

Report highlights the disastrous impact of the pandemic on public education in California

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The Biden administration is deepening the efforts begun under Trump to use the COVID-19 pandemic to restructure class relations, including the further dismantling of the public education system. A report published last month by the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) titled, “California Teachers and COVID-19: How the Pandemic Is Impacting the Teacher Workforce,” highlights the acute crisis of K–12 public education in California, the most populous state in the US.

The study examines the deepening shortage of teaching staff, primarily due to difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers in areas of high poverty, as well as the problems of teacher burnout, excess workloads and early retirements, all of which have been severely exacerbated by the pandemic.

While the study focuses on California, the crisis is universal and is affecting tens of millions of educators worldwide. State data from Michigan shows that from August 2020 through February 2021 there was a 44 percent increase in midyear retirements compared with the same period in 2019–2020, while a separate study by Horace Mann Educators Corporation found that 27 percent of US teachers are considering quitting due to the pandemic, with similar figures found in countries throughout the world.

In the fall of 2020, LPI interviewed superintendents and human resources administrators of 17 school districts across California, including eight of the 11 largest districts which educate nearly one in six students in the state, as well as nine smaller rural districts. Among the large districts surveyed were Los Angeles, San Diego, Long Beach, Elk Grove and San Francisco.

The report is limited by the fact that the authors only interviewed administrators and not teachers directly. Nevertheless, the report reflects the horrendous stress teachers are under due to the difficulties of remote learning and tremendous fear over in-person teaching in unsafe classrooms, while many juggle having to care for their own children at home.

The report highlights the stresses that teachers have been subject to, as they struggle to adapt to the remote learning systems and having to engage students, who themselves are often under acute stress. With many districts having moved to the unsafe “hybrid” model, in which teachers simultaneously

teach in-person and online, teachers need to implement two lesson plans, thus doubling their workload. They are increasingly compelled to act as untrained counselors to handle the emotional needs of students and provide technical support to students who may have spotty internet under a communications infrastructure that is unprepared to provide a high quality learning experience.

One district leader explained how the shift to distance learning impacted veteran teachers, who typically rely on a body of lessons and materials designed for in-person learning amassed over their years of experience, stating, “The distance learning platform makes it everyone’s first year of teaching all over again.”

Even before the pandemic, the ruling class has sought to pressure veteran teachers to retire. A report in 2015 by Maria D. Fitzpatrick and Michael F. Lovenheim noted: “Early retirement incentives (ERI) for teachers, which offer experienced teachers financial incentives to retire before they would be eligible for full pension benefits, have become increasingly prevalent over the past decade as states and school districts seek to reduce expenditures in light of tightening budgets.”

Commenting on the crisis, John, a middle school teacher in Los Angeles, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “When we return to school sites in April, we will be on the third schedule in 13 months! This is yet another reason that it is IDIOTIC that we go back for just five or six weeks to end the year. From teachers that I talk to about this, morale is HORRIBLE! And yes, some people are seriously considering retiring early just to avoid what will be yet a fourth different schedule next fall!”

The LPI report expresses particular concern that voluntary resignations in some districts may be higher than anticipated layoffs, citing a chronic shortage of teachers in the high-need subject areas of math, science, special education and bilingual education. To make up for the shortage, school districts have increasingly been relying on substitute teachers and hiring teachers with substandard credentials.

The ruling class, increasingly opposed to funding the pensions of full-time teachers, has pushed for the use of lower paid substitute teachers, who are mostly not eligible for retirement benefits. In May 2019, the average substitute teacher

in California made an average of \$120 per day. The high cost of living in the state makes this an entirely unlivable wage. The *Orange County Register* noted in 2019 that entry-level teachers will spend 85 percent of their pay—far higher than the industry standard of 30 percent—on a median rental in Los Angeles.

The reliance on intern and emergency permits has been a longstanding trend that has deepened since the 2008 financial crisis in particular, the result of a deliberate bipartisan policy of underfunding public education. The report notes that in the 2018–19 school year, the state hired 13,912 under-prepared teachers with substandard credentials, temporary permits and waivers, up nearly 300 percent from 4,724 such hires in 2012–13. This enormous rise has only increased during the pandemic.

A rural district superintendent spoke of the challenges of using a teacher on an emergency permit, saying, “She does not have the depth of math knowledge that you have when you have a degree. She’s getting through it. Kids are struggling a little bit, but if I didn’t have her, we wouldn’t be offering it. I don’t know what we’d be doing.”

Every district surveyed hired teachers on substandard credentials and permits this year, with eight out of 14 saying they hired roughly the same number of teachers on substandard credentials and permits this year as in recent years, and four districts said they hired more than in recent years.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) passed last month provides roughly \$125 billion of funding for K–12 to spend over two and a half years. This averages to a yearly \$50 billion, which is roughly \$1,000 per student. Even conservative estimates produced by LPI in July 2020 suggested that states will need between \$200 and \$300 billion to stabilize their K–12 education budgets and meet even a portion of the additional costs over the next year and a half.

To put this in a different context, a report from the Watson Institute at Brown University states that through 2020, the country spent or allocated \$6.4 trillion on the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, excluding future interest in war borrowing. Statista reports that the government spent \$732 billion on the military in 2019, or nearly 15 times the amount allocated to K–12 schools in the ARPA.

For the first nine months of the pandemic, the government provided next to nothing to help schools, with the CARES Act providing only \$13.2 billion for K–12 schools, leading to the deliberate sabotage of remote learning. In January, then-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos implemented a \$54 billion emergency relief bill as a way to further pressure school districts to prematurely reopen schools before the pandemic was contained. The funding in the ARPA is also explicitly tied to the aggressive and dangerous policy of reopening schools, which has rapidly escalated under Biden.

For all that the LPI report speaks of, it is remarkable what it leaves out. Not once does the report note the hundreds of thousands of COVID-19 infections of students and school staff

or the hundreds of deaths among educators as a result of school reopenings over the past year. While there still remains no official count of teacher deaths during the pandemic, *Education Week* reports that as of March 29, at least 913 active and retired K–12 educators and personnel have died of COVID-19, of whom 257 were active teachers.

From beginning to end, the report takes it as a given that any serious measures to resolve the crisis in public education lie outside what is possible. It appeals to the ruling class to enact “sensible” policies to avert a disaster in education, when it is precisely the ruling elite’s policies of malign neglect that have produced the crisis of the pandemic, which has put already strained schools in a highly vulnerable position.

Last July, Linda Darling-Hammond, the president and CEO of LPI, noted approvingly the policies of New York and California in their rushed plans to open schools when daily new cases were still around 800. She wrote for *Forbes*: “States like New York and California that are setting community health standards for school re-opening, as well as clear ground rules for how they reopen, are demonstrating a safe and responsible way forward.” Darling-Hammond also participated in the Biden administration’s “National Safe School Reopening Summit,” endorsing the reckless campaign to reopen schools.

Over the past year, educators across the US and globally have formed rank-and-file committees to oppose the drive to reopen schools that has been orchestrated by both big business parties, the teachers unions and the corporate media. In the coming weeks, the deepening surge of the pandemic will produce further opposition and growing calls for the shutdown of schools and nonessential workplaces.

The struggle in defense of lives must be combined with calls to expropriate the trillions hoarded by the financial elite, in order to fully fund public education, vastly expand the teacher workforce, and provide high quality remote learning for all until the pandemic is contained, as part of a broader socialist program advancing all the social rights of the working class. We urge all educators, parents and students interested in joining this fight to sign up today to join and help build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee in your area.



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