“When push comes to shove to make cuts, education is on the cut list.”

Massachusetts school district gets rid of art, music and PE teachers for coming school year

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See also: "Massachusetts teacher denounces cuts to Randolph and Brookline schools"

Randolph Public School District, located in the Greater Boston, Massachusetts region, has cut their entire K-12 arts, music, and physical education (PE) programs and staff from their 2020-21 budget. In a district with only 250 teachers, at least 25 teachers and other workers were given RIF (reduction in force) notices this week. This already comes after extraordinary losses, with the *Washington Post* reporting in early May that the district told “dozens of workers—including teaching aides and food service staff [...] they will be furloughed full time or part time.”

While the severity of these cuts may be particularly shocking, with the elimination of entire essential departments, Randolph is far from alone in the impact of budget cuts. With anticipated statewide cuts of up to 10 percent in Massachusetts, the nearby Public Schools of Brookline is facing as many as 300 pink slips for this coming school year, in a district with only 645 teachers. The city of Brookline projects that their deficit will be $12.8 million, and will cut $6.3 million of this total from their education budget.

After hearing of the educational departments that would be cut, concerned Randolph citizens took to social media to express their dismay. Concerned about the pandemic, one person wrote, “the thought of cutting any teacher right now is insane to me, because you’re going to need every abled body in order to keep students safe in small groups… to cut the arts right now when all we’ve doing during quarantine is TURNING TO THEM?!”

Following the social media outcry, the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed an art teacher who has worked in the Randolph school district for over a decade, who provided valuable insights into the proceedings. The teacher requested to be kept anonymous.

Describing the Randolph school district, the teacher said, “The district is mainly low to working class with a few pockets of higher income but a lot of low income housing options. Many single parent homes and parents working multiple low income jobs to make ends meet and still needing assistance.”

The teacher added, “We are the most diverse district in the state. Over 40 languages are spoken in the homes across the town. We saw a huge increase in our Haitian population after the 2010 earthquake. The fact that we have a high ell [English language learner] population makes art, music and gym all the more important because they can be successful in these classes without knowing much of the language.”

The announcement of job cuts, it seems, was made clumsily at best. On Wednesday, multiple art teachers were informed individually that they were losing their jobs. After talking amongst each other, teachers quickly put the pieces together and reached out to the administration. A principal set up an emergency Zoom meeting that night, where he notified the art teachers of the cuts. Music and PE teachers, after hearing rumors, were informed Thursday via emails from HR that they were also given pink slips.

Superintendent Thea Stovell has asked the district to be “mindful of the impact these decisions will have on staff, students and our community,” and that “she remains hopeful that changes will occur that will allow them to call people back.” This hope is both without foundation and little comfort to the staff, students, and community, especially those who are now jobless.

The art teacher we spoke with noted that the loss of art,

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music and PE will be devastating to students, who use them "as an escape from their AP classes." On top of providing needed stress-relief, many love the classes, where "they feel successful… because they are not 'typical learners.' At the elementary and middle school level, kids are assigned to the classes, but the early exposure and success they feel leads them to continue." Next year, students will not have the opportunity to discover these passions and triumphs, and those who already have will miss them sorely. Also missing will be the classes included in the PE program that teach "health, human sexuality, drug and alcohol awareness," all of which are crucial topics for youth to learn.

Lost classes are not the only threat facing students next year. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to swell, and reopening schools remains far from safe. Already, the virus has had a major impact on Randolph's students. The teacher we spoke with stated, "I have at least two students that reached out to me because they had the virus. I have at least one student that I know of that lost his mother. I have another that lost a grandmother and another that lost an uncle. Those are the ones that I know but I'm sure there have been more."

As well as illness and tragedy, the status of students' home lives is having a massive impact on their ability to learn. The art teacher noted, "Many of our students have parents that work in health care, maintenance, food service and other essential jobs, and high schoolers have been tasked with caring for younger siblings and helping them with their schooling. Some have had to step up further because their parents had to be quarantined due to known exposure… I would say, in a good week, I hear from 60 percent of my students in some way (even if they aren't completing the work, at least I heard from them)."

At a time when students need more assistance than ever, adults whose jobs it was to care for students will no longer be in their lives. On top of losing all art, music and PE teachers, elementary and middle school social workers and guidance counselors have also been cut from the Randolph budget for next year, as well as some at the high school level. This will only compound the already unsettled states students find themselves in.

"I think the lack of participation is more in part to losing the structure of school and losing the personal contacts and connections that in turn also hold kids accountable. Add to it the fear of the unknown—parents out of work, family members sick, parents are essential employees so there are no adults home to call them to task, older students caring for younger siblings, potential neglect or abuse that likely existed before but is exacerbated now, not enough food, and you realize kids have bigger fish to fry than whether or not they read a chapter, drew a picture, or learned more geometry."

Though this situation is severe, Randolph is no stranger to substandard educational facilities. "We have been on the chopping block at least three other times. We are behind other districts in what we have for technology for students. We have a transient student population. I may see a kid for freshman year and then never again. I may see them as a freshman, they leave and come back years later as a senior."

The drastic cuts in Randolph and Brookline are a foretaste of what will befall many districts, teachers, and students as US public education faces a $230 billion loss in funding. The cruelty of the ruling class response to the pandemic, though, is not going unnoticed. Our interviewee commented, "Once health becomes a political debate, I can't take their answer as looking out for the greater good… Too many politicians use education as their platform, but, when push comes to shove to make cuts, education is on the cut list."

The degradation of public education cannot go unanswered. Teachers and students must form independent rank-and-file committees to fight budget cuts and an unsafe return to work. It is only through the mobilization of workers and youth that a resistance to austerity and proper demands for safety can be made and forcibly met. All educators interested in fighting to make this a reality should sign up for our newsletter, follow us on Facebook, and contact us today at teachers@wsws.org.

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