

Pennsylvania budget impasse threatens public education

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Pennsylvania's budget deal for the fiscal year 2023-2024 is now over one month past the June 30th deadline. With the Republican-controlled state Senate expected to reconvene in September, it could take many more months before a deal is finally inked by newly elected Democratic governor Josh Shapiro.

Over the past several decades, and mirroring the factional fighting between the big-business parties at the national level, Pennsylvania politicians have routinely passed late budgets, despite the law mandating a deal before July 1st. The longest impasse, lasting nine months, took place under previous Democratic governor Tom Wolf in 2015. A total of 13 late budgets have been passed since the turn of the century, highlighting the bitter infighting at the state level.

The budget impasse spells misery for the public school system, social services, and the broader public. Government and nonprofit workers face potential layoffs and loss of income. Those that rely on necessary public service run the risk of being turned away.

Public schools, day cares, preschools, and special education programs, just one month into the impasse, have already lost out on millions of dollars in the dispersal of funds, according to the state Department of Education. For August, these education programs will lose \$1.1 billion in funding.

The proposed \$45.5 billion budget, \$300 million less than Shapiro requested, has been signed by the lower chamber but not by the Democratic lieutenant governor, who oversees the Republican-controlled upper chamber.

Republicans claim Shapiro reneged on an earlier promise to support an expansive new school voucher scheme, which would further decimate public education. Shapiro has vowed to use a line item veto on

the measure.

As always in such “budget disputes” between Democrats and Republicans, there is a good deal of choreography involved. Inevitably, the “impasse” will be resolved by Democrats “reaching across the aisle” and agreeing on a “compromise” that offers major concessions to the far-right.

Though House Democrats nominally oppose the voucher program, which shifts public education funds to private charter and religious schools, the amount allocated for education in the budget, totaling \$800 million, with \$100 million for the poorest school districts, will do nothing to change the downward trajectory of the public education system in Pennsylvania.

The education crisis in Pennsylvania won't be resolved by this budget or by any Democratic or Republican administration. Democrats have controlled the governorship five out of the last six terms. For decades, they have collaborated with Republicans in imposing austerity budgets and diverting funding from public schools to charter and parochial schools.

Education funding for the state's public schools at the k-12 level received extra scrutiny this year after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that the government's funding formula violates the state's constitution. The court declared that the school funding system, in which property taxes are pegged to the amount of money schools receive, inducing large funding disparities, violates the state's constitution. The judge said that “In the 21st century, students need more than a desk, chair, pen, paper, and textbooks.” In reality, many poor districts are without even these bare necessities.

The lawsuit-- brought by parents, former students, school districts, and community organizations, many

years ago--detailed the devastating economic impact capitalism has brought to cities, small towns, and local communities.

The petitioners cite the fact that Johnstown, home of the Greater Johnstown School District, had been the heart of the now-defunct steel and coal industry. Today it is the poorest school district by median income. Wilkes-Barre Area School District is also highlighted for the effects of de-industrialization on education funding. The School District of Philadelphia, it noted, is located in the 'poorest big city in the country.'

According to the lawsuit's funding calculation by Matthew Kelly of Penn State College of Education, 277 school districts will need more than \$2,000 per student to guarantee access to proper education and districts will need \$4.6 billion invested over time. In the face of this need, the 2022-2023 proposed budget is just a drop in the bucket, barely keeping up with inflation.

The Supreme Court ruling assigns the state legislature and the governor to resolve the problem of what is, in reality, class inequality in education created and overseen by these very bodies. The fact that such a lawsuit was even necessary makes clear that relying on Democratic and Republican politicians to devise a plan to save public education will produce only more disastrous, unequal funding formulas for the children of working class parents throughout the state.



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