

Pittsburgh plans to close 16 schools, devastating communities

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On August 13, the Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) district presented a school reorganization plan to its school board which will devastate local communities. The plan, to be implemented over the next three to five years, calls for closing 16 schools and opening two new ones. It would reduce the number of schools in the former “Steel Capital of the World” from 54 to 40.

The board will consider a final recommendation next month after the well-worn ploy of “community engagement” to “reimagine schools.” However, following the Biden-Harris decision to end federal pandemic relief to schools, PPS expects to post a \$26 million deficit and deplete its financial reserves by the 2027 school year. School officials say the school closures are necessary to prevent the system from going bankrupt.

Parents reacted angrily to the announcement. “This will be devastating,” said Lori, speaking to the WSWS. She explained that her daughter attends Fulton Elementary in Highland Park. “We live a few blocks away, and she walks on her own.” But going to Dilworth, the proposed replacement school, is over a mile away. “I’ll have to figure out how to get her there. She can’t walk that far on her own.” Lori works at Children’s Hospital, and her shift begins at 7 a.m.

“How do they expect students to learn? They are not starting from the students’ needs. Just how to save money,” said Rachael, whose son attended Dilworth. “This is a great school, the students get a lot of attention, they have a garden and plenty of outdoor time. The teachers are able to handle conflicts, and the kids get along great.

“What will happen if you double the size of the school? There really isn’t room for them.”

“There is no reason for these cuts,” continued Lori. “You look at how much money is being spent on war

and the rich keep getting tax cuts. The head of UPMC [University of Pittsburgh Medical Center] makes millions. That money should be spent on kids.”

Indeed, the Biden-Harris administration has just authorized a \$20 billion package of aid to the rapidly expanding wars of the Middle East, in addition to a \$1 trillion military budget. But it has allowed the termination of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), resulting in mass teacher layoffs and school closures across the US.

Nationwide, the \$122 billion ESSER funds served as a stopgap to districts in the face of decades of budget cuts, skyrocketing inflation and COVID costs, but all funds dry up by September 2024. As part of ESSER, the American Rescue Plan (ARP) of 2021 provided Pennsylvania with nearly \$4.5 billion of relief funds for eligible expenses between March 13, 2020, and September 30, 2024. Most districts relied on this funding to pay educators and supplement the costs of addressing pandemic learning loss, especially in view of years of state underfunding.

The average age of Pittsburgh schools is 90 years; 37 buildings need some type of renovation work. Previous cuts to the PPS have already eliminated or reduced many schools’ ability to offer music, art and library services.

Pittsburgh Public Schools faces increased budget deductions for charter school costs. This year, the reimbursement cost has increased by over \$25 million and is set to rise further.

Additionally, the city government slashed corporate taxes, subsidizing the costs of downtown office space. This corporate giveaway cost Pittsburgh Public Schools \$4 million the first year and another \$11 million last year. Now downtown property owners are seeking another \$7 million back, claiming overpayments to the

schools.

The proposed cuts were developed by the Massachusetts-based education consulting firm Education Resource Strategies, which the school district hired to develop the proposal. The firm, which bills itself as a nonprofit aimed at working with school districts, is clearly focused on closing schools and eliminating what it calls “over capacity.”

PPS’s enrollment has dropped from about 25,000 in 2012 to just under 20,000 today. But claiming that classrooms are “over capacity,” a term used in the production process in education, means placing larger and larger numbers of students into each classroom.

Instead of planning education around what is the optimal class size for the best learning and social interactions of the students and teachers, let alone considering the physical health of the children with the continuous and growing spread of COVID and other infectious diseases, the school system is simply looking at how many empty seats can be filled to save money on heating classrooms.

The plan does not outline any layoffs, but hundreds of teachers and other educational staff jobs will inevitably be cut.

The schools being eliminated in the South and West sides include Carrick High School, Roosevelt PreK-5, South Brook 6-8, South Hills 6-8 and Whittier PreK-5. On the North side, Spring Hill K-5, Manchester K-8, Schiller 6-8 and Allegheny 6-8 are slated to close. In the central and east end: Arsenal PreK-5, Fulton PreK-5, Woolslair PreK-5, Lincoln PreK-5, Weil PreK-5, Linden PreK-5 and Milliones 6-12. Nine buildings will be closed and others will be reconfigured. Six magnet schools will be converted to neighborhood schools.

The closure of Carrick High School has sparked great anger. One parent, posting on social media, pointed out that he didn’t have a car to drive his son to Brashear and that it will take hours on the bus. Other parents noted the area is already poor and wondered who would move into the neighborhood if there is no neighborhood school.

Pittsburgh is not the only school in Pennsylvania that is facing cuts. The Moon Township school district has voted to close Hyde Elementary.

The largest school district in the state, Philadelphia Public Schools, is in a massive crisis with 100-year-old

buildings in disrepair and starting the school year with scores of unfilled teaching positions.

In March, the Philadelphia School Board approved the 2024 budget. Its five-year projection shows that the district will face growing shortfalls each year, with a projected gap of nearly \$88 million in 2025 and \$745 million in 2029.

Both the AFT and NEA apparatuses are preoccupied with Harris-Walz’s election campaign in an effort to maintain their highly lucrative “seats at the table.” They are refusing to mobilize the power of teachers and other workers to fight the mass layoffs and school closures affecting virtually every district across the US. This is particularly apparent in Chicago, where the Chicago Teachers Union is all-in at the Democratic Party Convention while educators work under an expired contract and hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts loom.

To fight back against these cuts, educators, parents and students are urged to join the Pennsylvania Educators Rank-and-File Committee and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees by filling out the form below.



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