

Massive budget cuts and layoffs announced for K-12 will devastate school districts across the US

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School districts across the US face an unprecedented fiscal cliff for the approaching 2024-2025 school year. Preliminary budget proposals have been announced by districts throughout the nation this month and outline a clear jobs bloodbath and massive cuts to resources and programs in K-12 education.

Various factors have been cited in the mainstream media as contributors to the ongoing financial crisis for K-12 schools, which include the ending of COVID-19 relief funding, overall decline in enrollment, declines in birth rates. Numerous other factors, including increased homelessness, the growth of enrollment in charter schools and homeschooling as the result of decades-long budget cuts to public schools largely go unreported in corporate news outlets.

The final installment of Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds will expire in September 2024. The COVID-19 relief money, which has totaled roughly \$190 billion, was meant to help schools address needs arising from the pandemic, including making up for learning loss during the pandemic, but many districts have used it for one-time staffing costs to keep districts' budgets afloat.

Much of state and federal funding for public education is tied to district enrollment figures. US public schools have seen a significant decline in enrollment over the past few years while the number of students in charter and private schools has increased. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reported a 2 percent increase in charter school enrollment for the 2022-2023 school year. Figures from the *Washington Post* indicate that the number of homeschooled children in America has almost doubled from 1.5 million children in 2019 to 2.7 million in 2023.

It is also worth noting the 2023 study by Stanford University and the Associated Press which found over 240,000 "missing" students who were no longer attending public schools between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years but not accounted for. Numerous factors play a role, including the significant impact of Long COVID, the growth of homelessness, parents being forced to work more than one job and other forms of social and economic distress that cause students to drop out of school.

In addition to the approaching end of federal COVID-19 relief funding this September, Congress approved early Saturday morning the second half of resolutions for the 2024 federal budget. According to a recent report by K-12 Dive, the federal budget includes \$500 million less for the Department of Education as compared to the 2023 fiscal year and represents the first major cut to education since 2015.

The federal cuts to public education come as Congress and the Biden administration have allocated vast sums for war and expansion of the military. More than half of domestic discretionary spending, \$886.3 billion, will go to the Department of Defense. Biden is also calling for more military aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan to ramp up America's

wars for global conquest. Less than half of the remaining discretionary funds are to be divided up among various agencies, including public education, healthcare and others.

While several compounding factors have contributed to the attacks on public education, all of them emerge from the prioritization of Wall Street profit-making and US imperialist wars over the lives of children or the jobs of school workers.

Mass opposition is mounting throughout the country to the slashing of budgets and their impact on public education. In every district where cuts have been announced, students, parents, teachers and school staff have spoken out. School board meetings have seen hundreds of people lining up to call for revoking the cuts that would all greatly impact the quality of education in their respective districts. In multiple cases, students, parents and teachers have organized walkouts, protests and sickouts in support of their teachers and schools.

West Coast

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), the second-largest district in California, recently announced over 400 preliminary layoff notices to teachers and school staff to close a \$94 million budget deficit. Teachers have organized a rally this next week in opposition to the cuts.

In the Los Angeles region's Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD), students and parents protested a school board decision to gut 10 percent from the school budget, including the layoff of an estimated 120 teachers. Eighth grade student Hailey Sotelo helped organize the protest in support of her teachers and school staff. Speaking to local news media at the protest, Sotelo said, "We're concerned about how big class sizes are going to be. Class size does determine how well a teacher can teach."

A petition is circulating online among students and community members opposed to the cuts which has received over 3,000 signatures. One AUHSD student, Carol Huang, wrote, "Teachers aren't just numbers; they are the people who help students grow and learn, the ones that are guiding our futures. Think about all the people aspiring to be teachers too. All this does is disappoint and discourage future teachers and educators. Can I really say I'm proud of my school district if the teachers are not even protected? If some of the most important influences on my life can just be erased after all their hard work?"

