

School districts across US announce massive cuts in response to fiscal cliff, as teachers fight to defend education

Emma Arceneaux, Nancy Hanover
2 February 2024

School districts across the US are facing a dire fiscal cliff for the 2024-2025 fiscal year, as public education confronts an existential crisis. The extent of the cuts is unprecedented. Plans are underway for hundreds of school closures, the layoffs of thousands of staff, and the termination of critical supports for students.

Emblematic of this crisis is the city of Boston, the site of the oldest public school in the US. The state was the national model for the development of the Common Schools movement under Horace Mann, the father of American education, in the 19th century. This storied history is coming to an end. Last December, district leaders unveiled a long-term facilities plan that detailed the closure of up to half the city's schools.

But districts, facing financial crisis, are implementing closures everywhere—from California—where Hacienda La Puente Unified School District will close four elementary schools this year—to Grand Rapids, Michigan where 10 schools are on the chopping block—to Anchorage, Alaska where 650 educators and support staff face layoff.

Education is being bled to death while the most recent US budget appropriated a record \$886.3 billion for the military. This gargantuan boost to the multi-front US wars amounts to more than half of the government's entire discretionary funding.

The causes of the fiscal crisis are several, but all of them emerge from the prioritization of Wall Street profit-taking and wars for global hegemony over the lives of children or the jobs of school workers.

One of the chief proximate causes is the Biden administration's decision to end all Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, which expire in September 2024. The relief money, totaling roughly \$190 billion, was meant to help schools address needs arising from COVID-19, including making up for learning loss during the pandemic.

According to a study by Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research, "The *average* U.S. public school student in grades 3-8 lost the equivalent of a half year of learning in math and a quarter of a year in reading."

The loss of funds means the ending of tutoring programs across districts. Montgomery County, Maryland opted to end tutoring rather than raise class sizes; Detroit, Michigan cut paraprofessional support across all elementary grades; Shreveport, Louisiana said it would likely cut math teachers brought in to help middle school students. Virtually every district in the US is making such trade-offs at the expense of children.

In addition to the elimination of ESSER funds, schools are being hard hit by a loss in enrollment.

As a result of the Biden administration's decision to force the full reopening of schools to compel parents back to work amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, children were sent into unsafe school buildings, with whatever limited mitigations were in place steadily dismantled.

There, they contracted and brought the deadly and debilitating disease home to parents and loved ones, a cycle that continues to fuel the pandemic to this day.

In response, parents with greater means often turned to home-schooling or private or parochial schools with smaller classes or better air filtration. The poorest children often simply dropped out of school.

This drop in enrollment has been compounded with a demographic cliff, as the birthrates in the US dropped particularly following the 2008 economic crisis. More and more young millennials are worried that they cannot afford to have children, depressing the birthrate.

The pandemic has exacerbated the terrible growth of social inequality in education, leading to disproportionate attacks on the most vulnerable. None of this was inevitable. The US government throughout the pandemic has prioritized "the economy" over lives and were fully supported in this effort by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association.

Educators, however, are beginning to have their say. The latest round of attacks against public education, predicted to be a "bloodletting," are fueling a new round of struggles among both educators and students.

•2,000 suburban Boston teachers in Newton, Massachusetts have struck for 10 days demanding a living wage, affordable healthcare and better parental leave. They now face court-imposed fines totaling some \$575,000. Over 1,000 educators rallied Thursday, highlighting the starting pay of paraprofessionals, support staff and behavioral therapists at a poverty level of \$27,000 a year.

•In the Sweetwater Union High School District in California, students at the Chula Vista High School staged a walkout last week, followed by a rally of over 100 students on Monday to defend their cherished creative arts program under threat from the district.

•In Durham, North Carolina, a citywide sickout by school staff forced 12 schools to close on Wednesday, when at least 75 percent of staff at each school called in sick. The district is attempting to revoke raises for 1,300 classified staff, including cafeteria workers, custodians, nurses, instructional assistants and physical therapists.

•This week, teachers in two districts in the Minneapolis area, facing \$90 million in cuts to salaries and benefits, staged the first of several scheduled "Walkout Wednesdays."

These are just some of the initial struggles among K12 educators, as major attacks on jobs, working conditions and the integrity of public education take place. Major struggles loom on the horizon. These include:

New York

In New York City, the largest school district in the US with over 1 million students, schools face potentially \$230 million in cuts next fiscal year, on top of the \$547 million that was cut this year. The right-wing Democratic mayor Eric Adams, fully under the thumb of Wall Street, had the gall to blame immigrants for his draconian citywide budget cuts at the end of last year.

These cuts include a \$60 million reduction to the schools' food budgets. In response, the Education Department is paring down the menu offered to students. Numerous food items that are favored by students for lunch will be axed as a cost cutting measure, as well as many breakfast menu items.

A high school student told *Chalkbeat*, the cuts are "like 75% of the menu." A parent commented, "Our schools have already seen after-school programs decimated, arts programs eliminated...Now they won't have adequate fuel for the day."

