superintendents Association to say superintendents are feeling "total confusion" over conflicting statements from the administration.

This is not simply a matter of confusion, however. Plans are already being made to exploit the crisis in order to implement even deeper cuts to public education, while diverting more public resources to for-profit charter schools, “public-private partnerships,” e-learning businesses and other privatization schemes.

The 2008-09 crisis led to a sharp reduction in federal and state funding and the loss of 351,000 jobs in education by mid-2012 while student attendance rose by 1,419,000. According to an analysis by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, some of the jobs have been restored, but there is still a deficit of 135,000 school employees compared to 2008. The Obama administration used the financial crisis to goad cash-strapped school districts to lift the cap on charter schools and impose merit pay and punitive teacher accountability schemes, which punished teachers for educational problems caused by higher levels of poverty and decades of austerity.

Last week, *Education Week* published an article titled, “Districts Brace for Crash in State K-12 Revenue Due to Coronavirus,” which detailed plans being made to cut school district funding, particularly for districts with low property values and tax revenues that are least able to afford it. “School districts should brace for a precipitous drop in state K-12 aid next year because of the coronavirus’s widespread impact on the economy—and they should start preparing now, funding experts warn,” the article states.

One school funding consultant told *Education Week*, “For districts, this is going to be a double whammy. There’s uncertainty on the revenue side as far as how much state aid districts are going to get ... and, on the expense side, we’ve got to figure out how to respond to this new world. Districts need to begin planning for a new reality.”

State governments have already begun slash spending and renege on pay raises promised to teachers after the wave of strikes over the last two years by more than 700,000 educators demanding wage increases and the restoration of state school spending to pre-2008 levels.

Last week, the Kentucky state Senate passed a budget bill that will withhold \$1.3 billion from teacher pension funding unless the unions agree to cut retirement benefits for newly hired teachers. Protesting teachers were not allowed in the capitol because of coronavirus restrictions on large gatherings.

In Tennessee last week, Republican Governor Bill Lee cut in half the amount of money he wants to set aside for teacher pay raises and then got rid of a \$250 million proposal to provide mental health services in schools. He instead set aside that money in the state’s “emergency fund,” *Education Week* reported.

“Maryland’s legislature, which raced to approve

legislation this week before adjourning its session early, added a clause to an ambitious school funding overhaul that would pull all new funding in the case of a recession,” the publication said. In Wisconsin a plan to spend more on special education was shelved.

Districts are also incurring large unexpected costs by delivering meals to students, setting up makeshift child-care centers, and purchasing distance learning materials for students, the article notes. In addition, costs are expected to rise next year when students, many emotionally traumatized and behind academically, return to school.

“Any substitute teacher or transportation savings districts might gain by shaving off weeks or months off the school year will be outstripped by new intervention and counseling costs, experts warn,” the article notes. “States are going to take a massive hit,” predicted Marguerite Roza, a Georgetown University school finance expert. “School districts will be fine through the end of the school year. But next year is going to be a come-to-Jesus moment.”

Like they did after the global financial crash in 2008, the teacher unions will collaborate in the new and far deeper attacks on teachers and public education that are coming. That is why educators and all sections of workers have to take up a struggle against the plans of the corporate and financial elite to exploit the crisis to funnel even more money into their bank accounts and instead take up the fight for a program that defends the interests of the working class.

In its statement “How to Fight the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Program for the Working Class,” the Socialist Equality Party calls for free and universal testing, immediate and cost-free treatment for all those infected, an emergency program to expand the healthcare infrastructure, the immediate closure of all schools, nonessential plants and workplaces, with full income for workers affected. We urge all educators who agree with this program to join the Socialist Equality Party and take up the fight for socialism.



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