On Friday, teachers in Salem-Keizer School District in Oregon voted by 94 percent to authorize a strike amid contract negotiations with the district. While calling for major cuts due to an estimated \$60 million

budget deficit, district officials have claimed there is no money for teachers' demands to lower heavy workloads, decrease large class sizes and for pay raises. According to Tyler Scialo-Lakeberg, the president of the Salem-Keizer teachers union, cuts might include reducing many full-time positions to part-time work.

The school board in Vancouver, Washington, recently voted to slash \$35 million from the budget resulting in over 260 layoffs of teachers, counselors, librarians and other school staff. Walkouts at multiple high schools were carried out by students throughout last week in opposition to the cuts and layoffs. A flyer circulating among students and staff at Vancouver School of Arts and Academics (VSAA) stated, "VSAA is ultimately getting gutted as an art school so please walk out, email the superintendent and talk to everyone you know about this. Transparency and visibility are so important right now!" Students carried signs including, "Fund our Future" and "Fund School Not War."

Also in Washington, the Seattle Public Schools faces a massive \$105 million deficit for the coming 2024-2025 school year, and officials have announced initial plans for sweeping cuts to the district which include the closure or consolidation of dozens of schools in the district. The cuts for the next school year come in addition to \$100 million in cuts that have already been carried out for the 2023-2024 school year.

Midwest

Last week, teachers in Flint Public Schools (FPS) in Michigan carried out a powerful one-day sickout and unanimous vote to strike. Teachers in the district face untenable conditions, with many working multiple jobs to make ends meet. In January, the district rescinded a contract agreement made with the United Teachers of Flint (UTF), citing a \$14 million budget deficit. Teachers are outraged over the rejection of the agreement by the district. For its role, the UTF had failed to call a strike vote until after teachers carried out a sickout. Teacher wages have been frozen since 2012.

Sweeping budget cuts are also being carried out throughout the Detroit region. On Thursday, the Ann Arbor school district announced mass layoffs of school staff to cut \$25 million from the 2024-2025 budget. Wayne-Westland School District had planned to pass a multimillion-dollar budget cut plan at Thursday's board meeting but voted to delay the decision after the meeting erupted in opposition from teachers, bus drivers and other school workers.

According to the Association of Metropolitan School Districts, more than 70 percent of Minnesota's metro school districts expect deficits this next school year. Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) teachers have been fighting the Democratic Party's funding reductions since July. MPS announced a \$90 million budget deficit and an initial proposal for major cuts for the upcoming school year which include cuts to over 200 full-time positions in the district.

Having recently averted a strike with the help of the Saint Paul Federation of Educators union, Saint Paul Public Schools in Minnesota announced its preliminary plans to close its own \$100 million budget deficit, which will include cuts to afterschool programs, teacher prep time, food service and custodial staff funding.

The South

The Houston Independent School District, the largest district in Texas,

recently announced punitive budget cuts to schools. Superintendent Mike Miles has required dozens of schools in the district to cut up to 12 percent from their sites for the upcoming school year, resulting in part of his plan to cut \$15 million from an over \$250 million deficit. The cuts will target 140 schools in the district that have not yet implemented the superintendent's reform program, the "New Education System" (NES). Twenty-five schools will be required to cut the full 12 percent. A major decrease in enrollment—by over 32,000 students since the 2016-2017 school year—is being used as the justification to drastically reduce state funding.

Kanawha County Schools in West Virginia is facing multiple school closures and job cuts for the upcoming school year. Fifty-two school staff face potential layoffs, and the district has announced the closure of three schools in the county where the state capital of Charleston is located. This occurs as state educators mark the sixth anniversary of the wildcat strikes in 2018 that sparked a national wave of educators' walkouts against bipartisan austerity and school privatization.

In Arkansas, school districts in financial distress can be taken over by charter school companies. Little Rock School District (LRSD) announced its plans to cut \$16 million from the budget to avoid privatized takeover. Cuts include rearranging of middle school schedules in such a way that would necessitate cutting 11 positions and save close to \$1 million. Further cuts include laying off support staff, leadership and office jobs.

New Hanover County Schools (NHCS) in Alabama has a \$20 million shortfall and has proposed slashing 224 school staff positions and 56 school office staff positions.

