

School districts across Texas implement massive austerity and cuts to staff

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Despite the allocation of roughly \$11.2 billion in federal funds ostensibly to support public education, school districts across Texas are cutting staff and closing schools. Over the past year, tens of thousands of teachers were forced to quit or retire early after the state government aggressively pressured districts to reopen amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the state, huge numbers of these teaching positions are being left as unfilled vacancies, encompassing nearly all the major school districts. This mass attrition follows the expiration of the state's hold on cutting school funding that was extended through 2020, following declines in attendance due to the pandemic.

Schools in Texas adjust funding every school year based on daily attendance rates, meaning that even one day of absence impacts funding. This is compounded by virtual learning, which has been difficult for many students to access and consistently attend due to the deliberate sabotage of online education by the state and federal government. The spread of COVID-19 has caused many parents concerned with outbreaks at schools to pull their children from in-person learning, or switch to homeschooling or private online schools.

In the Austin Independent School District (AISD), which has an enrollment of 74,000 students, a district survey indicated that 22 percent of students were learning in-person in November. As of April 19, an estimated 23.6 percent were attending in-person, with the state threatening to withdraw \$5 million in “hold harmless” funding from the school if attendance was not raised to at least 44 percent in the last six weeks of the semester. In the 18 school districts in the Houston metro area, 250,000 students, roughly a third of the total enrollment, were not in person, while 475,000 were back in school as of March 31.

One of the factors underlying the drop in attendance has to do with the measures that the hated Texas Education Agency (TEA) implemented in order to quantify attendance for K-12 schools. In the TEA's “School Year 20-21 Attendance and Enrollment FAQ,” it states that remote attendance is

measured by daily progress in the “Learning Management System... Daily progress via teacher-student interactions, as defined in the approved learning plan... [or] Completion/Turn-in of assignments from student to teacher (potentially via email, on-line, or mail).”

Many teachers have had trouble reaching out to students in order to ascertain attendance, with a frequent occurrence being not hearing back from some students despite numerous and repeated attempts via email, online learning systems like Blackboard and Google Classrooms, or by phone. The task of logging attendance every single day for every single student has become a Sisyphean task.

According to TEA statistics released on March 4, a significant decrease in attendance was observed from October 2019 to October 2020 for all grades except high school (not including grade 9), which saw a slight increase. The highest change was seen in Pre-K and Early Education, which saw a 22 percent decrease in attendance, while most others had a 1-6 percent decrease in attendance. Comparing January 2021 to October 2019, the decrease remained constant for most grade levels. Should this decline in attendance remain the same, and there is little indication otherwise, a similar proportion of districts' funding can be expected to be at stake.

According to a combination of statements by teachers on Facebook and local news reports, the following list of districts—which is by no means comprehensive or complete—are cutting positions and/or experiencing budget shortfalls:

- **Pflugerville ISD** reports a \$14 million deficit and is planning a 14 percent reduction in staff and a five percent cut to department budgets. The staff and budget for Support Services will shrink by five percent, eliminating two percent of support staff on campuses.

- **Austin ISD** has a projected \$61 million shortfall and plans to eliminate 250 teaching positions, along with further cuts to the number of licensed specialists in school psychology (LSSPs), who are responsible for performing special education evaluations. This follows years of the

district hemorrhaging LSSPs due to a harsh work environment and overwork, and the district intentionally keeping the positions vacant after LSSPs left, creating a huge backlog of special education evaluations. The district has cynically used the backlog it caused by destroying LSSP positions to further justify the removal of LSSPs and their outsourcing to for-profit consulting companies.

- **Abilene ISD** is planning for \$10 million in total cuts.

- **Northwest ISD** states on its website, “Elementary campuses with 750-800 students will shift from two art teachers, two music teachers and two GATES teachers to one teacher in each position, respectively. Educational aides at campuses with more than 750 students will become fine arts assistants to help with music and art classes.”

- **Lovejoy Elementary School** in Collin County, Texas is being closed due to “budget concerns.” Local parents expressed outrage over the closures, with parent Mary Dickinson stating to local news media, “We’ve been working on plans to keep these kids safe for a year, and now you’re going to take them and put them in two schools and pack them in like sardines? It raises a lot of concerns.”

- **Plano ISD** plans to reduce its budget by \$10 million by leaving 500 unfilled vacancies of teachers and staff they expect to quit or retire at the end of the year. The Chief Financial Officer of the district, Randy McDowell stated in a work session in late April that this reduction in positions was not “any type of layoff or reduction in force” but due to attrition, which averages 12 percent annually in the district.

In addition, the following job cuts were recorded by teachers on Facebook on their individual schools:

- **Dallas ISD** is cutting positions based on campus, with electives being targeted.

- **San Antonio ISD** plans to eliminate at least 4 positions at a single school.

- **Fort Bend ISD** is cutting at least 8 positions at a school.

- In **Grapevine-Colleyville ISD**, 12 positions are not being replaced at a school.

According to Facebook posts by teachers, further budget cuts and/or layoffs are happening in Houston ISD, Fort Worth ISD, Leander ISD, Brownsville ISD, Denton ISD, and Hurst Euless Besford ISD. The recent release of education funds amounting to \$11.2 billion from federal bailout packages will likely do little if anything to prevent cuts, many of which have already been approved.

The deepening assault on public education in Texas takes place after the most brutal and exhausting year that current teachers have ever faced. During the pandemic, 51,014 Texans have officially died from COVID-19 and nearly 3 million have been infected, with both figures known to be significant undercounts.

A recent study conducted by University of Kentucky

researchers for the National Bureau of Economic Research, found that Texas school reopenings led to at least 43,000 additional cases and 800 additional deaths statewide in an eight-week period after schools began to reopen last fall, meaning at least 100 deaths per week were attributable to school reopenings. These figures account for 12 percent of total cases and 17 percent of deaths in that same time frame.

The unions have been fully complicit in the murderous drive to reopen schools, cowardly hiding behind state laws and claiming nothing can be done to defend their members’ jobs while signing off on school reopenings. The Texas AFT, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has 65,000 members and has made no effort to mobilize teachers in Texas or anywhere else against the school reopenings or the attacks on its members’ jobs. At the national level, AFT president Randi Weingarten has spearheaded the drive to reopen schools, stating in February that she spent 15 hours a day on the phone coordinating this campaign with the Biden administration.

The privations and suffering inflicted on poor and working class students and teachers, and the population of Texas as a whole, are in direct proportion to the extreme wealth inequality of the state, which is home to some of the wealthiest oligarchs in the world. The third-richest person on the planet, Elon Musk (net worth \$164.2 billion), the 17th-richest person, Walmart heiress Alice Walton (\$61.8 billion), and chairman and CEO of Dell Computers Michael Dell (\$45.1 billion), all reside in Texas. For comparison, the total budget for Texas public education in 2018-19 was \$54.4 billion.

The wealth of these oligarchs alone could more than fund the Texas education system for years and must be expropriated and used to vastly expand public education for all. Teachers must draw the necessary political conclusions that flow from the anti-working-class nature of the unions and Democrats and form rank-and-file committees independent from these rotten organizations to fight for jobs, safety, and lives.

The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, formed last fall to oppose the homicidal campaign to reopen schools, is the only organization opposing the devastating austerity planned throughout the state, and we urge all educators, parents and students in Texas to join and help build this organization today.



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