

# Biden oversees jobs bloodbath in public education

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School districts across the US are announcing devastating school closures, mass educator layoffs, and termination of tutoring, counseling, and other critical education services. Education analyst Chad Aldeman recently told CNN that as many as 384,000 full-time positions may be cut—an unprecedented assault on the public education system.

The real cut in jobs, however, is likely to be much higher. During the Great Recession under former President Barack Obama, the equivalent of 110,000 full-time education jobs were cut. But the real job loss was estimated at 364,000 including part-time and hourly staff.

The education jobs bloodbath is now being justified as necessary to bring staffing levels to 2018-19 levels, before the three rounds of federal pandemic aid to schools. The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) funds began in March 2020 and will be fully allocated by September 2024; they amounted to roughly \$190 billion.

The limited federal assistance to schools over four years may sound generous; it was nothing of the kind.

To put this in perspective, Biden's one-year military budget, signed in March, was officially \$825 billion, but likely more than \$1 trillion when monies for all classified operations are included. On April 24, Biden signed legislation providing another \$95 billion to fund the genocide in Gaza, the brutal US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and for armaments to be used against China.

In other words, the pandemic lifeline to the nation's 75 million schoolchildren (averaging \$47.5 billion annually each of four years) is a mere 4 percent of the most recent US budget for weapons of death and destruction (\$1.1 trillion).

It could not be clearer that the priority of the ruling elites is global military and economic hegemony, no matter the price for the future of society. Biden, who touted himself as the "education president" with a "teacher spouse," has decided to provide a blank check for war while insisting there are insufficient funds for public education.

The Democratic president's decision to refuse a new infusion of aid to schools is not a return to "normalcy." It constitutes a fundamental shift towards a war economy on the "home front" in which education is subordinated to the immediate profit needs of business, especially the business of war.

As it was, the pandemic funds amounted to little more than a financial band-aid. Districts were reeling from declines in state tax revenue, skyrocketing IT costs, and huge increased costs for outsourcing services. Food service costs rose 21.3 percent, school transportation rose 14.5 percent, and utilities went up in many districts by double digits.

Schools also bore the costs of the intense social crisis caused by the let-it-rip COVID policies of the Trump and Biden administrations. Schools provided food, medical attention and mental health supports to young people, resources that were largely unavailable anywhere else. Today, more than one in five students seek mental health help in schools. However, declining resources have meant cutting mental health professionals. A report this month shows effective mental health care is available now in less than half of schools, even prior to further cuts.

Criminally, the limited resources under the ESSER provided no allocation for disease control such as universal HEPA filtration systems and far-UV technology. As every parent knows, an entire generation has been infected and reinfected with COVID, passing the deadly disease onto family and friends, with death, disability or persistent Long COVID affecting millions.

None of these infrastructure conditions were adequately addressed. The majority of the nation's schools continue to have poor air quality and infrastructure, receiving a D+ from the American Society of Civil Engineers in its most recent evaluation.

The one area in which ESSER funds made a substantial difference, however, was tutoring. As a result of what amounted to a national investment in one-on-one and small-group tutoring, US students made dramatic strides in overcoming the learning loss associated with the worst years of the pandemic. According to a study by the University of Chicago Education Lab based on test scores between spring 2022 and 2023, "high dose" tutoring enabled students on average to gain back one-third of their original loss in math and one-quarter of the original loss in reading. This leap surpassed expectations and was better than the average annual gain in scores.

The response, however, of the Biden administration was encapsulated by Christina Grant, the superintendent of education for the District of Columbia, who said, "Spending close to \$2,000 per student isn't going to be sustainable anymore. We need to understand how to scale an intervention like high-dosage tutoring." Far from using the knowledge of effective tutoring to raise educational levels, the current cuts mean scuttling most one-on-one programs altogether.

Across the US, teachers, educators, parents and students are up in arms about the cuts. Additionally, the political issues are coming into focus. Nearly 50,000 academic workers across 10 campuses in the University of California system are voting to strike against the brutal suppression of students' democratic rights to protest the genocide in Gaza. This is an important indication of the growing ability to unify the working class, bringing together the defense of social rights and the class struggle with the fight against war and the attack on democratic rights.

Among just a few of the struggles now breaking out:

- Parents and teachers have been protesting for weeks in **Houston, Texas** at the City Hall, the Board of Managers meetings, and local schools. The district has been taken over by the state and is implementing wide-ranging cuts to address a \$450 million budget gap. An unnamed number of teachers, counselors, librarians and nurses are losing their jobs. Also in Texas, the Arlington schools will axe 275 positions affecting mental health services, tutoring and after-school care.

