

Arts, humanities are first on the chopping block as US state governments face deficits

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As state governments in the US face deficits estimated to be over \$400 billion, school districts and colleges are implementing severe budget cuts, beginning with arts and humanities programs. These measures are just the initial expression of what is to come if there is no organized opposition in defense of education, and particularly the arts and humanities.

Several states have already announced large education cuts.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine has announced plans to cut \$300 million in K-12 funding and \$100 million in college and university funding for the current year. Meanwhile, Georgia's top budget officials told the state's schools to plan for large cuts for the fiscal year starting July 1, where lawmakers have signed off on a spending plan of about \$2.2 billion in budget cuts—including nearly \$1 billion less for public schools.

Randolph Public School District, located in the Greater Boston, Massachusetts region, has cut its entire K-12 arts, music, and physical education (PE) programs and staff from its 2020-21 budget. In Brockton, Massachusetts, 24 teachers received pink slips and the district intends to leave 40 teaching vacancies unfilled, mostly positions in the arts, PE and music departments. The state as a whole has laid off over 2,000 teachers.

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District, which serves nearly 38,000 children, over 42 percent of whom live below the poverty line, faces a potential loss of up to \$127 million in state and local revenue in the upcoming year, including \$23 million in K-12, and the elimination of \$12 million in state-provided student wellness funds.

Eric Gordon, Chief Executive Officer of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), told a Congressional committee hearing last summer that the district faced losing nearly 25 percent of its net operating budget. This was on top of \$23 million in cuts his district made prior to the pandemic!

Gordon told the House Education and Labor Committee: "If this worst case scenario were to occur, I will have no choice but to make deep, devastating cuts to my district this coming winter," cuts that would include "school building closures, reductions of force at all levels of the organization, elimination of student transportation, and all extra-curricular activities, elimination of art, music, physical education and other classes

from K-8 schools and of electives from high schools."

In late September, the Joint Appropriations Committee of Wyoming asked Wyoming's school districts to envision what operations would look like with 16 percent less from the Wyoming School Foundation. The Natrona County School District (NCSD), of 12,000 students, would lose nearly \$32 million, or approximately 11 percent of the district's annual budget, from the Wyoming School Foundation.

In a response to the proposed measure, Chair of the Natrona County School Board Rita Walsh wrote, "A reduction of this magnitude would necessitate NCSD to reduce educational programs, increase class sizes, lay off personnel, extend the purchasing cycle of curriculum materials, eliminate course offerings, and much more." Class sizes could be increased to up to 40 students with such drastic cuts.

The University of Vermont has recently announced plans to terminate majors including Geology, Religion, Asian Studies and several language programs, including Greek, Latin and German. The plan would eliminate entirely the college's Classics, Geology and Religion departments. Other departments would be consolidated.

Indiana University of Pennsylvania, in Indiana County, Pennsylvania, will close five fine arts programs as part of plans to merge its fine arts and humanities schools and slash arts programs. The cuts could result in the elimination of nearly 130 jobs.

More than 50 university doctoral programs in the US in the humanities and social sciences won't be admitting new students for the fall of 2021. The School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Pennsylvania will also pause admissions for school-funded Ph. D. programs for the 2021-2022 academic year. All five of Rice University's humanities doctoral programs will suspend admissions for a year.

Public education is under attack

Public education in the US, after decades of austerity measures, was already in a severely damaged, precarious

condition even before the pandemic struck. Systematic defunding has produced horror stories across the country: water leaking from the ceilings of schools caught in buckets in Florida; drinking water contaminated with lead in Detroit schools; dilapidated or non-working heating, cooling and HVAC systems and bloated classroom sizes in too many school districts to name—just to mention a few of the problems.

A June 2020 study released by the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) found in a national survey that “about half (an estimated 54 percent) of public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems or features in their schools,” including an estimated 36,000 schools that need to update or replace heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems.

Attacks on arts and humanities courses and the deteriorating conditions of schools over the past decades go hand in hand. As schools and districts balance their books, money for repairs, system upgrades, teachers and courses are the first things to go. Economic stimulus plans such as the CARES Act, as well as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, have been boondoggles for Wall Street and the corporate elite, while leaving next to nothing for state funding and education.

The last time states faced such a massive budget crisis, in the wake of the 2008 recession, emergency federal aid closed only about one-quarter of state budget shortfalls. States then were forced to cut funding to K-12 schools to help meet their balanced budget requirements. By 2011, 17 states had cut per-student funding by more than 10 percent.

Local school districts responded to the loss of state aid by cutting teachers, librarians and other staff; scaling back counseling and other services; and even shortening the school year. By 2014, state support for K-12 schools in most states remained below pre-recession levels.

School districts have never recovered from the layoffs that were imposed. At the time that COVID-19 hit in 2020, K-12 schools employed 77,000 fewer teachers and other workers than they did when the 2008 recession began forcing layoffs, while the number of students had increased by some 1.5 million. Overall funding in many states is still below pre-recession levels.

For the defense of public education and the political independence of the working class!

Students and workers are being starved, in all senses of the word, of the right to a quality education, to art, to culture and to leisure.

Even more historic cuts and continued deterioration to education and other social services are on the horizon. The

current plans to cut arts and humanities programs to balance current state and local deficits are part of an ongoing process, in which private wealth is protected and continuously accumulated at the expense of the working class and young people.

While school districts and states face large deficits and devastating cuts, the reported wealth of 643 of America’s richest billionaires, according to the Institute for Policy Studies, rose from \$2.95 trillion to \$3.8 trillion between March 18 and September 15, or almost \$1 trillion. This figure is more than twice the entire budget deficit facing all 50 states. In combination with the near \$1 trillion yearly military budget, there is sufficient wealth to fund the public education system four or five times over from these sources alone.

Clearly, there is more than enough money to rebuild decaying schools, with small class sizes, offering arts and cultural education. But it is not a question of convincing “progressive” sections of the ruling class, their political agents and school district leaders of the importance of art and culture.

Mobilizing these resources to meet human need and not private profit requires the political organization of the working class in a fight for socialism. The ruling elite will not willingly give up a penny of their ill-gotten gains.

This fight requires a complete break from the duopoly of the two capitalist parties who work hand in hand to implement the policies that have left social infrastructure gutted and a socialist political program based on the expropriation of the vast sums of private wealth that these two big business parties represent.

We urge you to join the IYSSE and SEP, read the *World Socialist Web Site* and contact us to build rank-and-file-committees at your school or workplace to protect education, win the resources to stop the pandemic and fight against the unsafe reopening of schools.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact