

California public schools face massive budget cuts due to COVID-19 pandemic

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School districts across California are confronting the prospect of mass layoffs due to budget shortfalls accrued during the COVID-19 pandemic. Funding formulas are based on average daily attendance. While Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has repeatedly bragged that public schools in the state have remained open, enrollment has fallen precipitously and chronic absenteeism in California schools has skyrocketed due to the pandemic, pushing districts to the point of collapse.

Statewide enrollment in K-12 education declined by 160,000 in the 2020-21 school year, or nearly three percent. This translates to millions of dollars cut to already strained school districts and the possibility of mass layoffs for chronically understaffed schools.

In September, Newsom staged a visit to Melrose Leadership Academy in Oakland to brag about his COVID-19 strategy. He stated, “We implemented the most robust school reopening and safety strategy in the entire country, and now California’s students are back in the classroom and schools are remaining open at nation-leading rates.”

Despite Newsom’s assurances, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) reported 23 cases of students contracting COVID-19, four staff cases, and four classes fully quarantining in the last week alone. Chronic absenteeism has skyrocketed compared to pre-pandemic figures, with OUSD reporting a rate of 37 percent chronically absent among K-5 students, compared to 14 percent before the pandemic.

Three years ago, OUSD initiated the “Citywide Plan” which closed several schools and cut tens of millions of dollars from the budget. Now, with declining attendance, the budget shortfall will be greater, with a deficit of \$58 million projected for the 2022-23 school year.

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) also faces budget shortfalls as a result of a 6.6 percent decline in enrollment. A projected \$100 million shortfall may result in the loss of 1,000 jobs. SFUSD also faces chronic absenteeism, with African American, Pacific Islander, and homeless students particularly hard hit. Students who do attend school risk their health; since August 16, when schools reopened in San Francisco, 393 students and staff have become infected with COVID-19.

The two largest California school districts are also in crisis. Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has lost 27,000 students since last year and presently has 893 active COVID-19 cases. Enrollment at San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) is down by 7,500 students in the last four years.

EdSource has reported school districts with chronic absence rates tripling from two years ago. Some students miss school due to quarantines; others are afraid of contracting the disease, and many students and parents are unwilling to expose themselves to the harassment of fascistic anti-maskers. One of the worst-hit schools is Thermalito Union Elementary in the north central Butte County. This county has a poverty rate of 21 percent, with a median household income of \$43,444, far below the state household income of \$80,440 as well as the national income of \$65,712.

Besides poverty, Butte County residents suffered from the devastating 2018 Camp Fire. This fire was caused by the negligence of Pacific Gas and Electricity (PG&E), for which the company agreed to pay merely \$13.5 billion for the destruction of the entire town of Paradise and the deaths of 84 people. Two years after the settlement, lawyers have skimmed millions of dollars and the victims have received only a fraction of what they are owed. Only 10 percent of the burned

homes have been rebuilt, and thousands of residents are living in shacks, motor homes or tents.

Butte County has also been hard hit by COVID-19, with 19,561 confirmed cases and 252 deaths from the virus. Despite claims by Democrats, Republicans and their media stooges that the pandemic has subsided, 53 cases were reported last week alone. At California State University Chico, also in Butte County, 312 students and employees have contacted COVID-19 since the school reopened in August. In Chico Unified School District, 56 students and 11 staff members have been confirmed as infected with COVID-19 in the last two weeks.

California has had 4,571,467 individuals officially infected with COVID-19, with 672,005 cases among the 0-17 age group, while the total number of deaths in the state has reached 70,150. In the past two weeks alone, there were 76,888 cases and 1,245 deaths among Californians.

In the last two weeks, 70 students were either confirmed or potentially positive for the virus and 158 students were quarantined in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District (SMMUSD). In the foothill town of Jackson, the superintendent for the Amador County Unified School District, Torie Gibson, has been receiving death threats because of the mask mandate implemented by the district. Despite the mandate, 379 students and 11 staff members have tested positive for the virus and 376 students and 9 staff members are presently in quarantine.

Rocklin, in Placer County, had an infection rate of over 200 cases per 100,000 over the last two weeks. Approximately one out of 1,000 residents have died from COVID-19 and one out of every six people infected has been a child. School board meetings in Rocklin Unified School District have repeatedly been disrupted by fascists, including Proud Boys, Moms 4 Liberty, and White Rose members, who have attended and raised threats of violence against school board members and teachers for enforcing mask mandates.

Newsom has ended mask mandates for vaccinated individuals in businesses, threatening the further spread of COVID-19. Two months ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report on the ability of vaccinated individuals to carry a viral load and infect others. As is already widely known, breakthrough infections among those

vaccinated have already occurred.

Newsom also recently announced that students will be required to be vaccinated, but this should not be taken at face value. First, there is an immense loophole in that parents can refuse to vaccinate their children based on personal beliefs or medical waivers. The state legislature has not defined “personal beliefs,” so localities are free to interpret that as religious, political, or unscientific fears. Furthermore, the start date for the mandate could be as late as January 2023.

The statistics have made it perfectly clear that until COVID-19 cases are brought to zero, schools cannot be open without mass infections among children, which in turn spread to their families and communities. The only way that the health and safety of the public can be achieved is through a fight to eliminate COVID-19 in ever-broader geographic areas until all human-to-human transmission is brought to an end.

This fight must be taken up by educators, parents and students through the building of independent rank-and-file committees outside of the Democratic and Republican parties and the corporatist trade unions. On Sunday, October 24, the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will host a webinar, “How to end the pandemic,” to discuss the dangers of school reopenings and the broader crisis of the pandemic, and outline a fighting strategy to stop the pandemic and save millions of lives worldwide. Register today, invite your coworkers, family and friends, and share this event widely on social media!



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