

“We might get some extra pay if we stay until the end of the school year, if we live that long”

Educators demand Biden’s K-12 relief funding go to protect teachers, students and families

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This is part three of a multipart series of articles featuring interviews with US educators. Read part one here and part two here. We encourage all educators, parents and students to share your stories and describe conditions in your district with educators@wsws.org.

In order to fuel Biden’s back-to-school campaign, which is meant to facilitate the broader reopening of the economy, the recent \$1.9 trillion federal relief package has set aside \$128 billion for K-12 school districts that resume in-person learning. School districts have flexibility regarding how to use this money. However, according to the legislation, 20 percent of the funds given to school districts must be spent on “evidence-based” practices to combat “learning loss.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers from across the US regarding the severe crisis in public education, the recent relief bill and how they would like to see these funds used in schools.

A **New York City elementary school teacher** spoke about the relief bill and the interests of the federal government in funding “learning loss,” noting, “The district is going to put more students into my classroom in the middle of the year. I have to find time to test and evaluate these students and still teach the students I already have. I don’t have an assistant. It’s too much for one person to do. The kids need YOU! They don’t individually get your full attention when you’re spread too thin.”

The New York City Public Schools, the largest school district in the country with 1.1 million students, will receive an estimated \$4.5 billion in federal coronavirus relief from the recent stimulus bill, which amounts to about \$900 million that must be used for “learning loss.”

Elementary, middle and high schools have all reopened for in-person instruction in the district, despite the fact that more transmissible variants of COVID-19 now make up the majority of active cases in the city. The city has seen an uptick in cases and currently has a seven-day average citywide test positivity rate of 6.4 percent, with much higher case rates in working class

neighborhoods.

The New York City teacher continued, “The Biden administration is not looking at the reopening of schools in a reasonable way. It’s not rational. Do they really care about the kids? They are not having a school year that is typical. They don’t get art and music and gym. They’re sitting in one classroom all day. Middle and high school is a whole different ball game. You move through classes, there’s a lot of movement through hallways. How can they do that safely?”

Describing the amount of economic stress teachers are also under this year, the teacher noted, “Recently a colleague of mine had to take three personal days off to manage her mother’s funeral. Later in the year her daughter needed to be picked up from an upstate New York college because of a COVID-19 outbreak. Because she didn’t have any personal days left, they docked her pay!”

Another **teacher in Norfolk, Virginia** described where funds are needed in public education in her district, saying, “I’ve heard that the money is not being spent to retool old schools’ air conditioning and all that. Here in Norfolk there was the concern with lead in the water supply, and they are not putting money there either.

“I think it’s just about paying the school district to babysit the kids. I don’t think that it’s going to fix infrastructure. I don’t think it’s going to address the disparity in pay that teachers have. They’re not going to touch that. It’s probably going to go to pad the wallets of the higher-ups and keep business as usual. I keep hearing that they’re afraid they won’t have enough teachers to hire in the fall, and I’m not hearing anything about a pay bump. There was an email we got saying we might get some extra pay if we stay until the end of the school year, like a summer bonus ... if we live that long.

“I don’t think it will be used to improve the literacy issues that the students in Norfolk have. It’s not going to change the class struggle that our children have or the racial disparities that our children in Norfolk have.”

The WSWWS asked how she would spend the money. She replied, “I would put it toward addressing the literacy difficulty. I almost see it as a social justice issue. I don’t see how we have so much difficulty getting our kids to read. It’s almost like we don’t even want them to read.

“In terms of safety, repair the ventilation systems! They even tell us that the plexiglass is too expensive, and teachers are going to the hardware store to get and make their own screens. They aren’t giving us PPE, and they are not deep cleaning anything. I would also probably hire more teachers and give more funding for professional development that’s nationally recognized and meaty, that would be beneficial for everyone.”

She added, “It would also be better to have more hardware. We seem to be running out of laptops. The kids came in to get them to take home and now the schools don’t have enough for the children learning in-person. The internet connection for the remote kids is up and down. There are days when everybody is kicked out of the Zoom meeting, and you have to put on the Canvas message board that it’s an asynchronous day with assignments but without instruction, which you didn’t plan on. But you can’t get it to function.

