

The deliberate sabotage of online learning in the US

Part 2

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This is the second part of a two-part series. To read the first part, [click here](#).

Online education and austerity

States across the US are facing massive budget shortfalls as a result of the pandemic-induced collapse in tax revenue. According to the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), K-12 districts in the US face a combined \$1 trillion shortfall by the end of 2021. There have already been huge budget cuts in nearly every state, resulting in the elimination of at least 354,000 K-12 and 337,000 higher education jobs since last spring. The *Wall Street Journal*, noting that overall state budget shortfalls have already hit \$434 billion, predicted that the shredding of education and social programs will “fuel social unrest.”

These gargantuan sums are a fraction of the \$6 trillion handed over to Wall Street through the CARES Act, which was passed at the end of March in a near-unanimous vote by Republicans and Democrats in Congress, including Bernie Sanders. The CARES Act allocated merely \$13.5 billion for schools, and both big business parties have made it clear that no federal rescue for education is being planned.

While Joe Biden has falsely claimed that his administration will serve the interests of educators, one need only look to the massive austerity implemented while he was vice president under Obama to see what is in store in the coming period. Following the 2008-2009 financial collapse, the Obama administration bailed out the banks and escalated the attack on public education as part of an overall assault on the working class. By 2012, at least 350,000 teachers had lost their jobs and countless schools throughout the country were closed.

During the pandemic, districts have been forced to use rainy day funds to get by, scrambling to provide students with Chromebooks to accommodate distance learning. Education Dive reports that many districts have purchased low quality

technology, writing, “where they’re able to cut corners, they cut corners. Some are opting for free online tools without the best track records or purchasing refurbished devices with substandard specs. ... Those are more likely to break down, they’re more likely to experience trouble in an online learning environment so they might, for instance, have not enough memory.”

Other districts are finding it difficult to even get devices at all, including Denver Public Schools, which has 94,000 students. Trade war measures imposed by the Trump administration meant that 12,500 Lenovo devices manufactured by China and destined for Denver schools were seized at the border.

A Denver schools spokesperson noted in late summer, “We anticipate thousands of DPS students, including a large portion of our youngest students, will be forced to start the school year remotely, without access to technology, if we are unable to secure devices. This will put our most vulnerable further behind.” The district has been reduced to scouring warehouses and offices for computers and imploring alumni to mail in extra devices.

Moreover, significant declines in attendance will exacerbate the fiscal crisis in at least 20 states, as school funding in the US is largely predicated on enrollment. For example, Wisconsin has reported that student counts have fallen by 3 percent, the largest drop in decades, resulting in a funding loss of more than \$23 million. These cuts also disproportionately affect poorer districts, which receive less revenue from local property taxes.

Inequality in online learning

Special education students, who under federal mandates are legally entitled to receive “free and appropriate education,” have faced particular difficulty with online learning. Approximately 7 million special needs students qualify for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that is tailored towards

their learning needs. The pandemic has disrupted access to IEPs and there has been no significant effort on the part of the federal or state governments to aid in the transition to online learning or to provide the necessary safety equipment and medical personnel to ensure a safe learning environment for students who are incapable of learning online due to a disability.

Parents of special needs children, many of whom live in poverty, have had to set aside everything in order to assist their children in learning, since education specialists are unable to provide adequate services remotely. The dire conditions facing special needs students and their families has cynically been used as a pretext for sending some of the most medically vulnerable of society back to school in the middle of a pandemic.

The widespread switch to online learning has also exposed the huge disparity in internet access in the US and internationally. In 2019, only 56 percent of adults making less than \$30,000 and 72 percent of those making between \$30,000 and \$50,000 had broadband internet at home. This impacts many students' ability to access online learning, forcing large numbers to rely on smartphones alone. Seventeen percent of the US population is dependent on their phone for internet service and smartphones can have limited or even no access to districts' online schooling applications.

Even when students have internet, oftentimes the service is inadequate for schoolwork. A 2020 FCC report noted the wide disparities between urban and rural access to 25 Mbps/3 Mbps broadband, which is considered adequate for electronic learning.

These disparities are far worse on a global level, with UNICEF reporting that 463 million children have been unable to access remote learning during the pandemic. "The sheer number of children whose education was completely disrupted for months on end is a global education emergency," said UNICEF director Henrietta Fore, adding, "The repercussions could be felt in economies and societies for decades to come."

In East, West, Central, and South Africa, almost half of all children are unable to access remote learning. In North Africa and the Middle East, 40 percent of students are unable to access remote learning, in South Asia 38 percent of students, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia 34 percent of students.

Speculators exploit the crisis

The financial oligarchy has massively increased their investment in the technology sector during the pandemic, while reaping the unprecedented growth in stock valuation. The wealth of America's billionaires rose to \$3.88 trillion as of October 13, a jump of \$931 billion from March, with tech

billionaires Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Larry Ellison amassing unfathomable wealth.

The sales of education technology has been a key component of the stock market climb. "There are tremendous opportunities to invest into EdTech, with strong growth in both venture capital and listed equity," a senior fund manager at Credit Suisse Asset Management recently stated. He added, "The Coronavirus pandemic will accelerate investment, with many EdTech companies bringing forward investments into new functionalities."

Like vultures picking apart a dying animal, the financial oligarchs are enriching themselves off of the crisis of education they created through years of bipartisan defunding. Both political parties are responsible for the assault on the fundamental right to high-quality education for all. For their part, the teachers unions have provided support to the politicians wielding the axe, while suppressing numerous strikes and protests of educators.

The class divide in education has widened to an abyss during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fight for the universal right to free, high quality education, the first step forward for educators, parents and students is the formation of independent, rank-and-file committees. These committees must be completely independent of the Democrats, Republicans and unions, and fight to establish the political independence of the working class.

Teachers, education workers and students must advance a genuine socialist program in defense of public education. This entails seizing the massive bailout given to the financial oligarchy, nationalizing the multi-trillion-dollar tech corporations and converting them into public utilities, providing high-quality computer equipment and free broadband to all students, securing full funding for all levels of education, abolishing student debt, assuring mental health supports for students, and providing full financial support to parents and caregivers who must stay at home while schools are closed.

The national Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was built to coordinate the struggles of local and statewide committees, which have now been formed across the US and internationally. We urge all educators to join and build these committees, or contact us to found a new committee in your district or state.



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