- On May 7, over 1,000 **Los Angeles** educators protested massive budget cuts. One teacher, Cheryl Zarate, related that her school alone had to find \$800,000 in cuts, explaining they could lose as many as six campus aides, two counselors, school climate advocates, custodians, and an assistant principal. School psychologists will no longer be available every day, only on campus two days a week.

- School board meetings have erupted across Michigan, as educators and parents have denounced cuts, including in **Wayne-Westland, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor and Detroit**. A Citizens Research Council of Michigan report indicated that as many as 5,100 full-time-equivalent educators' jobs were at risk in the state due to the ending of federal COVID school money.

- A similar report from the University of **Washington** indicates that the state has 12,000 school positions at risk of layoff including more than 5,000 teachers.

- Over 100 **Denver, Colorado** teachers rallied May 13 to denounce the district's reneging on their contract's cost-of-living adjustment.

- After months of protests in **Durham, North Carolina**, teachers were promised a pay increase, only to be told that the district is short by \$27 million and cannot pay it. "I will say to you like never before, our house is on fire," a school board member told teachers this week.

Such cuts are replicated everywhere and are being implemented by both Democratic- and Republican-controlled districts. **Hartford, Connecticut** will cut 384 jobs, including teachers and support staff. **Youngstown, Ohio** will close or consolidate five elementary schools and make staff cuts. **Missoula, Montana's** superintendent said reductions of this nature hadn't been seen "in a generation," citing plans to cut 33 teaching positions and 13 administrative positions, including its special education director and fine arts director. This week, **East Brunswick, New Jersey** announced it will cut 51 teaching positions, including 15 teachers, 10 instructional coaches, seven school counselors, and the assistant superintendent of student activities and services.

How have the unions responded to this existential threat to public education?

First, both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), headed by Randi Weingarten, and the National Education Association (NEA), are preoccupied with propping up the floundering campaign of Genocide Joe Biden in an effort to safeguard their dues stream and maintain their seat at the table. The avowed Zionist Weingarten has traveled the country denouncing tens of thousands of anti-genocide students as "vile antisemites" and green-lighting the vicious witch-hunting of pro-Palestinian educators.

As to budget cuts, both unions have joined hands to suppress strike action and enforce contracts that sanction layoffs. They are terrified that the outbreak of even local strikes could spark a far broader movement. Aware of the national tsunami of cuts and austerity underway, they know they are dealing with a political tinderbox. This universal policy was most recently put into effect

at the University of Michigan, wherein the AFT worked overtime to force through a deal and prevent a strike in concert with student protesters on campus.

To this end, Weingarten has issued no tweets against the layoffs, no warnings about the impact to children of the loss of support programs, and turned a blind eye to the fate of communities whose schools are being closed. Instead, she largely devotes her X/Twitter page to the promotion of various Democratic Party politicians.

Her main role, however, is as an asset of the US State Department. She has worked for months to cover up for the US funding and direction of the ongoing genocide in Gaza, traveling to Israel proclaiming its "right to defend itself." In service to the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, Weingarten also traveled to Ukraine to whitewash the Nazi-infested regime of Volodymyr Zelensky.

On May 15, in that vein, Weingarten registered her support for Biden's inflammatory trade war measures against China, which aim to prepare the next escalation of imperialist war.

The National Education Association (NEA) is likewise preoccupied with the reelection campaign of Biden, not the fate of hundreds of thousands of educators who will lose their jobs. President Becky Pringle is on the campaign trail, last week accompanying Jill Biden to Arizona, and traveling with Weingarten to the White House for photo ops on "Teacher Appreciation Day."

There is a deep connection between the destruction of public education, the terrible growth of social inequality, the suppression of democratic rights and the ever-escalating imperialist wars. They all arise out of the fundamental breakdown of the capitalist economic system.

The fight to defend jobs, living standards and social and democratic rights requires a fight against the pro-capitalist, pro-war union bureaucracy. We urge teachers to join and build the growing network of educators' rank-and-file committees across the US to unify their struggle along class lines, with that of students opposing war and with the struggles of the working class nationally and internationally.

*Make your voice heard! Fill out the form below to tell us what your working conditions are like and what you are fighting for. We will protect your anonymity.*



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