

The “Big Shrink”: Over half of 50 largest school districts in US facing deep cuts as war on education escalates

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More than half of the country’s 50 largest school districts are either making budget cuts, have already implemented them, or are confronting reported deficits, according to a Chalkbeat analysis published at the end of May.

Describing the mass layoffs as a long-anticipated “Big Shrink,” Georgetown University’s Edunomics Lab details cuts in Boston, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, San Diego, Toledo, Broward, San Francisco, Anchorage, Cedar Rapids, Tulsa, Brevard, Richmond, Fresno, Clark County, Cleveland, Bellingham “and countless small and mid-sized districts.”

They conclude, “What’s becoming clear: This isn’t temporary—it’s a reset.”

The capitalist-controlled media universally describe the cuts as the inevitable result of declining student enrollment. In reality, they are part of a decades-long bipartisan strategy by the ruling class to cripple public education services, drive students out and privatize it.

This is the real content of Trump’s demand to close the Department of Education (ED) and decimate federal education spending. Appointing the crude and ignorant billionaire co-founder of World Wrestling Entertainment, Linda McMahon, as the department’s head, Trump terminated half the ED workforce, illegally withheld \$7 billion in congressionally appropriated school funding, and hived off key education services to other agencies.

But if Trump is spearheading this attack, it is being implemented across the states by the Democrats. Democratic mayors, governors and school boards are all enforcing the manufactured “budget constraints,” i.e., the dwindling reserves that remain after bipartisan measures that funneled hundreds of billions to the Pentagon and Wall Street through war spending and tax cuts.

Nationally, educators are fighting back. Education workers have been the largest sector on strike for several years, accounting for 60 percent of all strikers and more than half of all strike days in 2022, and again leading with nearly one-third of all workers who walked out in 2024.

Yet these courageous struggles have not reversed the social counterrevolution against public education because they have been systematically isolated and betrayed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose members have major positions in the union bureaucracy. It was these betrayals which collectively gave a green light to the current escalation of austerity and mass layoffs.

The cynically misnamed “We Can’t Wait” campaign of the California Teachers Association (CTA—an alliance of the AFT and the NEA) was launched in February 2025, supposedly to unify educators across 32 districts in a coordinated contract battle. Instead, the campaign—a multimillion-dollar public relations effort—served as a cover while the CTA forced teachers to work under expired contracts for months. “We Can’t Wait” was used by the union apparatus to channel mounting anger into appeals to Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom and block strike action.

When San Francisco teachers walked out anyway in February 2026, the strike was quickly shut down, delivering no genuine job protection and below-inflation pay increases in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Layoffs were announced almost immediately.

The culmination of this cynical operation took place in Los Angeles in April 2026, when United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) President Cecily Myart-Cruz signed a sellout deal two days before 68,000 workers were set to walk out—a mobilization that could have galvanized teachers nationally and was fiercely opposed by the CTA. Negotiated behind closed doors, with decisive bargaining committee support from DSA members, the settlement explicitly accepted the Los Angeles Unified School District’s “fiscal stabilization plan,” clearing the way for hundreds of millions in cuts now being imposed through layoffs, increased class sizes and “restructuring.”

Similarly, the pseudo-left led Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) collaborated with DSA-backed Mayor Brandon Johnson to push through a 2025 contract on the basis of the false claim that educators had a “Trump-proof” agreement, a supposed “force field” protecting educators and students from federal cuts.

In reality, the agreement locked Chicago educators into sub-inflation raises, preserved the framework of “school choice” and charter expansion, and left untouched the city’s underlying dependence on regressive local taxes and speculative municipal finance. Johnson’s dual role as a Democratic mayor and longtime CTU operative exposed the real function of the “union reform” rhetoric promoted by the DSA and allied pseudo-left organizations: to mask the integration of the unions into the state and enforce austerity on behalf of the ruling class.

After cutting 2,141 educators in 2025, the district is now projected to lay off between 700 and 800 teachers next year, as part of a massive \$734 million deficit.

What is being cut?

Two cases: California and Chicago

In refusing to mobilize nationally against the Trump attacks, the NEA and AFT bureaucracy has encouraged district after district to proceed with layoffs. Moreover, except for Anchorage, every district listed in Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab is governed by Democratic Party-controlled administrations. Together, they illustrate how the "Big Shrink" is being carried out in practice, with Democratic officials functioning as the chief executors of Trump's national agenda. In addition, the three largest school districts in America: New York City, Los Angeles and Chicago are run by DSA members or their fellow travelers.

This is only a snapshot of some of the cuts already announced:

- Los Angeles is facing an \$877 million deficit, and sent layoff notices to roughly 3,200 employees, while modeling school consolidations and closures.

- Broward County, Florida is eliminating more than 1,000 positions.

- Philadelphia is closing 17 schools in 2026-27 and eliminating approximately 340 school-based positions.

- Houston will close 12 schools; statewide at least 34 Texas public school campuses will shutter, cutting more than 800 jobs.