“You’re really at the mercy of Cox Cable, and there’s limited connectivity. There’s the mobile hotspots, but we don’t have enough of those. Even within the school there are internet signal dead zones. It would be nice for all the kids to have confidence that their internet would work.

“Most of the kids are struggling to stay connected from home. When it’s overcast or it has been raining, we just know that half of the class won’t be able to tune in. If it’s not bright and sunny outside, it’s a s... show. I would put some of the \$128 billion toward that.”

A **teacher in Tennessee** also responded to the recent federal relief bill, saying, “In the past 11 years, Tennessee has seen great influxes of federal money, the largest being Obama’s Race-to-the-Top grant in 2010, which ushered in the Common Core, rigorous standardized testing, and a punitive teacher evaluation model.

“While a few hundred teachers across the state benefited from the \$44 million by taking on summer work to train their colleagues on the new standards and best practices, most teachers in the state had *none* of that money reach their classrooms in any meaningful way aside from the burden of the new evaluation system.”

She added, “Biden’s relief package to the state is significantly larger in 2021. While teachers can speculate on how the billions will be spent, we are sure it will not be spent on what is needed to improve student outcomes and teacher working conditions. We know what works in education; mountains of research exist about the effectiveness of this or that instructional strategy or intervention.

“These are just a few items I would suggest if I was asked where the money should go: smaller class sizes; hire more teachers; hire more psychologists, social workers, and student supports; fully fund and staff restorative justice programs; wraparound supports for the whole child; make access to internet free.”

Jessica has been teaching in California for 16 years. She currently teaches kindergarten in Davis Joint Unified School District (DJUSD) near Sacramento. She spoke to the WSWWS about

the conditions in her school district and the intensified drive to fully reopen schools.

“This week we’re starting in-person instruction. A lot of us are very worried, especially those of us with children. It’s like there is no choice but to go back. My husband works in a hospital, but our two daughters aren’t vaccinated. My friend who’s a teacher has a daughter with an autoimmune disease. She’s probably going to have to take an unpaid leave of absence.”

On Wednesday, California Governor Gavin Newsom called on school districts to use recent state and federal funding to extend the work day and school year in order to get students back into classrooms. Newsom said, “Use this money to extend learning opportunities, extend the school day, extend the school year. Who says you have to end on June 15, who says that? We’re not saying that, we’re saying the opposite. That’s what I want to offer: that flexibility.”

All major school districts throughout the state returned to some form of in-person instruction in recent weeks. Despite a steady rise in cases throughout the state, Governor Newsom plans to lift most major restrictions by June 15.

Jessica further described the push to fully reopen schools in her district, saying, “In our contract vote, 80 percent had voted for a four-day week in-person. Now the Board is imposing a five-day week. They rejected the \$4,300 bonus we demanded and brought it down to \$2,500. It’s a mess! So DJUSD is opening up five days a week, in-person AND online. That’s a heck of a lot of preparation and teaching time. Our district is giving us \$900 a month per child for child care, but then we’re worried about our children in a group setting at child care. There’s no choice.

“In our daily schedule, teachers are given only 45 minutes of prep time. That’s nothing, when it takes one to two hours to do the video. We have to prepare math and language arts lessons.”

“The district is also offering us a one-time bonus of \$2,500, but that’s a lot of work ahead of us for next year. I have a friend who teaches in Elk Grove, near Davis. They aren’t getting any bonuses, and they also started this week. Why is it that all the districts aren’t going by one plan, same bonuses, etc.?”

“There have been COVID-19 cases here. Several of my coworkers got it. One teacher had to even start a GoFundMe to help her financially manage. My husband works as a physical therapist at a hospital. We even have a COVID quarantine hotel here.

“I know that when this school year ends, there’s going to be a mass exodus of teachers out of this profession. It’s just too much work and stress for teachers.”

To be continued



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