East Coast

New York City Public Schools face an ongoing massive budget crisis. In January, \$100 million in cuts were announced by the Democratic administration of Mayor Eric Adams for the upcoming school year in the face of a \$700 million shortfall. The district is planning over \$100 million in cuts to Pre-K services, which has received enormous opposition from parents.

Also in New York state, middle and high school students at Hamburg Central School District just south of Buffalo, New York, walked out of classrooms over the layoff of 27 teachers and school staff. At last week's school board meeting, hundreds of teachers, parents and students opposed the cuts.

Brockton Public Schools (BPS) in Massachusetts faces a shortfall of up to \$25 million for the 2023-2024 school year. The district is carrying out significant cuts to cover the deficit and avoid a state takeover. Schools have reported a major staffing crisis, and students are being left unattended in the cafeteria for hours. In February, several members of the Brockton school committee requested that the Massachusetts National Guard be deployed to manage safety concerns in the high school.

D.C. Public Schools officials anticipate an estimated 200-450 positions will be eliminated from the district. Given the drying up of COVID-19 relief funds, many of the layoffs will be of support staff, who have provided critical services for students. Mayor Muriel Bowser recently stated that individual school sites will have to decide which positions are cut.

On Wednesday, elementary students and parents protested budget cuts in Howard County, Maryland. Howard County Public Schools (HCPS) recently announced cuts to important student programs for the 2025 school budget. Programs are being slashed for gifted and talented students, and the entire third grade strings program is being gutted. The latter program is an integral part of the district's beloved and revered

instrumental music program.

Layoffs have been announced, as well as the increasing of class sizes by two students. A petition to restore third-grade strings has more than 5,700 signatures, and a petition to restore elementary gifted and talented programs has over 1,700 signatures. During last week's protest outside one of the Howard County government buildings, multiple elementary school students played their violins and cellos to demonstrate their opposition to the cuts to their music education.

The current growing opposition among teachers and school workers to decades of austerity in public schools comes after the wave of teacher rebellions in 2018-2019 and has continued throughout the ongoing pandemic. Since 2022, teachers and school workers have carried out strikes and sickout actions in Los Angeles, Sacramento, Minneapolis, New Haven, Durham, Flint, Seattle and elsewhere. Even further, tens of thousands of educators demanded strike action over the deepening assault on public education as funds are drained from social programs to pay for war.

With each struggle the treachery of the trade union bureaucracies led by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have resulted in concessionary contracts, no guarantees of staffing, and enshrined cuts to real wages, lack of resources and now massive budget cuts. The union bureaucracies also enforced Biden's back-to-school orders despite the ongoing pandemic and the lack of elemental ventilation systems in decaying school systems. Above all, the AFT and NEA bureaucracies are deeply entrenched in the Democratic Party and its reckless military confrontations with Russia and China, which threaten the nuclear annihilation of civilization.

This is why it is so urgent to build independent rank-and-file committees of educators that will break the grip of the pro-capitalist and pro-war union bureaucracies, unite educators across all state and national boundaries and develop an industrial and political counter-offensive of the whole working class against Biden and Trump, both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.

Last week Socialist Equality Party (SEP) vice presidential candidate Jerry White spoke to teachers and community members at multiple school board meetings in Flint and Wayne-Westland, Michigan. He made a powerful call for the unity of educators across districts throughout the US and internationally who are facing similar conditions of austerity. Speaking at the Wayne-Westland school board meeting, he said:

The budget crises facing Flint and Wayne-Westland and thousands of districts across the US is the product of capitalism. That is a system that subordinates everything from public health to public education to profits. Over the past four years the billionaires in this country saw their private fortunes almost double, while more than a million people died from COVID. Billionaires have a total wealth of \$5.5 trillion—seven times more than what's spent every year on K-12 education. ... Everything depends on rank-and-file educators like yourselves taking the initiative, uniting with Flint teachers, uniting with Detroit teachers and organizing a fight to defend the right to high quality public education not private profit.



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