Biden infrastructure bill nixes all education funding as schools remain epicenter of COVID-19 spread

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously reported on the passage of the congressional infrastructure bill signed into law by the Biden administration Monday. After months of protracted negotiations, the final infrastructure bill devoted $1 trillion over the course of ten years towards fixing the dilapidated infrastructure across the US, a woefully inadequate sum considering the country's actual infrastructure needs.

The bill, which only provides $100 billion per year in infrastructure funding, is 7–8 times less than the Pentagon's annual budget in a typical year. It slashes the Biden administration's originally proposed $2.25 trillion infrastructure package by more than half.

The latest infrastructure bill, in addition to removing corporate tax increases, did the same to $100 billion for school modernization earmarked in the original spending bill. Specifically, this called for new school construction and upgrades to existing buildings. It would have included $50 billion in school infrastructure grants and $50 billion in school infrastructure bonds should it have been passed.

The $100 billion, part of the Biden administration's "Build Back Better" agenda, was initially reduced to $82 billion in September. Once congressional Democrats and Republicans agreed to remove corporate tax provisions, which would have been used to fund the remaining $82 billion, the school infrastructure funding was reduced to zero as part of the budget reconciliation process. As it stands, the only school infrastructure upgrades in the bill will come indirectly via $15 billion in funding for lead pipe replacement. This amounts to only a third of the funding originally proposed and a fourth of the $60 billion needed to fully replace lead pipes nationwide according to the most conservative estimates.

Earlier this year, $125 billion in education funding was passed in the American Rescue Plan of 2021. However, this is to be spread out over two-and-a-half years, averaging to only $50 billion annually, which will barely put a dent in the country's school infrastructure needs.

A 2013 estimate of the US Department of Education found that the total cost of repairing schools was $200 billion, a number that has since grown far higher. A December 2020 study by the Learning Policy Institute found that $72 billion was needed to upgrade school ventilation systems alone as school sites have become the nation's primary source of coronavirus infections.

Acceptable uses of the funding include assistance for students with disabilities, educational technology, mental health services, repair and improvements, public health protocols, among others. In other words, the plan contained no guarantees whatsoever to repair public school infrastructure.

Recent studies have found that the repair of infrastructure is not a luxury for students but in fact a vital necessity. Upgraded and repaired school infrastructure plays a significant role in student learning. Students overwhelmingly benefit when school buildings have fully functioning bathrooms and water fountains, HVAC systems, lighting, audio visual and computer equipment. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic and the drive by the Biden administration and the teachers unions to force children back into unsafe classrooms has only served to exacerbate the situation.

This has also led to hundreds of thousands of teachers and other education workers voluntarily leaving the

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profession, adding to the more than 600,000 laid off during the first three months of the pandemic alone. According to recent surveys, one in four teachers said they were planning on quitting their jobs, up from one in six prior to the pandemic. Elizabeth D. Steiner, co-author of one such study released by the RAND corporation, stated, “Teachers were almost twice as likely to report that they were experiencing frequent job-related stress as the general employed adult population. And about three times as many teachers said that they were experiencing symptoms of depression as the general adult population.”

Such issues are not solely due to the pandemic, however, but also are the outcome of a decades-long campaign to defund public education and underpay teachers. These figures also come on top of a teacher strike wave from 2018–2019, which was quickly shut down by the teachers unions. The local teachers unions, led by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), worked with districts to prevent their members from achieving adequate staffing levels and even modest wage and benefit improvements.

The attacks on public education have been carried out under both Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Between 2008–2018, school capital spending declined by $12 billion, from approximately $81 billion in 2008 to $69 billion in 2018, a 15 percent drop. Over that same period, the lowest annual spending levels occurred during the second term of the Obama administration, when the much touted economic “recovery” from the 2008–2009 financial crash saw the lowest school capital spending levels of approximately $50 billion per year nationwide, a 38 percent drop from the 2008 level.

According to estimates from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, schools with the highest infrastructure needs are in the most impoverished districts. Among schools with less than 35 percent of students requiring free or reduced priced lunches, 48 percent require urgent repairs; for schools with 35 to 49 percent of students requiring free or reduced price lunches, the repair percent rises to 51 percent; for 50 to 74 percent of students, 52 percent of schools; and for 75 percent or more, 60 percent.

Overall, an estimated 54 percent of public school districts need to update or replace multiple building systems or features in their schools according to a 2020 Government Accountability Office survey. HVAC systems need replacement in at least half of the schools in 41 percent of districts for a total of 36,000 schools nationwide. The report also found that 29 percent of interior light fixtures need repairs or replacements, 28 percent of school roofing need repairs, 27 percent need improvements to safety and security, and most alarming of all, 13 percent of schools had severe structural integrity issues that needed to be urgently dealt with. On top of these urgent needs, about 16 percent of US school districts had not assessed their building needs in more than 10 years.

Another alarming issue is the presence of lead in school drinking water. An estimated 43 percent of all school districts, which together serve 35 million students, tested positive for lead in drinking water in 2016 and 2017. In the city of Detroit alone, water had to be shut off to more than 100 schools in 2018 after elevated levels of lead and copper were found in 16 out of 24 schools tested.

To give another example of the devastation of public schools in the US, after the devastation of hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 the island of Puerto Rico needed more than $11 billion to bring its schools up to code. In 2020, Federal Emergency Management Agency grants provided $2 billion for repairs due to the hurricanes and also the island’s January 2020 earthquake. The island’s schools have received no federal funding since then.

These figures only serve to underscore the immense hostility of both the Democrats and Republicans to the basic needs of schoolchildren, especially those from working class and impoverished backgrounds. While the ruling elite sends its children to exclusive private schools with small student-to-teacher ratios and all the conditions necessary for a prosperous learning environment, children of the working class are made to suffer in overcrowded classrooms in which not only their ability to learn but even their very lives and those of their families are at stake.

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