

Schools on rations: US education funding lags behind UNESCO benchmarks

Nancy Hanover
7 November 2024

A recent report from the Education Data Initiative exposes the fact that the world's richest imperialist country has underfunded schools for decades. It indicts the US for failing to meet global benchmarks for education and, despite economic growth, allocating proportionally less for schools.

The report confirms what public school educators and staff experience every day—they are being forced to do more with less while millions of American children are being deprived of even a passingly adequate education.

Expenditure for US public schools is “equivalent to 3.68 percent of taxpayer income” and 12.7 percent of public funding, according to the nonprofit research group. The UNESCO benchmark for minimum funding to ensure basic education for all is 4-6 percent of the GDP and 15-20 percent of total government spending.

Were the US to meet international standards, it would mean a leap from current spending of \$878.2 billion to between \$1.037 and \$1.382 trillion annually. The amount of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding (begun in March 2020 and ending September 30, 2024), which the Biden/Harris administration allowed to lapse, was only \$190 billion spread over four years. Currently, the K12 population in the US is about 50 million.

The ending of ESSER funding—emblematic of the attitude of the ruling elites to public education—has been a body blow to a system already dangerously underfunded. The brief infusion of these limited funds improved educational outcomes and services in many districts. Students exceeded typical pre-pandemic annual improvements in reading and math, according to Harvard's Center for Education Policy Research. In fact, the Harvard Center showed each \$1,000 of ESSER spending would be worth \$1,238 in students' lifetime earnings alone. ESSER's expiration is forcing many

districts to carry through wholesale school closures, thousands of layoffs, and the elimination of essential educational offerings.

To reiterate, even if the US adhered to the lowest UNESCO minimum standards, annual education funding would substantially exceed what schools received during ESSER.

The numbers are an indictment of the successive administrations of Democrats and Republicans at both the state and federal levels. They particularly expose the claims of the Biden/Harris administration, which claimed to be “pro-education” and promoted First Lady Jill Biden's membership in the pro-capitalist National Education Association (NEA).

In another set of comparisons, the Education Data Initiative notes that the US is one of only nine countries that fail to provide any funding for early childhood education.

The US has other priorities. The Biden administration budgeted some \$1 trillion for the military while allocating additional billions more specifically for the US/NATO war against Russia—the Kiel Institute for World Economy shows the US funding at \$107 billion. The US/Israeli genocide in Gaza has been funded with about \$18 billion since October 7, 2023, with another \$20 billion authorized by Biden in August 2024. Spending for war comprises more than half of the US discretionary budget.

Education Data states that the combined federal, state, and local government support to public education is substantially below military spending, at \$878.2 billion. This translates to \$17,700 per pupil, with the federal government only comprising 13.6 percent of actual costs.

States and localities provide the majority of school revenue, but overall funding lags behind real costs

across the board. Averaged nationally, the deficit between funding and actual spending is \$21 billion or \$420 per pupil. Within these shortfalls, there is additional substantial variation. Idaho, for example, spends \$9,390 per pupil on K12 education, Maine \$19,310, and New York \$33,400. The federal government provides just \$1,310 for each K12 child in Utah and \$4,370 for Alaskan students.

There is no mandate to provide all children access to the arts, tutoring or field trips. Parents would be excused in thinking it a “roll of the dice” if their children could attain life’s essential skills, much less real cultural enrichment at their local school.

Everywhere, programs are being slashed, the number of school days pared down, and educational resources scarce. But these problems are far worse in districts where property taxes are lower and people are poorer—the vast majority of the US.

The existing scenario provided by Education Data is bad enough, but 2024 and beyond will register far lower levels as a result of the Biden/Harris administration’s disastrous decision to end ESSER support.

The patchwork of funding is further skewed by regressive property taxes, state income taxes, millage increases and other local funding mechanisms. But from 2021 to 2024, a majority of states (28) have opted to cut the taxes of the wealthy and businesses instead of supporting schools. Additionally, over half of the states enacted school voucher measures, which further diverted public dollars away from public schools to private schools. In 2024, 14 states enacted new or expanded vouchers.

How do districts deal with the resulting deficits? Loans and bonds, which increase the tax burden for workers. These measures are increasingly going down to defeat, as workers’ budgets reach the breaking point. In the November 2024 elections, Houston’s \$4.4 billion bond proposal was defeated. Other regressive taxes for schools were defeated in St. Paul, Minnesota; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; in 10 different district attempts across Central Ohio (including suburban Akron); Whitmore Lake schools in Michigan; Buckeye Valley, Delaware and many more. In Michigan alone, districts were attempting to raise \$1 billion in new taxes. In Michigan, only about half of such measures typically pass, down from 70 percent from 2018-20.

The breakdown of public education, which has been the result of a bipartisan policy of prioritizing Wall Street profits and war, will intensify under the next Trump administration. As part of his plan to open the money spigots for the oligarchy, the Education Department is being targeted for destruction and massive cuts planned.

Educators should draw the necessary lessons from the years of collusion between the Democrats and Republicans to eviscerate public education with cuts and increasingly privatize it. The defense of public education requires the expropriation of the billionaires and the fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact