

Ending of COVID funding prompts mid-year round of mass layoffs and budget cuts in US public schools

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Across the United States, a brutal assault on public education is occurring, with school districts from coast to coast announcing drastic budget cuts and mass layoffs even before the Trump administration comes to power. The attacks on teachers, social workers, and support staff are not isolated incidents but rather a systematic dismantling of public services that will be sharply accelerated after Trump's inauguration.

The scale of the attack on public education is staggering. In **Anchorage, Alaska**, a \$107 million budget deficit threatens to eliminate 598 jobs. The Anchorage School Board, using an online simulation tool called Balancing Act, is planning cuts to programs and personnel, as "there is no other way to do it," according to Board Member Margo Bellamy. Even if the state increases per-student funding, the district would still face a \$62 million deficit, requiring further cuts.

In **East Orange, New Jersey**, more than 70 school staffers, including teachers and social workers, were laid off due to an \$8 million budget shortfall. These cuts are taking place despite previous tax increases, and parents worry this is only the prelude to a further undermining of their children's education.

The **Santa Ana Unified School District in California** is also moving towards massive teacher layoffs. The school board voted 4-1 in favor of proposed cuts that could impact more than 300 educators. The district claims it faces a \$180 million deficit, citing the end of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds and declining student enrollment as reasons for the cuts.

In **Springfield, Missouri**, the school district plans to eliminate \$8.6 million in salaries and benefits, the equivalent of 142 full-time positions, with 68 currently filled positions set to be cut by June 30. This is on top of \$15 million in cuts from the current school year. Parents and teachers expressed frustration with the lack of transparency around these cuts and the prioritization of administrative positions over those

in the classroom.

The **Kingfisher, Oklahoma** Public School board accepted the resignations of 18 employees, with over 20 positions impacted, including teachers and administrative roles. These cuts stem from a \$2 million budget shortfall, partially caused by a \$5 million settlement in a lawsuit alleging abuse within the school's football program.

The impact of budget cuts on students and educators will be severe. The loss of teachers will lead to increased class sizes. The layoffs of social workers, counselors and other support staff, already in short supply, will leave students without vital supports and resources, particularly vulnerable students and those with special needs.

Districts are also targeting extracurricular activities, such as sports programs, and specialized programs, such as the International Baccalaureate program in Springfield, Missouri. Even when districts say they are preserving programs, the elimination of program coordinator positions guarantees that these programs will fall by the wayside.

The loss of jobs and the threat of further layoffs will exacerbate the environment of overwork and uncertainty that currently exists in schools. This will further discourage teachers and accelerate the numbers of teachers leaving education, which has remained high since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The overall turnover rate in US public schools during the 2022–2023 school year was 12 percent, slightly down from 14 percent the previous year. School-level turnover averaged 23 percent last year with turnover in high poverty schools reaching nearly 30 percent.

The Biden administration has allowed ESSER funding to expire despite the ongoing pandemic and long-term effects of mass infection and Long COVID. This has led to widespread budget cuts in schools nationwide as cash-strapped school districts had come to depend on this temporary funding. However, the current fiscal crisis facing districts across the country is the result of decades of chronic

underfunding in public education.

An ongoing wave of public school closures is expected across the nation beginning in 2025. In addition to those cited above, some of the latest announcements include: **Boston Public Schools**, whose board announced plans to close four school and merge three others before the 2026-2027 school year; **Fairbanks North Star Borough School District in Alaska** plans to close five elementary schools by the end of this school year; **Aldine ISD's school board in Texas** will vote in February whether to close seven schools by the 2025-2026 school year; and in California, district administrators in the **Santa Rosa City Schools District** have recommended the closure of four schools by the end of the present school year, which has also been met by major opposition among teachers, students and parents.

Announcements of major cuts to schools have already provoked popular resistance, with rallies and packed school board meetings across the country.

Protesting the announcement the closure of all seven ACERO charter schools within Chicago Public Schools, a high school student, Luis Delgado, stated at a December school board meeting, "Why did you see us merely as profit rather than individuals with dreams and aspirations? We are not items to be counted as dollar signs!...We will continue to fight for our schools!"

School districts, facing major budget deficits, cite various reasons for planned cuts, including the end of federal pandemic aid, declining enrollment, state and federal funding uncertainties, court decisions, and legal settlements. However, these explanations mask the underlying reality that public education is being starved of resources while a small section of the ruling class amasses unprecedented wealth.

The total expenditure on ESSER funding, which started in March 2020, is \$189.5 billion. This is less than the \$213 billion Elon Musk added to his personal fortune (now estimated at \$442 billion) during 2024. The annual US military budget is 4.5 times larger than the ESSER funding, a one-time measure spread out over seven years.

While school districts have cited the drying up of ESSER funds as the proximate cause of their austerity measures, many of the positions being cut were not added after the pandemic hit. This reveals a deeper trend of disinvestment in public education.

As for declining student enrollment, this is not primarily a question of demographic shifts. It is both the result of the deepening social crisis, including the impact of poverty, homelessness and the pandemic, as well as the deliberate policy of both capitalist parties to starve the public schools of vital resources.

Every educator has seen this movie before: Public money

is siphoned off from public schools to fund charter, parochial and other for-profit ventures. Reduced services, understaffing and overcrowded public schools lose enrollment and this is used to justify more cuts.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has consistently explained, the world's capitalist oligarchs are amassing wealth at an unprecedented rate, while the working class faces increasing poverty and hardship. Such levels of gross inequality are incompatible with the democratic and egalitarian principles which lie at the foundation of public education.

Trump has nominated the wrestling billionaire Linda McMahon for education secretary and has called for sweeping cuts and restrictions to public schools including universal school vouchers to promote school privatization and elimination the Department of Education. The latter would significantly impact federal Title I and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding for low income and special education students.

Trump also plans to steamroll any limitations on the ability of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents to arrest immigrant children and their families at schools before deporting them.

Opposition by educators, students and parents to the attack on public education will rapidly grow. But this movement must break free from the control of the bureaucracies that control the teachers unions.

Aligned with corporate and state interests, the heads of National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) have downplayed the dangers of Trump's policies and have expressed a willingness to work with the incoming administration. They have no intention of mobilizing opposition to this existential threat to public education.

That is why teachers, school staff, students and parents must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union bureaucrats. Only by organizing independently and uniting across districts and with the broader sections of the working class, can educators defend their jobs, their students, and the future of public education. The fight for public education is a fight against the capitalist system itself.

To join the fight to expand the network of educators rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



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