

School districts slash spending across the US

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School districts across the United States are implementing deep budget cuts. Citing the drop in student enrollment—the result of the criminal response of both political parties to the pandemic—federal, state and local officials are accelerating the attack on public education.

A major decline in enrollment in US public schools has taken place over the past two years. According to Return 2 Learn Tracker, a recent national survey on student enrollment, an estimated 1.2 million students have left public schools since the pandemic began.

There are still no definitive studies on the causes of the sharp decline. However, large numbers of working class parents likely pulled their children out of school because they lost jobs, suffered homelessness, got sick or lost family members who cared for children. Some parents with the economic means also transferred their children to parochial and other private schools, which have largely remained open throughout the pandemic.

As most public school funds are tied directly to student enrollment and attendance, districts face major budget deficits for the upcoming school years. Insufficient pandemic relief funding from the federal government has not stemmed the budget crisis. Projecting major budget deficits, districts across the US are already imposing austerity measures in the form of hiring freezes, school closures, cuts to vital services and programs including Special Education programs and English as a Second Language programs, teacher and staff layoffs, classroom consolidations and more.

A snapshot of school budget cuts in several areas gives a sense of the scale of this assault.

In New York City Public Schools, the largest district in the US, over 50,000 students have left the district over the past two years. Proposals for cuts to the budget include cutting \$215 million for next school year and a total of nearly \$1 billion to schools over the next three years.

In Minnesota, Minneapolis Public Schools faces an estimated \$27.1 million budget deficit for the upcoming school year. Citing decline in enrollment and added expenses from meager employee raises under new labor agreements, the district plans to enforce a hiring freeze, cut 5 percent from each department, and decrease allocations to school sites. The district also plans to use 78 percent of its remaining pandemic relief funds to pay salaries for the next two years. The drastic cuts come two months after the 20-day strike of teachers and support staff in

the district was shut down and betrayed by the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers.

In California, student enrollment has declined by more than 250,000 students since 2019, representing the state's lowest public school student enrollment numbers in 20 years. In the Sacramento City Unified School District, one month after the Sacramento City Teachers Union and Service Employees International Union Local 1021 sold out the strike of over 5,000 school employees, the district voted unanimously to lay off 106 classified positions, effective since last Friday, and unilaterally extend the school year. The district has cited the cost of the below inflation rate wage increases for educators and fines from lost instruction due to the strike as basis for its estimated \$38.5 million budget deficit.

San Francisco Unified School District last week rescinded hundreds of layoff notices and issued 35 layoff notices to teachers and classified staff, instead of an initial proposal of 311 layoffs back in March. The rescinding of layoffs was due in large part to a major exodus of teachers and staff from the district for the 2022–2023 school year. Since January, 68 teachers have resigned and 15 teachers retired. The district is cynically presenting these figures as a means for solving the budget crisis, but most of the vacancies will remain unfilled due to ongoing budget cuts.

Facing a \$50 million budget deficit, Oakland Unified School District will carry out the closure, consolidation and merging of 11 schools in the district over the next two years, a plan which has been confronted with mass opposition from teachers, staff and families. The school board recently announced there have been 96 employee “separations” from the district since January, which include special ed teachers, counselors, psychologists, English as a second language teachers and food service staff, among others.

According to state data, Kansas public schools enrollment dropped by more than 15,000 since the start of the pandemic. The Olathe School District in Kansas City faces a \$28 million deficit for next school year and has issued major cuts to the district including 140 teaching and staff positions and a hiring freeze on vacant positions.

Maysville School District in Everett, Washington, recently finalized 35 teacher layoffs to offset \$13.5 million in lost revenue. Also on the chopping block are millions in cuts to sports programs, instructional materials, student support staff

and school maintenance staff. Evergreen Public Schools in Vancouver, Washington, plans to lay off nearly 200 positions for the 2022–2023 school year, including teachers, paraeducators and student intervention specialists. The district also proposed to eliminate all COVID-19 quarantine monitor positions.

In New Jersey, Montclair Schools will cut 26 teaching positions due to a more than \$3 million budget deficit. An undisclosed number of support staff are also getting laid off in addition to hiring freezes on special ed and bus driver vacancies.

Pentucket Regional School District in West Newbury, Massachusetts, plans for \$1.34 million in cuts for next year, which will have a devastating impact on the quality of public education in the district. Cuts are to include the elimination of seven teachers, two paraeducators, two Special Ed teachers, one nurse and one librarian position in the district. There will also be cuts to school supplies, field trips for grades 6–7, reductions in athletics and cuts to summer special ed programs.

In Pennsylvania, Pleasant Valley School District has issued layoffs to 52 staff, including 18 teachers and 34 support staff for next school year. The layoffs come after the district incentivized early retirements in February resulting in 28 teacher and 22 support staff early retirements in the district.

Additional relief funding from the federal government during the pandemic has proven to be entirely insufficient. The \$30 billion one-time COVID-19 relief funding for schools from the CARES Act did not adequately address safety concerns across US schools. Instead it served largely as a buffer for districts to keep afloat during the pandemic. Another \$122 billion in American Rescue Plan stimulus funds must be spent by July 2024. Even if this was actually spent, it would hardly be a dent in the resources needed to address crumbling infrastructure in schools, lack of resources and COVID-19 safety mitigations.

Significantly, federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund money is being used to “bolster” meager pay raises through one-time funds. At the same time, state and district officials, along with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), are telling teachers and support staff to lower their expectations because this money will soon run out too.

US Secretary of Education Cardona issued a nationwide call in March, during the Minneapolis teacher strike, for districts to use ESSER funds as a means to attract new educators and address the teacher shortage. But most of those funds were already allocated for important school services and in many cases have since been redirected for one-time bonuses. During the strike and contract negotiations in Sacramento, district and union officials agreed to take ESSER funds earmarked for health services for 504 plans, behavioral supports, and nutrition services and other services amounting to \$11 million.

Far from fighting for a genuine redistribution of wealth in

order to expand funding for public education programs and teacher salaries, the unions have pursued this “rob Peter to pay Paul” policy, which allows districts to drive a wedge between teachers, parents and students.

Significantly, the latest budget passed by Congress has offered no significant increase in public education funds, instead funneling unlimited billions for war. Just last week the US House of Representatives voted to send an unprecedented \$40 billion in military and financial aid to Ukraine. All claims that there is no money to adequately fund public education is a lie.

The present crisis in public education is the result of a decades-long defunding of public education and diversion of public resources to for-profit charters and other school privatization schemes. Declines in student enrollment before the pandemic were always a self-fulfilling prophecy. The gutting of public schools led to lower enrollment, which in turn was used to carry out further cuts and promote charters, school vouchers and other “school choice.”

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, first Trump and then Biden refused to carry out the necessary public health measures—school and workplace closures and the replacement of lost wages, universal testing, contact tracing, quarantining and a global campaign of mass vaccinations—to shorten the pandemic and eliminate SARS-CoV-2.

Politicians from both parties cite the dangers of supposed “learning loss” to keep the schools open as cases and hospitalizations rise due to the highly infectious and immune-resistant Omicron BA.2 and BA.2.12.1 subvariants. But the “let it rip” policy has and continues to have a catastrophic impact on schoolchildren, including on their learning capacity, with many thousands facing long-term illness and debilities from Long COVID.

Now all of the feigned concern over the educational needs of students is further exposed by the massive budget cuts hitting the schools.

These conditions are sparking a resurgence of struggles by educators in the US and internationally. The fight against both the pandemic and austerity requires the expansion of the national and international network of educators rank-and-file committees, which have been organized in opposition to the pro-capitalist and pro-war teacher unions.



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