

Behind California's school budget proposal: An education system in an advanced state of decay

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27 June 2022

The latest proposal for the 2022-2023 California state budget includes a budget surplus of \$97.5 billion. As part of the budget proposed in May, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom put forward a \$128 billion budget for schools and community colleges, with \$110.3 billion allocated to K-12 schools. The legislature is set to finalize the budget in July.

Regarding his proposal for state education funding, Newsom recently stated, "This is about education reform. This is about completely reimagining the education system." However, the proposal does not adequately reflect the resources needed to address accelerating levels of poverty in the state impacting California students and the chronic lack of funding for public schools.

Behind Newsom's self-congratulatory statement lies the disintegration of life under a rotting capitalist system. Poverty and homelessness are rampant. COVID-19 has killed 92,271 Californians. School districts are slashing budgets, laying off teachers and school workers, deferring maintenance and providing staff raises far below the inflation rate, which has surged to 8.6 percent. This inflation is imposing severe hardship on workers and youth throughout the state.

With President Biden's support, the Federal Reserve Bank has responded to the surge in inflation and looming economic recession by raising its interest rate by 0.75 percent. This hike will have the effect of creating mass unemployment to contain the rate of inflation.

The state Legislative Analyst Office and education specialists in media are anticipating a recession that will severely reduce California's revenues, sparking even further cuts. Teachers are leaving the profession in droves by retiring or resigning. Further, declining student enrollment will significantly reduce Proposition 98 funding, which establishes minimum state funding for K-12 schools and community colleges based largely on student attendance.

Over 110,000 students have left California public schools this last school year, bringing total enrollment in the state under 6 million for the first time in over 20 years. Charter school enrollment has also dropped. Just 9,000 additional students enrolled in private schools last year, suggesting other factors triggered by the pandemic, including exacerbated financial hardship, have caused the staggering decline in enrollment.

The financial picture facing schools and students is far from rosy. A 2020 report titled *State of Crisis* from the Center for the Transformation of Schools at UCLA (CTS) documents that nearly two-thirds of the 6.3 million K-12 California students in 2020 were economically disadvantaged. These are students who are eligible for free or reduced priced meals or have parents/guardians who live below the federal poverty level. The CTS report notes that at least 269,000 students were homeless in the 2018-2019 school year. For the 2020-21 school year, the California Department of Education has reported 183,000 California K-12 students were homeless at some point during the year.

Such horrendous figures are an indictment of the inequality of capitalism in the state with the most billionaires. The CTS report also indicates that this number is undoubtedly far higher due to the immense economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families and youth, as well as the overall lack of reporting and measuring of student homelessness in K-12 schools.

As a cynical response to the dire conditions facing homeless students, state Democrats have recently introduced a bill to provide \$5,000 to \$15,000 stipends for homeless high school students in their senior year. The result is that 6 percent of homeless students in K-12 schools would get aid for half a school year. The total cost of this bill would be \$85 million, which is less than 0.08 percent of the state budget surplus. Poverty and homelessness facing workers and youth in California will only deepen in the coming period as inflation continues to surge. Workers are facing a global recession that will dry up state tax revenues and force new budget cuts.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, jobs, facilities and programs are on the chopping block in every county. The West Contra Costa County School District (WCCUSD) deficit is projected to reach \$151 million by 2024. Facing bankruptcy, the district faces the threat of a state takeover of district finances and extensive cuts. To eliminate a \$50 million shortfall in the 2022-2023 school year, the Oakland, California school district closed one school and merged two this year. Next year, five more schools will be shuttered. Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has deferred maintenance for several years and will continue to let schools deteriorate.

The San Francisco Unified School District faces a \$125 million deficit for the upcoming school year. Initial proposals from the

school board included laying off over 300 teachers and staff. This was reduced to an estimated 15 layoffs, due in large part to a mass exodus of teachers and school employees retiring and resigning from the district.

An important element in the financial troubles of California schools is the growth of charter schools. OUSD loses \$57.3 million yearly to private institutions; WCCUSD, nearly bankrupt, loses \$27.9 million. Governor Newsom has worked hard to legitimize the privatization of education.

