

Houston, Texas area school district to impose massive budget cuts

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Last month, the Spring Branch Independent School District (SBISD), located on the west side of Houston, Texas, with a student body of 35,000 from kindergarten through 12th grade, announced it would cut 215 positions for the 2024-25 school year. Those to be fired include all school librarians and school counselors, as well as support staff.

Other cuts include the closure of one elementary school and one pre-kindergarten center, the pausing of bond-funded programs of renovations to or rebuilding of older school buildings and the cutting back of a gifted and talented program. The district is also ending its partnership with two public charter school programs.

The American Association of School Libraries (AASL), a division of the American Library Association, in a statement on the role of school libraries has stated that it “supports the position that an effective school library plays a critical role in preparing learners for life in an information-rich society. . . Grounded in standards and best practice, school libraries are an integral component of the educational landscape. . . Under the direction of a qualified school librarian, school libraries are instrumental in fostering literacy and teaching inquiry skills to support lifelong learning.” School counselors provide academic, career, college readiness, and social and emotional support for students.

Librarians and counselors are dedicated to their jobs, which require advanced degrees. In Texas, a master’s degree in library science from an accredited institution, plus a teaching certificate, is required to work as a school librarian. School counselors must have a master’s degree in school counseling and a teaching certificate.

SBISD faces a \$35 million dollar shortfall, largely due to not having received adequate funding from the state government. Texas school districts currently receive \$6,160 for each student. This has not increased since 2019, while inflation has cut into the real value of

funding.

SBISD Board President Chris Earnest stated, “The blame lies squarely with our state leaders and elected officials who have failed the children of Texas and SBISD. We find it reprehensible that Governor [Greg] Abbott has willfully chosen to neglect 5.5 million Texas public school students and educators while sitting on the largest budget surplus in state history.”

The State of Texas has had a budget surplus of \$32.7 billion, a result of increased sales taxes and funds from the federal government earmarked for confronting the COVID-19 pandemic. Right-wingers have demanded the surplus be used as relief for property taxes.

Abbott, for his part, has worked diligently at keeping the public’s attention on the Mexican border, where in his latest stunt, he has announced that an 80-acre “forward operating base” with the capability of housing up to 1,800 National Guard troops will be built near the city of Eagle Pass. This is all in defiance of the authority of the federal government, which is the only governmental entity that is legally responsible for administering international borders. Operation Lone Star, as the state’s activities of militarizing the border is known, has cost Texas \$10 billion since March 2021.

The SBISD Board of Trustees has embroiled itself in other controversies. Last year, the board gave itself the authority to determine whether books should be banned, without input from teachers or librarians. Previously, the process of challenging a book’s appropriateness for students involved a set of procedures in which professional staff with expertise in literature and experience working with young people made recommendations as to whether a book was suitable for certain grade levels.

SBISD has joined other districts in Texas, the state with the most book challenges in the country, by banning several books. By eliminating librarians, the Board of

Trustees has removed an impediment to their efforts.

While it is certainly true that the Texas Republican Party has led efforts to defund public education, the Democratic Party and unions are complicit in this state of affairs.

As of this writing, recently elected Democratic mayor John Whitmire has made no comment on the SBISD cuts. And the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT), the local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, likewise has released no statement.

HFT claims to represent employees of SBISD (35,000 students) and Houston ISD (195,000 students), the largest public school system in Texas. The union's web page states "our union's priorities reflect the interests of teachers, counselors, librarians, support professionals, and the people who make our public schools work."

Houston ISD was recently taken over by the State of Texas Government for low test scores. The previous superintendent was fired, and Mike Miles was appointed to the position by the Texas Education Agency. Miles is a former US Army officer who went on to join the State Department as a "Soviet Specialist" and worked as a special assistant to the American ambassador to Russia. Other than organizing some protests by teachers in the district, the HFT has not opposed the changes Miles has implemented.

SBISD encompasses part of west Houston, as well as several independent villages that the city of Houston, as part of the relentless growth it has experienced since the second world war, has surrounded and moved past. The district had its origins in the nineteenth century, when the area was a rural agricultural region. After World War II, the area developed quickly, and the district became a suburban school district. It has since evolved into an urban area, with working class, lower-middle and upper-middle class neighborhoods, and a multicultural population.



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