

The war at home: Record 2026-27 school closures—the working class pays for US imperialism

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More than 1,000 public schools shut their doors during the 2025–26 school year, up from 755 four years earlier—a 35 percent increase, according to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) figures reported this month. The wave is only accelerating. Board votes already on the record will close or consolidate more than 200 schools beginning in 2026–27.

In 14 districts tracked by K-12 Dive, boards have approved 147 closures: 29 schools in Cleveland, 17 in Philadelphia, 16 in Atlanta, 12 each in Pittsburgh and Houston, 10 in Austin, nine in Miami-Dade, seven each in Cedar Rapids, Fort Bend and Corpus Christi, and smaller plans in Broward County, Florida, in Arizona's Kyrene district, San Jose, California and Judson, Texas. Dozens more are moving through St. Louis, Alaska and the West Virginia state board. Officials present each vote as a local response to declining enrollment, aging buildings and “underutilized” facilities.

The closures are part of what Georgetown University's Edunomics Lab calls “the Big Shrink.” Its director, Marguerite Roza, does not merely describe the process—she advises districts on how to execute it. Because salaries consume most of a school budget, she tells administrators, the cuts must come out of staff; handled correctly, shrinking is a chance to build “smaller, stronger, and more effective” school systems. In practice it means shuttered buildings, laid-off teachers and aides, and more crowded classrooms for the children who remain.

In individual districts the scale goes further still. St. Louis Public Schools, which floated closing or co-locating more than half its 68 buildings in July 2025, released a revised draft on June 29 that would close up to 22 schools in 2027. The district is still absorbing the impact of the May 2025 tornado that damaged a dozen buildings; six campuses could not reopen and 1,959 students were relocated. Missouri is also closing all 12 of its state schools for severely disabled students by June 2026, including Gateway/Hubert Wheeler in St. Louis campuses where 61 students had already been

hit by “temporary emergency closures” due to staffing shortages caused by state budget constraints.

Nor is this confined to large cities. At least 15 schools are closing across five Alaska districts. Mat-Su is shutting Larson and Meadow Lakes elementaries and Glacier View School in Sutton, affecting some 650 students, with Larson's children scattered among three separate schools; Ketchikan will close Fawn Mountain and Point Higgins, moving about 400 more children.

West Virginia has closed 53 schools in five years. In December the state board approved closures across six counties; in February it shut Dunlow and Genoa elementary schools in Wayne County, sending about 100 children to Crum, East Lynn and Wayne Elementary for 2026-27. The county simultaneously asked for a waiver to run bus routes longer than the state's own recommended limits—an admission in writing of what a closure means for a rural child: an hour on a bus before the first bell.

NCES projects enrollment will fall by nearly 4 million students between 2019 and 2031. Officials present that decline as an inevitable fact. It is nothing of the kind. Falling enrollment is the product of deliberate policy: the deportation of immigrant families, rising homelessness, the soaring cost of daycare, healthcare and raising a child at all, and the transfer of students into charter, voucher and homeschool arrangements as public schools are stripped bare. Houston ISD reports 90 percent of students who left in 2024–25 went to nearby charters; Fort Bend names Texas's new voucher program as a reason it expects worse. The mechanism is self-reinforcing: a school starved of resources loses the families able to leave, and officials cite the loss as proof the closure was necessary.

Nor does a smaller student body require a smaller school system. The children who remain could be taught in classes of 18 rather than 34, in buildings with a nurse, a librarian and a counselor. Whether falling enrollment yields better conditions or boarded-up buildings is not a question of

arithmetic but of class interest.

The claim that “there is no money” for public education is a lie whose dimensions can be measured. While school boards plead poverty, the Trump administration has submitted a Fiscal Year 2027 Pentagon request of \$1.5 trillion—a 50 percent increase over the record \$1 trillion FY2026 budget, and the largest single-year defense request in US history. Hegseth told Congress it would put the defense industrial base “back on a wartime footing.”

The entire budget of the near-dismantled Department of Education is roughly \$80 billion—about 5 percent of the Pentagon request. The \$56.4 million deficit Fort Bend cites to justify closing seven schools is 0.004 percent of it.

The administration is not only diverting money to the war machine; it is illegally blocking funds Congress already appropriated. The Office of Management and Budget, under Russell Vought, has frozen nearly \$320 million in 2025 funds for the Institute of Education Sciences and is withholding \$584 million more of its 2026 allocation. Of \$235 million Congress appropriated for Education Innovation and Research grants, Vought has released \$65,000. Of \$50 million for Comprehensive Centers, \$500,000. Blocked in court once, the Trump administration is now re-cancelling 223 school-based mental health grants by another route—a political project lawsuits will not stop.

Trump's anti-immigrant offensive is producing a further enrollment shock. Miami-Dade enrolled about 2,550 newly arrived immigrant students in 2025-26, against nearly 14,000 the year before—losses that erased roughly \$70 million from its budget before the board approved nine closures on June 17. Houston closed a school for newly arrived immigrant children after enrollment fell from 111 to 21. This is the work of an ICE campaign that has killed 22 people in custody this year, four in the past eight days, among them Lorenzo Salgado Araujo, shot dead by agents in Houston on July 10. Raids drain districts of students and revenue, and officials cite the losses to justify the closures.

This is no secret. At a private White House Easter luncheon on April 1, Trump told Vought not to spend money for daycare, because the country “can’t take care of daycare.” His explanation: “We’re fighting wars.” That is a declaration by a ruling class whose crisis has grown so deep it can no longer afford its old democratic pretenses.

Trump spearheads an assault prepared over decades by both big-business parties, but across many states it is the Democrats who implement it. On June 29, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed a \$352 billion budget deferring \$3.9 billion in constitutionally guaranteed K-12 funding. A trailer bill strips the elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction of authority and hands it to a governor-appointed commissioner—executive power consolidated to

streamline closures and suppress labor unrest. Los Angeles Unified alone faces an \$877 million deficit, 3,200 layoff notices and a projected shortfall of up to \$1.6 billion in 2027-28.

The Democrats, who posture as defenders of public education, have voted for every one of Trump’s war budgets. Educators, parents and students cannot stop this through appeals to school boards, that party, or union bureaucracies that accept the framework of unavoidable deficits.

Philadelphia demonstrates this. In June 2025, 14,000 members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers voted 94 percent to authorize the first strike in 25 years—over class sizes, understaffing, punitive attendance rules and crumbling buildings. Days before schools opened, PFT President Arthur Steinberg appeared beside Superintendent Tony Watlington and Democratic Mayor Cherelle Parker to announce a tentative agreement no member had read, declaring himself “thrilled” at three years of “labor peace.” It was rammed through a scripted online town hall: fewer than half the membership took part, and roughly 4,000 votes—a quarter of the members—were declared a ratification.

Less than two weeks later the district announced closures. The WSWs had warned Philadelphia educators in advance, pointing to Chicago, where the CTU’s “Trump-proof” contract was followed immediately by layoffs. When the master plan arrived, Steinberg complained only that it “does not provide sufficient detail or data,” pleaded for a transparent “process,” and organized no protest and no strike. This is not incompetence. The PFT is an adjunct of the same Democratic Party that holds the mayor’s office and 14 of 17 council seats—and that council appoints the school board that voted the closures through, 6-3, on April 30.

The fight must be organized independently, through rank-and-file committees linking workers across districts and states, on the demand for the resources to keep schools open, cut class sizes, restore programs and guarantee free, high-quality public education for every child.



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