In 2019, with the connivance of teachers' unions, Newsom pushed through changes to Assembly Bill 1505, which allowed for charters to appeal petition refusals, and a streamlined process for renewal up to 7 years. Additionally, the bill prevents "high-performing" charters from being denied a renewal. Considering the abysmal academic achievements of charter schools, this can only be interpreted as whitewashing the failures of charters.

This bill was celebrated by Toby E. Boyd, president of the California Teachers Association (CTA) who participated in negotiations with Newsom and Charter Schools Association President Myrna Castrejón, saying, "Today is a good day for the 6.4 million students of California!" It was only a good day for profiteering; students have lost dramatically. Charter schools scored lower than public education in California, with only 30 percent achieving science standards, 31 percent meeting math standards and 48 percent reaching English language arts standards. The entrepreneurs of the A3 Charter Schools in San Diego County took the charter model to the next logical step and committed mass fraud in 2019 that netted an estimated \$400 million in state funds. Just over half of these funds have been paid back through restitution, and this isn't expected to continue.

What emerges most starkly throughout the state is the complicity of school unions and their millionaire presidents with the Democratic Party's war against public education. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, whose net worth is approximately \$4 million; National Education Association (NEA) president Becky Pringle, net worth around \$11.3 million; and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President Mary Kay Henry, with an estimated \$3 million net worth; have not raised a finger against layoffs and closures and have actively supported the electoral campaigns of Gavin Newsom and California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tony Thurmond.

The union leadership's collaboration with state and local Democratic politicians in the erosion of educators' living standards and in the reopening of schools during the pandemic has driven thousands of teachers to quit their profession. A study by the Learning Policy Institute revealed that some large districts have 10 percent of open teacher positions unfilled. The California State Teachers' Retirement System (CalSTRS) reported a 26 percent jump in retirements during the pandemic. The teacher shortage is not just a result of permanent staff reductions, but of absences of teachers who are sick with COVID-19. Teachers will search in vain for statistics on COVID-19 infections, deaths or Long COVID on the unions' websites. That would reveal how much union members have suffered as a result of school reopenings.

Statistics from CalSTRS also reveal that through 2021, 787 of its retired and active teacher members have died as result of COVID-19. There have been 1,408,296 cases and 46 deaths among school age youth aged 5-17 in California. These statistics, as well as the oft-repeated story of students being herded into cafeterias because of instructor shortages, sharply contrast with Biden Education Secretary Miguel Cardona's claim that "virtual instruction might present more risks than" in-person classrooms, including "increased risk for negative mental, emotional, or physical health outcomes." American workers are not convinced. The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) polled parents during the pandemic and found that less than 40 percent of respondents preferred full-time, in-person learning. Public schools have taken on the role of babysitter so that parents can work and create profits for the rich.

The negligence of the US government in the pandemic was sharply expressed in the CARES Act, a bonanza for the rich, with \$33.5 billion in relief funds allocated in California to the notoriously corrupt boards of education in K-12 districts. Little of that money went to actual COVID-19 relief. District after district routed their pot of gold to cronies and relatives, religious institutions, fly-by-night companies and the parent companies of private charter schools. Both OUSD and San Francisco school board "cannot locate documents" on how the money was spent. LAUSD has stonewalled media requests for information.

A recent investigative report by *CalMatters* shows that there has been little oversight and transparency as to how pandemic relief funds have been spent in schools across the state. Just \$5.9 billion of the \$33.5 billion allocated to schools has been spent. Additionally, more than a quarter, or \$1.7 billion, has been categorized as "other," indicating it has not been used to cover COVID-19 expenses. There exists no centralized state or federal database detailing precisely how schools have spent this money. The remaining \$28 billion is also at risk of being revoked if local education agencies don't spend the fund by 2024.

California is just a microcosm of the decay of education nationwide and internationally. Neither the unions, nor Democratic Party politicians have any intention of waging a political struggle against the capitalist system, which is the source of war, growing austerity and the present policies of mass infection. Teachers worldwide are leading struggles to defend health and living standards. Educators in all states and countries must unite with other sections of the working class and build their own rank-and-file movement to fight the gang of capitalist party politicians and trade union leaders and assert demands for high-quality public education, safety from COVID-19 and against growing austerity.



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