Throughout the state, rural and suburban districts are anticipating severe cuts after seeing Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul's proposed executive budget which includes state aid to education. According to State Assemblyman Ken Blankenbush, the proposal would mean a \$168 million decrease in state aid to over half of school districts in rural and suburban areas.

Texas

Texas is implementing education budget cuts throughout the state. The legislature has systematically defunded education for years, specifically refusing to increase funding since 2019. With double-digit inflation over the past two years, schools face insurmountable costs. Cuts this year to Medicaid reimbursements for special education will eliminate more than \$300 million to schools. Essential services like speech therapy, physical therapy, behavioral and individual care for special needs students are all threatened.

Even with a state surplus of \$40 billion, far-right Republican Governor Greg Abbott continues to hold education funding hostage in order to promote voucher schemes for the wealthy.

•The San Antonio Independent School District board of trustees voted to close 15 schools and merge six others at the end of the 2023-24 school year. This will shutter over 15 percent of the district.

•Dallas faces a \$186 million deficit this year. Teacher layoffs and increased class sizes are on the table, in addition to plans which may axe all extracurriculars and field trips.

•These cuts extend across the state. Keller ISD is planning significant cuts to overcome a \$27 million deficit, which, according to Superintendent Tracy Johnson, means layoffs. "You can't find that money in papers and paperclips and toner, you find it in people," she said. Librarians and administrative staff will be most affected, and the district will "narrow" some of its student programs, including less Spanish instruction for 6th graders and reduced early childhood and summer programs. The Canutillo ISD will address a \$6 million deficit through layoffs and school closures.

California

The San Diego Unified School District is considering between \$70 and \$100 million in cuts to balance its budget as the state faces a potential \$68 billion deficit, the remaining federal COVID relief funding dries up, and enrollment declines signal a decrease in state funding.

Layoffs are on the table, and the district recently offered a \$1,000 incentive to staff members who announced plans to retire. Other proposed cuts include funds for substitute teachers and family support staff, which were paid for by pandemic relief money.

Manhattan Beach Unified School District projects laying off as many as 70 teachers in the next two years and pushing average class sizes from between 30 and 31 students to 35 and 36.

San Francisco faces a staggering \$421 million budget deficit, with the superintendent calling to eliminate 927 positions, currently unfilled vacancies including teaching, custodial and administrative positions.

Maryland

The Cecil County School Board has proposed approximately \$20 million in cuts, including the elimination of 150 staff positions, of which 113 are teachers. Entire programs, such as jump start, junior varsity sports, after school activities, and others face elimination. Additionally, the district is proposing to offload the costs of various programs, including AP exams, band, chorus, and field trips onto parents.

Connecticut

Across Connecticut, school districts are faced with a 3 percent fiscal cliff this year as pandemic funding expires, according to Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab. For some districts, the cliff will be particularly steep.

In Bridgeport, the most populous city in the state, the school district faces a 19 percent cliff, threatening 100 staff positions. In Hartford, which faces a 13 percent budget cliff, the district may cut as many as 211 staff positions.

Parents in Darien protested at the recent school board meeting, after the district announced major cuts to the arts and music program. The district also plans to eliminate the World Languages Department Chair, which threatens the functioning of the languages program throughout the high school level.

Additional school closures loom in Utah, where four elementary schools will close in Salt Lake City. Rochester, New York just closed 11 of 45 schools.

Unite educators across the US and internationally

The fight against these systematic attacks, which are being carried out in every corner of the United States and internationally as capitalist governments divert all social resources to war and Wall Street, necessitate a strategy based on uniting educators nationwide and across the globe in a common struggle.

But such a struggle cannot be realized under the heel of the trade union bureaucracies, which function as a labor police force over the working class. For decades, the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association have forced through concessionary contracts, assisted in the charterization of public schools, stifled opposition to the rampant spread of COVID, and now are actively covering for the Biden administration as it funds and supplies weapons for Israel's genocide in

Gaza. They have remained silent as Israel has systematically destroyed education infrastructure in the city, including the demolition on January 17 of the last standing university.

As millions of young people and workers throughout the US, including within the AFT and NEA, have stated their refusal to vote for #GenocideJoe, the union bureaucrats have not only endorsed but are actively campaigning for Biden's reelection campaign. This apparatus must be overthrown and replaced by organizations democratically controlled by the rank and file themselves.

Any illusion that the unions will be able to "negotiate" away the existential threats to public education or the deliberate assaults on workers' living standards must be discarded and a new strategy taken up, based on overthrowing the bureaucracy and uniting educators with workers throughout industry. The defense of public education is inextricably connected to the fight against genocide, war, and the capitalist profit system, all of which are sucking resources that should be used for schools, healthcare, infrastructure and human need. This means a struggle against capitalism itself, led by the international working class.

We urge educators, parents and students to get involved in this fight today by helping to build the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact