

As educators die from COVID19

New York City makes first wave of massive budget cuts to public education

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On April 7, New York City's Department of Education (DOE) announced that it would be cutting \$273 million from its budget next school year. These are part of plans to cut \$1.3 billion from the city's budget, due to a steep drop in revenue caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The DOE has confirmed that more cuts are to come.

This does not include aid from New York state, whose deficit has jumped from \$6 billion to \$12 billion because of revenue lost during the coronavirus pandemic. The New York City DOE will receive \$11.3 billion from the state, including \$717 million of federal stimulus funds. That still represents a small overall decrease from the current year.

Significantly, the state legislature, controlled by the Democratic Party, authorized the state budget director to make further cuts in each quarter of the year if the budget is one percent off state projections. Already anticipating a further loss in revenue, Cuomo has made it clear that such cuts are coming. There is little doubt that they will further impact New York City schools. The annual federal contribution to New York schools has not been calculated, though there are likely to be cuts there as well.

Funding for private charter schools at both the city and the state levels remain intact in the budget and it is unlikely that this line will be significantly adjusted.

On the chopping block for the schools in the city's system is \$67 million for teachers' professional development and a \$49 million reduction in funding for Equity and Excellence programs, such as early literacy, computer science, math and college entry programs that largely benefit kids from impoverished backgrounds.

Other cuts include \$43 million for the expansion of pre-school programs in several school districts, including the entire borough of Staten Island.

Another \$100 million will be taken from the Fair Student Funding formula. This funding is typically higher at schools with large numbers of special education students, English language learners, low-income students and students who need special academic assistance.

In addition to the cuts to education, the city will cancel its

Summer Youth Employment Program, in place since 1963, that provides 75,000 poor and working-class youth with summer jobs. Cutting the program will save the city \$150 million.

These are all necessary programs for the largest school system in the United States, one that is already severely underfunded. The city, home to Wall Street and 103 billionaires, has the highest levels of social inequality for any major city in the United States. The death rate from COVID-19 in the working-class areas of Queens and the Bronx, the poorest urban county in the US, far exceeds those of wealthier Manhattan.

These cuts, only a taste of what is to come, constitute part of the ongoing attacks on public education by the ruling elite. While education and other vital services are being slashed, the political establishment is pouring over \$2 trillion into Wall Street. In New York, the cuts will hit low income families the hardest in a school system that serves over 700,000 poor children, 114,000 of them homeless.

The pandemic has already had a brutal impact on the public school system and its teachers, students and their families.

On Monday, after delaying releasing figures for weeks, the DOE announced that 50 of its employees had died of COVID-19, including 22 paraprofessionals, 21 teachers, 2 administrators, 1 facilities staffer, 1 guidance counselor and 1 food service staffer.

The fact that the de Blasio administration only released these figures after considerable pressure from teachers and other DOE workers demonstrates the enormous contempt it holds for educators, as also demonstrated in its education budget. No official tracking of DOE deaths has been made by the agency and the mayor has not even publicly mentioned them.

Even before the budget cuts were announced, teachers had become largely hostile to the mayor because of his seeming indifference. One science teacher in the Bronx told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "One of the things that bothers me and other teachers is we've lost principals and teachers to coronavirus. I don't think the mayor has ever mentioned them. He's not even recognizing that some of us are sick."

There is no doubt that the extremely late closing of New York

schools by de Blasio on March 16, which was only done under the threat of a strike by teachers, has played a central role not only in teacher and school staff deaths, but also in the transmission of the coronavirus throughout the city.

On Saturday, de Blasio announced that he would keep schools closed for the rest of the school year, which ends on June 26. Within a few hours, however, Governor Cuomo announced that de Blasio did not have the authority to make that decision.

On Sunday, Cuomo said in reference to school closing dates, "I do not know what we'll be doing in June. Nobody knows what we'll be doing in June." On Monday, the governor said at his daily press conference that the "worst is over." Earlier in the day he called de Blasio's decision a "mistake." Statewide, schools are only closed until April 29. As of this writing, teachers, students and parents in New York City do not know for how long schools will be closed.

De Blasio said on Monday that keeping the schools open "is a moral question." It would be naive, however, to assume that the New York mayor has put morality, let alone the health safety of teachers and students, or, in fact, the entire population of the city ahead of the needs of big business. On Thursday, along with Trump and Cuomo, he suggested that social distancing should be relaxed as soon as possible and that businesses in the city could open by the end of May.

Teaching is in disarray across New York City. Much of special education, for example, has become extremely difficult if not impossible for the 225,000 students who receive those services. The DOE has revised its standards, but critics have raised concerns that parents are not informed of the changes.

Stephanie, who teaches Special Ed at several schools in Manhattan, told the WWS: "I have families that may have one to three children and one phone. If a family has not had a computer, parents do not know what they are doing.

"These are federally mandated services where parents need to give consent, such as for occupational or physical therapy like speech therapy, so we must deal with parents also. Appointments must be scheduled, so special education teachers may be waiting online thirty minutes in an empty chat room but then are not paid for that time. When we call, parents may say the child does not want to do it now, or is sleeping, or is talking to their grandmother. Just on April 2 the DOE mandated that after three failed attempts to reach a family, they can be terminated from service, but the students will not receive what they need.

"I have been sitting down for fourteen-hour days. I have to reach out to 31 families. A counselor I know has fifty families. I have never met these people. Some are in shelters or have family violence or addiction. There can be a complete disconnect. I cannot just be calling and saying 'Good morning? How are you?'"

The completely unplanned, haphazard and inadequate approach to the pandemic in all its aspects represents an

historic failure of capitalism. Teachers have been outraged at the conduct of the political establishment throughout this experience. The response is "Nowhere nearly what it should be," one Bronx Science teacher told the WWS. When de Blasio and Cuomo cancelled their spring break this month, it only added insult to injury. The Bronx science teacher noted, "What's next? We have an increase due in May. Are they going to take away the summer?"

Primary and secondary education are now being permanently scarred and the agenda of privatization, long advocated by both Democrats and Republicans, will be implemented with renewed force as public education is starved of funds.

These attacks on public education are an international issue. Educators all around the world have faced governments unwilling to close schools, and unable to properly educate their students during the pandemic. The response of teachers has been equally global in nature. In mid-March, teachers in three countries, Australia, Britain and the United States were all using the hash tag #closetheschools on Twitter to demand a halt to the spread of the pandemic.

Teachers are in a critical position to fight the official failure to confront the pandemic in New York City. Teachers' knowledge of and connections with the working class of the city make them indispensable in developing an independent response to the pandemic.

They should pose a broad set of necessary demands such as a program of massive testing, full support to those who have lost their jobs, healthy and sanitary conditions for those who work in essential industries, acquisition and mass personal protective equipment and full citizenship rights and access to services for undocumented immigrant workers.

To implement these demands, teachers will need to form rank-and-file committees independent of the Democratic Party and its appendage, the United Federation of Teachers. These committees must link up with other workers, including the parents of their students, school bus drivers, logistics workers, health care workers and transit workers, to help the working class develop its own response to the pandemic.

This will require the development of a new socialist leadership among teachers. The Socialist Equality Party election campaign of Joseph Kishore for president and Norissa Santa Cruz for vice president has put forward a plan of action for the entire working class to fight the pandemic by mobilizing workers independently from the Democratic and Republican Party politicians, who are seeking to use the crisis to destroy public education. This is a campaign that educators and school staff should support and join.



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