

Amid desperate teacher shortage, East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools eliminates hundreds of positions

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1 June 2022

Are you a teacher, parent or student in Baton Rouge? Write us to report on how the layoffs have impacted you and your school.

Teacher shortages are creating crisis conditions throughout the state of Louisiana, where there are more than 2,500 certified teacher vacancies.

According to State Superintendent of Education Cade Brumely, an estimated 50,000, K-12 students, roughly 7 percent of the total, are directly affected by teacher vacancies. However, this leaves out the indirect impact on students whose teachers are stretched thin, sacrificing planning periods and taking on extra work to cover the shortages. Students have been herded into cafeterias and auditoriums to be supervised because there is no one to teach them, an increasingly common practice across the US.

A recent report by the state Legislative Auditor found that Louisiana has the fifth-highest percentage nationwide of uncertified teachers, at 9 percent compared to the national average of 3.2 percent. The state also has the fourth-highest percentage of inexperienced teachers, with 16.1 percent of teachers in their first or second year, compared to the national average of 11.7.

Within charter schools, the percentage of uncertified teachers jumps to 49.7 percent, compared to only 7.9 percent in traditional public schools. Following Hurricane Katrina, the entire city of New Orleans was converted into the country's first all-charter school district.

The staffing shortages extend beyond the classroom. Louisiana employs one school psychologist for every 3,300 students, nearly one-seventh the National Association of School Psychologists' recommended ratio of one for 500. This is enough to place the state in the bottom ten nationwide.

Stop-gap legislative efforts to bandage the shortage

include a miserly \$1,500 pay raise for teachers, a pending bill that would incentivize retired teachers to return to work while still receiving retirement benefits, and a proposed scholarship fund to recruit high school students into the profession. According to the National Education Association, in the 2020-2021 school year, Louisiana ranked 43 out of 50 for average teacher salary at just \$52,472 compared to the national average of \$65,293.

It is within the context of severe shortages that a recent mass layoff took place in the East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools district (EBR). In May, despite a budget surplus and over 600 vacancies for the 2022-2023 school year, at least 230 employees were informed that their positions were being eliminated. The employees, including both teachers and staff, were told they could apply for or be reassigned to vacant jobs at other schools. According to *The Advocate*, 54 schools lost at least one position, and 23 schools lost at least five positions. One middle school, Park Forest, will lose eight teachers.

Educators, parents and students responded with outrage to the announcements, holding protests at local school board meetings. EBR Superintendent Sito Narcisse, architect of the revised staffing formula that led to the "reassignments," has been a particular focus of their anger. An online petition begun by a parent urging the school board to review Narcisse's contract and vote "no confidence" has received over 2,300 signatures.

Comments on the petition reveal that the layoffs will have a devastating impact on the fine arts classes, orchestra and other treasured elective programs.

One bus driver wrote, "I'm a tired, stressed and fed up bus driver. This has been the worst year in all of my years. We've had so many drivers quit and even more planning to retire. We deserve someone who cares about us. I sat in meetings with this man and his blatant

disrespect and disregard for the bus drivers is unbelievable. If he doesn't care about the school district as a whole, then he should not be in that position."

The Advocate reported that Narcisse claimed in an email to district personnel that his decision was meant to "ensure every child is served by qualified and effective personnel, in order to ensure their success." He continued, "This redistribution of talent has resulted in some employees being impacted and *given the opportunity* to serve at another school or in another capacity with the district as we focus on effectively meeting the needs of each child" (emphasis added). What nerve! Amid an historic nationwide teacher shortage, teachers are "given the opportunity" to reapply for another job with the district that just fired them.

Identity politics has also been invoked to support this blatant attack on public education, with Narcisse garnering the support of prominent African American business and nonprofit representatives. A press conference held in his support included members of the Baton Rouge Black Chamber of Commerce, the Baton Rouge branch of the NAACP, 100 Black Men of Metropolitan Baton Rouge, and other Democratic Party-linked organizations.

Their claim is that the forced reassignments are a legitimate method of staffing experienced teachers into the most underfunded and poor performing schools, which will improve education for African American students. In their view, scarcity of resources is not the problem, only that scarce resources should be "equitably" divided.

Eugene Collins, president of the East Baton Rouge branch of the NAACP, went so far as to blame teachers for the crisis in education. Referring to the fact that after this latest attack many teachers will look for work in other districts or leave the profession altogether, he said, "If these teachers are going to leave the district and have a mass exodus because they don't want to teach poor kids, something is not right with that."

This cynical declaration is totally divorced from reality. The mass exodus from the teaching profession, which has reached record levels following two years of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, is the result of decades of bipartisan attacks on public education funding, low wages, grueling working conditions, lack of administrative support, and physically dangerous school environments.

Thousands of educators and students have died as a result of the forced reopening of schools during the

pandemic, and schools are known to be one of the most significant vectors for community transmission. The Uvalde, Texas massacre, the latest episode in the decades-long school shooting epidemic, has further illuminated for educators the low regard that the corporate political establishment has for their and their students' lives.

For their parts, the local teachers' unions have not made any effort to mobilize educators against this attack on their jobs. In a statement to *The Advocate*, the president of the East Baton Rouge Parish Association of Educators, Valencea Johnson, merely stated that the district was "taking a step in the wrong direction." Neither the Association nor the East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers appear to have gone so far as to release a press statement on the eliminations.

This is in line with the role of the unions throughout the pandemic, from the local to national level, which collaborated with both the Trump and Biden administrations in their efforts to force millions of educators and children into infected classrooms so that their parents could be forced back into infected workplaces. Major strikes over the last two years in Chicago, Minneapolis, Sacramento and elsewhere were shut down by the unions, which strong-armed their members into accepting sellout contracts and dangerous working conditions.

Educators in Baton Rouge and Louisiana must be warned that attacks on their jobs, wages and working conditions will only increase as the crisis in public education intensifies. The unions, which are directly tied to the Democratic Party and help to serve the interests of the capitalist system, have demonstrated that they will do nothing to defend their members' lives or livelihoods.

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages educators and parents to fight to defend public education by joining and building the growing network of independent rank-and-file committees in every city and school. These committees are the basis upon which a mass movement of the working class can organize across the US and internationally to secure safe, fully funded and staffed schools for all students and teachers.



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