

Expand funding for remote learning, support staff and ventilation upgrades in Tennessee schools!

Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
27 May 2021

The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee opposes the budget passed by the Tennessee state legislature on April 29. Even by the Republican majority's standards, the \$42.6 billion spending plan is considered "fiscally conservative." Tennessee's new budget makes permanent the austerity cuts to education and social programs desperately needed by the population in the context of the ongoing pandemic and serves as a virtual slush fund for the governor's various right-wing projects.

Tennessee raked in record tax revenues during most months of the 2020-21 fiscal year as corporations and Wall Street criminals reaped unfathomable profits while nearly a million people are estimated to have died from COVID-19 in the US alone. This April, the state collected \$2.5 billion, almost twice as much as it collected in April of 2020 and almost \$600 million more than the budgeted estimate. Over the last year, while the super-rich were swimming in pandemic blood money, Tennessee eliminated the already grossly inadequate 4 percent annual teacher pay raise, supposedly out of economic necessity.

This year, while lawmakers will restore the teachers' pay increase, they will also double the amount requested by Governor Bill Lee to shore up his \$1.42 billion "rainy day" fund, adding \$100 million in the coming year. Total state reserves are estimated at \$4.8 billion, yet little, if any, money will be used to improve the day-to-day lives of most Tennesseans. At the same time, tax incentives for large corporations have continued unabated during the pandemic, including a \$10 million tax incentive deal with the private company Oracle.

Last year, Tennessee ranked 46th in education spending among all US states, and this year's budget is not expected to alter its national spending ranking. Only about 12 percent of the \$42.6 billion budget has been allotted to K-12 education.

However, \$29 million will be allocated to the private school voucher program that Governor Lee has promoted.

This plan, declared unconstitutional by a judge in 2019, provides a small number of families with access to public funds to pay for private school tuition for their children, while public schools are starved of funding.

The budget also includes \$4.2 million for out-of-state charities such as the anti-abortion group Human Coalition, another one of the governor's pet projects.

Despite the governor's breast-beating over "learning loss" during the pandemic, \$100 million was cut from a plan for broadband infrastructure that would improve remote learning options for students throughout the state by closing internet service gaps.

Moreover, calls from K-12 educators to repair the funding formula for education have fallen on deaf ears. Instead, K-12 schools received merely \$250 million for student support in secondary schools via a trust fund. Only the interest from this fund can be used, not the fund itself, and this interest will be nowhere near enough to provide the kinds of support students desperately need, such as additional school counselors and nurses.

The need for support has grown substantially during the pandemic. The psychological impact of the deaths of family members and teachers and even friends is incalculable. And despite the repeated assurances of government officials and agencies that children are not vulnerable to the virus, growing numbers of young people are increasingly affected, particularly by the newer variants, and more nurses are desperately needed.

The recent police-involved murder of a student inside a Knox County high school illustrates the consequences of the grievous underfunding of student supports by Lee and other state politicians. Rather than bringing in a counselor or negotiator to deescalate the conflict, Knoxville police cornered the 17-year-old in a bathroom where they grabbed him out of a stall and began firing when the student couldn't remove his hands from his pockets fast enough. In this era of prolonged austerity, cops are cheaper to hire than

counselors.

How many more students in crisis need to die, be dragged from their desks, or led in handcuffs from their classrooms while Governor Lee hoards billions in the state's coffers? The Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee demands that all police officers be immediately removed from Tennessee schools and that their funding be made available for the immediate hiring of support staff.

No confidence can be placed in the Tennessee Education Association (TEA) or its affiliated locals such as the Knox County Education Association (KCEA) to defend the interests of students and teachers. KCEA President Tanya Coates falsely claimed at a Board of Education meeting that teachers fully support having police in schools. Many teachers have no other recourse when students experience a mental health crisis that potentially endangers other students, but would prefer to help students by providing adequate support. Once again, we demand this support!

Tennessee's right-wing governor and legislature have garnered the state the distinction of being among the most "fiscally sound" in the country. Yet it is anticipated that our public education funding will remain 46th in the nation for the foreseeable future.

With the dropping of the state mask mandate and the spotty implementation of individual county and school district mask mandates, the situation for students in particular is becoming increasingly precarious. Children under 12 do not yet have access to any vaccine and as we move into summer school, many more children will become ill. In a situation where the long-term health consequences of even mild illness remain unknown, this is intolerable.

Like the Trump administration before it, the Biden administration has pressured the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to bend its recommendations to the economic aims of the ruling class. The most recent result was the announcement that vaccinated individuals no longer need to wear masks at indoor and outdoor gatherings, which has been implemented by Tennessee and a growing number of states. Under conditions in which two thirds of the US population remain unvaccinated, including most small children, this criminally irresponsible recommendation will add fuel to the fire of a continually raging pandemic.

The Tennessee budget and the elimination of mask mandates and recommendations for public spaces have to be understood in terms of the clamoring of the ruling class for an intensification of the exploitation of the working class to preserve corporate profits. The increasing availability of vaccines is being used as an excuse to drop the last pretenses of anything resembling a social safety net in the context of the greatest public health crisis in American history. The media and federal government are engaged in an intensified

campaign to end federal pandemic unemployment benefits. In line with this, in its last day in session, the Tennessee legislature cut jobless aid by more than a half, from 26 to 12 weeks of benefits.

Teachers and other workers must reject the claims from the ruling elite in Tennessee and the federal government that there is no money to pay for education, unemployment benefits and other social programs.

We have been assured repeatedly by bourgeois politicians that schools are safe for students and teachers, and that children rarely experience symptoms from COVID-19 infection and rarely spread the virus to others. Science tells us the opposite. Every day in the US, roughly 600 people die from a preventable disease, which is totally unacceptable.

We reiterate the demands in our founding statement for the immediate closure of schools and full financial support for parents who must stay home with their children. All reopening plans must be subordinated to the demands of science, not private profit!

Small class sizes, the reimplementation of a universal mask mandate, the immediate updating and upgrading of all school ventilation systems, adequate supplies for surface decontamination, and the systematic identification of cases together with contact tracing and quarantine measures are the absolute minimum measures required to mitigate the personal and public health risks of in-person classroom learning.

We demand that any school that remains open for any period of time for any reason be provided with the resources to implement these minimum requirements! This must go hand in hand with the creation of a safe and adequate learning environment for all students, which requires adequate support staff and the immediate removal of police from the schools.

If you are interested in joining the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee, or in creating one in your area, please fill out this form and we will get back to you promptly.



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