

San Diego county schools gutted by cuts in 2025-26, as budget deficits deepen

Our Reporters
12 June 2026

School districts across San Diego County, California, are cutting jobs, closing campuses and slashing services simultaneously. Every major district in the region is bleeding, and the workers who hold schools together are being made to pay for a crisis they did not create.

Enrollment has fallen roughly 5 percent countywide over the past decade, with individual districts hit far harder. South Bay Union has lost 37 percent of its students, and San Diego Unified, 13 percent. Birth rates in San Diego County have fallen 20 percent since 2014, and San Diego now ranks first among major US cities for the share of income consumed by food and housing, at 47 percent, pushing working families out of the region.

The Trump administration's deportation machine has terrorized the largely Latino and immigrant communities these districts serve. More than 250 children were arrested by ICE in San Diego and Imperial counties in 2025, nearly 10 times the year before. As a result many families are keeping children home or are leaving the region altogether.

ICE agents have arrested parents outside San Diego County schools during morning drop-offs. In Chula Vista, agents seized a couple after they dropped their children off at school and told them to find someone to pick up their kids or they would be placed in foster care.

More than half of the 50 largest school districts in the United States are implementing cuts or confronting deficits. Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab dubbed this wave the "Big Shrink." Their conclusion: "This isn't temporary, it's a reset."

The capitalist media frames these cuts as the unavoidable result of declining enrollment. In reality, they are part of a decades-long bipartisan drive to defund and privatize public education. The structural deficits were forged during the Great Recession, when the Obama administration eliminated 350,000 education jobs while funneling hundreds of billions to Wall Street.

The immediate trigger for the current wave was the exhaustion of federal pandemic ESSER (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds, which exposed structural deficits that had been building up for years. Trump has sharpened the crisis by gutting the Department of Education, firing half its workforce and withholding over \$2 billion in congressionally appropriated school funds. Trump's Fiscal Year 2027 budget proposes billions more in K-12 cuts, including eliminating \$890 million for English learner services. Democratic mayors, governors and school boards are the chief local enforcers.

A region under the knife

Every one of San Diego County's 10 largest school districts is facing a deficit, and at least eight have issued major cuts or layoff notices during the 2025-26 school year alone.

San Diego Unified School District, the state's second-largest, moved in March 2026 to eliminate 221 positions, issuing layoff notices to approximately 200 classified employees. This came less than three weeks after the district finalized a contract with the San Diego Education Association that explicitly prohibits teacher layoffs for 2026-27. The classified workers received no such protection.

Sweetwater Union High School District, California's largest high school district, confronts a cumulative deficit approaching \$200 million on an \$824 million operating budget, with reserves projected to reach zero by 2028-29. Enrollment, down 16 percent over a decade, is expected to fall below 30,000.

The district's January 6 board meeting passed a consent-calendar item cutting substitute teacher pay from \$218 to \$183 per day, effective January 1, retroactively. The cut amounts to \$35 per day, or more than \$6,000 per year. In the same package, the board ratified a pitiful 3.5 percent salary increase for permanent certificated staff represented by the Sweetwater Education Association.

One substitute teacher described to the WSWs how the cut was communicated: Workers were not notified until February 3, a full month after the effective date, via email from Human Resources. "Admin and teachers all received 3.5 percent increases in their salaries during that meeting," the substitute wrote. "They were notified immediately. Substitutes took over a 10 percent decrease, and I didn't find out until March when a teacher asked me how I felt about it." The impact is concrete: "Gas prices have increased about 40 percent since SUHSD made that vote. Groceries cost more. Basic goods cost more and don't last nearly as long. I take my family out less often. ... I also now must work more often for a district that openly values me as lesser than everyone else I encounter on campus."

Poway Unified School District, the county's second-largest district, eliminated 100 positions, the majority of which were classified staff who provide social and emotional support to children in the early grades, to close a \$10 million gap.

Chula Vista Elementary School District, California's largest

elementary district, eliminated 100 full-time classified positions, including the principal of its special education program.

South Bay Union School District has lost nearly half its students over a decade and is closing three campuses, with staff cuts accompanying each closure.

San Ysidro School District, serving roughly 4,200 students in the border community of San Ysidro, was placed under county financial supervision in January 2026. The district is cutting nearly \$5 million from its budget, with planned layoffs of 60 staff, including teachers, administrators and support workers.

These districts represent only a snapshot of the crisis across the region. Others, including Grossmont Union, Cajon Valley, San Marcos Unified and Escondido Union High, have all issued cuts or layoff notices over the past year. The outlook for 2026-27 is worse across the board.

The national scale

San Diego is a regional cross-section of a national catastrophe. Los Angeles Unified faces an \$877 million deficit and sent layoff notices to 3,200 employees. Philadelphia is closing 17 schools. Houston closed 12. Broward County cut over 1,000 positions.

There is no shortage of money. The Fiscal Year 2026 defense budget crossed \$1 trillion for the first time in history, and Trump's FY 2027 proposal demands \$1.5 trillion. This week, Congress passed the \$70 billion "Secure America Act" to fund ICE and Border Patrol through the end of Trump's term, on top of the \$75 billion ICE already received from the "One Big Beautiful Bill."

The same agency arresting parents in school parking lots in Chula Vista now commands more resources than the FBI, the Coast Guard and the Federal Bureau of Prisons combined. The structural deficits in public education are the other side of a political ledger that prioritizes war, deportation and Wall Street over public schools.

CTA's "We Can't Wait" betrayal and the role of the Democrats

In February 2025, the California Teachers Association launched "We Can't Wait," promising to unify educators across 32 districts in a coordinated contract fight. The campaign served as a cover while the CTA forced teachers to work under expired contracts for months, channeling anger into appeals to Governor Newsom and working to block strike action.

When San Francisco teachers walked out in February 2026, the strike was quickly shut down with below-inflation increases and no job protection. Layoffs followed almost immediately. Then in April 2026, a potential strike of 68,000 Los Angeles school workers was called off. The sellout agreements used to cancel the strike were negotiated with decisive support from DSA members

on the bargaining committee, explicitly accepting LAUSD's "fiscal stabilization plan" and clearing the way for hundreds of millions in cuts. 1,000 job cuts were announced weeks later, with 6,000 more planned in the coming years.

In San Diego, the SDEA organized a one-day strike for February 26, then called it off on February 12 after reaching a deal that included 5 percent raises and the contractual guarantee protecting certificated staff. Within three weeks, the board eliminated the 221 classified positions.

All of this is happening with the support of the state government in Sacramento. Governor Gavin Newsom is withholding \$3.9 billion in constitutionally guaranteed school funding. He will leave office next January having presided over the deepest wave of school layoffs in a generation. The CTA endorsed billionaire Tom Steyer for governor, a hedge fund investor who lost the June 2 primary.

This divisive logic, pitting certificated against classified, permanent against substitute, union member against non-member, is the function of the union bureaucracy under austerity it has accepted as permanent. At the federal level, Trump is slashing funds for public schools. In California, Democratic officials and the union bureaucracy are administering the austerity.

Workers must reject this framework and fight together. That cannot be answered by petitions to local school boards, one-day strikes called off at the last minute or endorsements of billionaires. It requires independent rank-and-file committees in every school and district, linked nationally and internationally, fighting for public education as a social right.

We urge substitute teachers, classified staff and educators throughout San Diego County and across the country to contact the World Socialist Web Site and share your experiences.



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