

US budget deal will accelerate savage cuts to public education

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A wave of mass austerity is being planned and carried out against public education as part of the bipartisan plan to raise the nation's debt ceiling. The agreement reached by President Biden and Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, which is headed to a vote in the US House of Representatives today, includes far-reaching cuts to social spending. Discretionary non-military spending for the 2024 fiscal year will be frozen at present 2023 levels and a 1 percent cap imposed on any increases for the 2025 fiscal year.

The cuts are being prepared against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic, which has claimed the lives of more than 1.1 million people in the US since 2020, including an estimated 2,200 children and 8,000 educators. Of the 96 percent of US children who were infected, an estimated 10 to 25 percent have Long COVID.

The same politicians who swore they were only concerned for the educational and emotional well-being of children when they were herding them back into infected classrooms are now taking an axe to public education.

The third and last federal stimulus bill that provided \$122 billion in relief to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund is set to expire in September 2024. As of April this year, most districts have already spent about three-quarters of ESSER funds, according to EdWeek Research Center. Under the bipartisan budget agreement, any unspent funds by school districts are set to be rescinded as part of the \$30 billion in total unspent COVID relief funds to be clawed back by the federal government.

Given the impact of inflation, the cap on spending at 2023 levels in the new budget deal will mean a cut in billions of real dollars to already cash-strapped school districts. These cuts are all taking place amid historic teacher shortages in all categories (but especially special education) as a result of decades of bipartisan austerity and the devastation of the education system through mass infection.

The following is a brief survey of the cuts already planned or underway in major districts across the US.

Northeast

New York City is the largest school district in the US, with about 1 million students and almost 100,000 teachers and paraprofessionals and other staff. On top of major cuts last year, Mayor Eric Adams, a Democrat, proposed a 4 percent cut for most city agencies and a reduction of 3 percent for the Department of Education, along with a further \$176 million in midyear education cuts.

Adam's proposed education budget of \$30.7 billion for the 2023-2024 fiscal year would be a reduction of \$800 million. Budgets were cut in the fall in 77 percent of schools, for a total of \$469 million. Eighty-six percent

of schools had cuts totaling \$893 million compared to last year, averaging about \$655,000 each.

At least \$700 million in the city's recurring expenses, such as 3-K, the Public Schools Athletic League (PSAL), the arts, community schools and social workers, will evaporate with the expiration of ESSER funds.

The American Federation of Teachers-affiliated United Federation of Teachers has collaborated in the cuts by forcing through real wage cuts against educators.

In New Jersey, 157 school districts face budget cuts under Democratic Governor Phil Murphy's proposed 2023-24 budget. Twenty-five of those districts would see cuts of over \$1 million, including Jersey City, where state funding will be reduced by \$50 million. Even if Jersey City is successful in applying for a one-time grant, it will only give two-thirds of the cuts back.

Montclair Public School District, which eliminated 31 teaching positions, is cutting 73 paraprofessional positions to balance a \$5.5 million budget deficit. Hundreds of Montclair High School students walked out of school in protest of the cuts on May 18, calling for the reinstatement of laid off staff, among other demands.

Mid-Atlantic

In Maryland, Frederick County Public Schools is planning major cuts to close a more than \$40 million budget deficit by the end of June, lowering its budget by \$10.8 million. The Board of Education proposed to cut \$15 million from the salary pool and eliminate a summer school program funded with around \$2 million in COVID relief funds and serving 3,500 students. Three grades of the district's online classes are to be removed due to \$900,000 in cuts. Special education was revised down from \$10.7 million in the initial budget proposal to \$7.3 million.

Midwest

In Chicago, Illinois, the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)-backed mayor, Brandon Johnson, has already floated cuts for the near future. During his campaign, Johnson, a former organizer for the Chicago Teachers Union, said he would have to make some "tough decisions" when he was mayor, including telling the CTU there was no money to increase school funding. He asked, "Who is better able to deliver bad news to a friend than a friend?"

In Detroit, Michigan, at least 150 jobs at the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) are on the chopping block, with the AFT-

affiliated Detroit Federation of Teachers and the DSA collaborating in the cuts. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer's proposed budget would decrease school funding in real terms. DPSCD has budgeted according to Whitmer's budget, which will lead to shortfalls as costs increase with inflation. According to Chalkbeat, the district has proposed eliminating "deans of culture, assistant principals, school culture facilitators, college transition advisers, and kindergarten paraprofessionals."

West Coast

In California, Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed \$1.5 billion in cuts to education in the state. The Los Angeles Unified School District—the second largest school district in the US—is facing major cuts in school programs and employee salaries in anticipation of the decline in funding sources. The United Teachers Los Angeles forced through a below inflation tentative agreement, imposing the district's austerity measures.

Oakland Unified School District is preparing cuts to close a \$79 million deficit, having already approved initial layoffs of support staff. Recently, the school board brought school closures and mergers back on the table, despite years of protests by school staff, students and families. The recent strike in the district was shut down by the union to force through a pay cut, as in the 2019 strike.

Washington state has lost about 44,800 public school students since the 2019-20 school year, causing many school districts to consider plans for closing schools and cutting staff, salaries and the arts.

Seattle Public Schools faces a \$131 million deficit in the 2023-24 school year and \$92 million the following year. To close the budget gap, \$33 million is being cut from the central office and \$11.2 million from salaries for school-based staff. In addition to cutting programs, such as the Washington Middle School band program, the district is looking at closures of some of its 106 schools, particularly 30 that have enrollment under 300 students.

South

In Louisiana, East Baton Rouge Parish Public Schools has announced \$15.2 million in proposed cuts directed at central office positions as well as contracts with outside vendors for the 2023-24 budget. The district is also increasing the student-to-teacher ratio from the already onerous 28-to-1 to 33-to-1 in grades 6-12. Eighteen teaching positions are being cut. Support staff in various areas such as Special Programs, Guidance Services and Information Technology will also be cut.

Teachers, though no other staff, will supposedly receive an 8 percent pay increase, and then a 12 percent increase over three years, for an insulting 5 percent per year. The district notes that it has not secured a sustainable funding source for these raises past this coming school year.

In Fort Bend, Texas, the district has reduced its budget by \$40 million since 2021. Deputy Superintendent Steve Bassett told local news that if the district wants to provide a paltry 2 percent raise to its teachers next year, it will have to cut another \$23 million elsewhere. Even that, he notes, "is not going to be enough to keep our teachers." The Austin Independent School District faces a \$54 million budget deficit after proposing a 7 percent raise for its teachers.

Multiple districts have pleaded with the state government to raise per pupil spending, which has been frozen since 2019. The Spring Branch

Independent School District says it needs an additional \$1,000 per student to maintain operations, while the state has only offered an increase of \$50 per student.

The cost of war

The massive cuts in social spending are taking place as both parties spend trillions on war and bank bailouts. The budget deal exempts the military from a spending cap. It follows the enactment of Biden's record \$1 trillion war budget and his administration's allotment of another \$375 billion to arm Ukraine for the US proxy war against Russia.

This outcome is exactly what the WSWs warned of in the November 2020 article, "What would a Biden administration mean for public education?" In it we warned:

[A] Biden administration will continue the austerity policies [of President Trump] against public education, under conditions of a severe economic crisis. ... Under these conditions, any new programs or budgetary reforms will be rejected as "unfeasible" in light of Wall Street's demands for mass austerity and state deficits.

This is the restructuring of public education along class lines, or rather the destruction of public education. The children of poor and working class people will be increasingly shut out of education, which will become ever more exclusive to the upper-middle class and ruling class.

At the same time, ever younger children are being pushed into the workforce to address the labor shortage caused by the ruling elite's criminal response to the pandemic. At least eight states have already introduced bills this year to loosen child labor laws, and North Carolina is poised to approve a bill requiring all public high schools to create a three-year track to graduate. This will allow students to be pushed into the military or manual labor jobs earlier. In addition, several states have passed legislation to fund school choice and voucher programs.

Such attacks are taking place around the world and provoking opposition by educators in the US and internationally. There is no shortage of opposition to these attacks, as can be seen from Michigan educators seeking to protect students after a six-year-old child died from a "mystery illness;" from San Diego teachers who have been without a contract for over a year; from educators, parents and nurses who oppose the budget cuts in Detroit schools, and from countless other instances.

If workers are to halt these attacks and reverse the decades of destruction of public education, they must form rank-and-file committees that are independent of the union bureaucracies and the capitalist political parties. In opposition to war and austerity, educational workers should spearhead the fight for an industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class against capitalism and the grotesque social inequality it creates. Only in this way can the social right to a high-quality and free public education be guaranteed to all.



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