- In addition: Cleveland (cutting 400 employees and closing 18 buildings); Boston (400); Anchorage (500); Sacramento (400); Portland (336); and Minneapolis (400).

Austerity deferred, now delivered

The immediate fiscal trigger for many of these cuts is the exhaustion of funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program, following the Biden-Harris administration's decision to provide no replacement for the pandemic relief program. The steepest cuts are, predictably, falling on the districts that serve the highest proportions of low-income students.

Under Biden and Harris, military spending soared to \$886 billion in fiscal year 2024—more than at any point since World War II. Hundreds of billions flowed to weapons manufacturers and proxy wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. The message was unambiguous: the money exists; the children of the working class are not the priority.

But the crisis did not begin with the ESSER cliff. It represents the culmination of a bipartisan attack on public education that stretches back decades, driven by Wall Street interests that have long sought to privatize American schooling.

The greatest single "shrinkage" in public education occurred during the Great Recession of 2008–2012 under Democrat Barack Obama. Hundreds of billions in taxpayer funds were diverted to rescue the banks from their speculative frenzy—and the working class paid for it. An estimated 350,000 education jobs were cut while Obama championed punitive "teacher accountability" schemes, merit pay and charter expansion.

The supposed "recovery" of funding was grotesquely incomplete. Nearly a decade later, 29 states were still providing less total school funding per student than they had in 2008, and states nationwide were still down 135,000 jobs. When COVID-19 hit, K-12 schools employed 77,000 fewer teachers and other workers than before the Great Recession—even though they were teaching 2 million more children. Overall funding in many states had still not returned to pre-recession levels more than a decade later.

The ESSER funds served as a temporary reprieve that masked the underlying structural deficits created by decades of bipartisan underfunding. Once ESSER expired, those deficits were exposed and rapidly compounded by inflation, substantially higher healthcare costs, and increased school privatization.

The demographic cliff is a red herring

While all of the cited districts are experiencing declining enrollment, this does not make cuts a fiscal necessity. That is the lying claim of both capitalist political parties, designed to conceal their agreement on looting the education budget to fund their real priorities.

Moreover, the argument that declining enrollment makes cuts necessary functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When schools in a neighborhood are deprived of resources or threatened with closure, families with the means to do so begin enrolling their children elsewhere—in charter schools, suburban districts, or private institutions. This accelerates the enrollment decline that officials cite as justification for the very closures they are planning.

Parents and educators know painfully well that *more* positions are needed in schools, not fewer: class sizes are constantly increasing, enrichment programs are being eliminated, and the expansion of counseling, tutoring, and special education services is desperately needed.

Fundamentally, this demographic decline is itself a byproduct of deliberate political policies—bound up with direct profit-taking, brutal social measures, and right-wing nostrums promoted amid deepening crisis. These include the witch-hunt and deportation of immigrants and their families, the rise of homelessness, and the skyrocketing costs of daycare, healthcare and child-rearing. Meanwhile, millions of students have been lured to charter schools (a highly lucrative form of privatization), transferred to private or parochial education via taxpayer-funding voucher schemes, or homeschooled. As public schools are defunded, these alternatives have seen their populations increase.

What is needed: a rank-and-file educators counter-offensive

The cuts now being implemented across the country are not the end of the crisis—they are its beginning. What is unfolding is a bipartisan conspiracy to put an end to public education, one of the fundamental social conquests of the working class. Trump's illegal assault on the Department of Education met no resistance from the Democrats because both parties represent the same oligarchy, serve the same financial interests, and are committed to the same capitalist agenda.

The experiences in California and Chicago pose decisive strategic lessons for educators and the broader working class.

First, no genuine struggle to defend public education is possible so long as educators are straight-jacketed by the AFT and NEA apparatus and their local affiliates, and through them subordinated to the Democratic Party. These bureaucracies function not as representatives of the working class but instruments of labor discipline and political control on behalf of the state and corporations.

Second, educators must establish their own independent organizations of struggle—rank-and-file committees in every school and district—democratically controlled by workers themselves and consciously opposed to the bureaucracies. Such committees must link up nationally and internationally, coordinating actions across districts and states and rejecting the false division between "local" and "national" issues.

Third, the fight to defend and expand public education is inseparable from a broader political struggle against capitalism and both parties of big business. The diversion of trillions to war and corporate wealth is not an unfortunate misallocation but the organic outcome of a social system based on private profit and imperialist rivalry. The grotesque accumulation of wealth by the oligarchy, including Elon Musk, set to become the world's first trillionaire, is incompatible with democratic

rights, including the right to public education for all.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the Socialist Equality Party call on educators, students and parents to draw the necessary conclusions from the “Big Shrink.” The defense of public education requires the mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program: placing the banks and major corporations under public ownership and democratic control, expropriating the fortunes of the oligarchs, and redirecting society’s vast resources to schools, healthcare, housing, culture and the full development of every human being.



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