

Texas withholds federal aid from public schools

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The Texas state government is refusing to disburse \$17.9 billion of \$19 billion in federal money intended for public education under the recently-passed COVID-19 stimulus bill. When account is taken of all the money that the state has received from Washington for various purposes due to the pandemic, officials are holding back on a total of \$38.6 billion. In addition, should a bill pass the Texas House of Representatives this week and be signed by the governor, a further \$1.2 billion of the stimulus money intended for K-12 education will be diverted to the 2022-2023 budget.

The reason Texas is withholding money from public schools is that it is seeking a waiver from the federal government that will allow it to avoid spending at least \$1 billion of the state's own budget on higher education. In other words, the state government is starving K-12 schools of desperately needed funds so that it can then starve colleges and universities of desperately needed funds.

Texas has already required these higher education institutions to implement budget cuts ranging from 5-10 percent, which were mandated in 2020 under the pretext of accommodating the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The state is aiming to retain those budget cuts.

Officials are simultaneously finding ways to shift financial burdens onto municipalities and away from the state. On the grounds that the pandemic has driven up property values, resulting in a rise in the amount of money generated from local property taxes, Texas state senators axed \$5.5 billion in education funding from the state budget that is now on its way to the state House for approval. Local governments, buoyed by some additional money coming from the roughly \$1.2 billion allocated by the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act), are expected to

cover what has been cut.

This move will serve to exacerbate inequalities between school districts, as poorer districts with lower revenue from property taxes will have less to spend compared to their better-off counterparts.

Texas has a history of using short-term federal aid to effectively implement long-term budget cuts. Once federal funding that was not intended for a long duration dries up, a hole appears in the state budget that legislators refuse to fill. This happened during the Great Recession, when Washington stopped providing certain public education funding to the state in 2011 and the Texas education budget was cut by \$5.4 billion.

Total funding per pupil, adjusted for inflation, only returned to 2009 levels in 2016. Spending hit its lowest point in 2013, with state expenditures per pupil being 6 percent below 2009 levels.

Most Texas students live in poverty, with 60.6 percent of schoolchildren in the 2018-19 school year being classified as economically disadvantaged. Nearly one-fifth were English language learners. Schools in Texas, like those across the United States, are dilapidated and dirty. They have outdated and barely functioning Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems, many of which fail in the middle of the summer and during extreme winter weather.

High school classrooms are packed with an average of 27 students and are rarely cleaned, with many teachers forced to buy their own cleaning supplies to wipe off desks. All of this has, predictably, led to massive seasonal outbreaks in schools of flu and colds and the spread of coronavirus. Texas teachers' average pay was just \$53,000 during the 2017-18 school year, with many forced to take up second jobs in order to make up for low salaries.

The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety

Committee, which was formed last fall to oppose the homicidal reopening of schools amid the raging pandemic, is also fighting to vastly expand public education funding and guarantee this fundamental social right to all working class youth. We urge all educators, parents and students in Texas and the surrounding region to join and help build this committee as your organization, independent of the pro-corporate unions and both big business parties. Sign up today to get involved !



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