

South Dakota teachers scramble at “Dash for Cash” in desperate attempt to fund their classrooms

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Anger has exploded across the internet and among educators following a “Dash for Cash” spectacle staged among teachers at a hockey game in Sioux Falls, South Dakota last Saturday. While the advertising claims made it out to be a “fun” form of social charity to aid cash-strapped schools, horrified spectators instead compared the degraded competition with the Hunger Games or the more recent Squid Game.

A local business, CU Mortgage Direct, sponsored the stunt, arranging to dump a \$5,000 cash pile in the middle of the ice rink. A pre-selected group of educators were given hockey helmets and allowed five minutes on the clock to grab dollar bills for their classrooms. They stuffed money in their shirts or trousers, as the crowd watched. The teachers’ schools also participated in providing an audience, receiving \$5 for every ticket they sold.

The shameful event, partially uploaded onto Twitter, has gone viral, meeting with a tirade of outrage and hostility among viewers. It has been seen over 8 million times as of this writing.

High school teacher Barry Longden picked up the most cash, a mere \$616. He said the funds would help an e-sports program he runs for students. Alexandria Kuyper, a fifth grade teacher, grabbed \$592, which she plans to use for treats and decorations for her classroom. Other teachers said they would use their winnings on flexible seating, standing desks and document cameras to upload lessons online, the local paper reported.

The degrading use of educators, determined to do whatever they can for their students despite personal humiliation, has deeply angered millions of parents, students, workers and educators. Thousands have commented on social media with disgust.

Toni Beaumont wrote, “Nothing could be more emblematic of my parents’ career choice than watching teachers literally ending down on hands and knees, scraping for every last cent.” Susan Majcher asked, “How many other professions need to do this to obtain the tools for their jobs?” A commenter to the *Washington Post*, asked, “Imagine if our generals had to crawl around on the floor to grab cash to buy jet fighters and guns...”

Laurie Batterson Bunn posted, “Teaching: the only job where you have to beg, borrow, steal and spend your own money to

do your job. Now this? After 20 years of this and a little break, I’ve started subbing. My eyes are open now as I see crappy environments, mismatched odds and ends just to have a place to put educational materials, overworked and underpaid teachers.”

Dexter Thomas of *Vice News* tweeted, “Squid Game (KOR, fantasy): underpaid people play games on hidden island for \$38.5M Audience: VIPs Goal: a better life. Dash for Cash (USA, real life): underpaid teachers grovel on their knees in ice rink for a share of \$5k Audience: stadium full of ppl Goal: buy pencils for the kids”

Peggy Hill on Twitter said, “This is sickening. This isn’t a cute little contest. This is a gross display of how this country has failed its teachers. Any coverage that doesn’t call out the economic failure that led to this scene is just journalistic malpractice.” Susie Olesen in Iowa Teachers for a Safe Return said, “When teachers have to crawl on the floor to scrape for funds for their classrooms, you know things are completely out of whack. Infuriating.”

The response was somewhat different from the politicians who have presided over the starving of public schools. South Dakota’s State Senator Reynold Nesiba, a Democrat, tried to put a good face on things, describing the spectacle as “probably well-intentioned.” Republican Governor Kristi Noem—a shill for the state’s COVID-19-infected meatpacking industry—recently proposed an insulting 6 percent raise [lower than the annual inflation] be allocated to teachers. That stop-gap idea, which most likely will not see the light of day, is only being considered as a result of the huge teacher shortage in the state, as teachers flee the profession.

Some commentators on social media pointed to the political players. A *Washington Post* reader said, “Welcome to the eventual world of the fascist Republican Party. A real preview. As pointed out, the Squid games are not far behind? [But]... It would be more appropriate for the Governor, legislature, and school board members to do this. But you know they were in the stands making wagers on who would win.”

South Dakota teachers are among the lowest paid in the country. Average pay for 2019-20 was the second worst in the US; only Mississippi was worse. In terms of per student

spending, the state ranked 38th, having spent about \$10,800 per student in the fall term of that year, according to a National Education Association report.

Why is there “no money” for teachers in South Dakota? For starters, the state has no corporate or income tax. With business costs at 15 percent below the national average, the financial industry in particular is booming. In fact, South Dakota’s attacks on education go hand in hand with the best “business climate” in the US, according to a ranking of Forbes. It notes that South Dakota’s \$3.3 trillion in bank assets are among the most of any state and represent nearly one-fifth of all bank assets in the US.

It has recently come to light that South Dakota is one of the world’s most lucrative tax havens. According to the Pandora Papers, the state shields an estimated \$367 billion in assets [approaching the annual economic output of the Republic of Ireland], rivaling Switzerland, Panama, the Cayman Islands and other famous tax havens as a premier venue for the international rich seeking to avoid taxes or the authorities.

But this scandalous dichotomy between the grotesque profit-taking in the state and the plight of educators is not unique but a microcosm of the systematic decades-long war on the working class, the defunding of all public services and the upward transfer of wealth to the elite. It has been a fully bipartisan operation, enforced by both Democrats and Republicans. In the US, half the states never restored even the inadequate funding levels for K-12 education established prior to 2008.

In other words, while the dystopian Squid Game certainly comes to mind when watching “Dash for Cash,” so does Obama’s Race to the Top. The optics may not have been so down-and-dirty, but the use of competitive grants, pitting schools against each other for desperately needed resources, instead of universal standards for federal assistance, is bipartisan and has been going on for years.

The first was Democratic President Bill Clinton’s “Goals 2000,” which doubled down on standardized tests and introduced the first competitive grant between school districts, the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund. Republican President George Bush’s No Child Left Behind deepened this trend, which was then dramatically expanded by Democratic President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top (RTTT).

All of these programs forced schools and districts to vie with each other for meager aid. Limiting any universal standards for federal assistance to public education, RTTT offered pots of cash, based on districts’ willingness to privatize operations, turn schools in business-run charters, and fire longstanding educators—in the name of “school reform.” At the same time, the Obama administration used the 2008 crisis to provide a cash infusion to the banks and large corporations, funneling trillions upward to the financial and corporate elite.

Far from opposing this frontal attack, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association embraced it. Ever concerned about their “seat at the table” and

dues stream, the AFT eagerly sought out charter operations for membership. The result is that teachers have been utterly abandoned and forced to find individual “solutions” to a massive national and international problem. The proliferation of GoFundMe appeals for classrooms or teachers suffering from COVID-19 asking for sick day credits is another side of the ongoing breakdown of public education.

The “lack of respect” which hundreds of educators are pointing to after watching the “Dash for Cash” is true but an understatement. Not only are teachers chronically underpaid and classrooms left without resources, but their very lives are being placed at risk on a daily basis by the demand that schools remain open no matter the spread of COVID-19. Educators get no official or economic respect because the ruling elite consider schools not as places of universal high-quality education but holding pens for children while parents are working and producing profit.

The attitude of Wall Street to educators is marked, above all, in the grim total of thousands of those who have succumbed unnecessarily to COVID-19. But the outpouring of opposition among teachers and workers powerfully demonstrates the alternative, the mobilization of the power of the working class.

The WSWs urges educators, parents and students in South Dakota and around the country to join the growing network of Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, independent of the politicians and the unions. We are demanding our right to decent pay, well-stocked schools and particularly to oppose the profit-driven back-to-school and back-to-work policy and to fight for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19 and save lives.



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