

New York City public schools face historic crisis amid federal, state and municipal attacks

Steve Light, Jesse Thomas
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New York City's public education system, the largest in the nation, faces unprecedented fiscal threats as federal, state and local budget battles converge, jeopardizing programs upon which hundreds of thousands of working-class families rely. With the attack on federal funding cuts by the Trump administration, combined with reductions at the state level as well as cuts to the city budget, there will be cascading impacts on schools already gutted by the response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In her most recent round of attacks on education, Trump's Education Secretary Linda McMahon has demanded that states certify that they do not fund diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs or face the loss of federal funding. Since New York City has indicated that it will not cooperate with the order, this will result in cuts of \$2 billion in federal funding for New York City schools, amounting to nearly 5 percent of the city's \$40 billion education budget. Such funds support hundreds of Title I schools serving low-income students, as well as IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) programs, covering around 200,000 students with educational disabilities.

Additionally, McMahon has abruptly terminated Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) pandemic funding grants, completing the Biden administration's goal of forcing the American population to "move on" from the coronavirus. This has already cost New York \$79 million, including \$8.4 million for locally sourced school meals.

Meanwhile, the hundreds of layoffs at the federal Department of Education Office for Civil Rights—including all staff in its New York City regional office—will inevitably weaken oversight of disability accommodations and discrimination complaints filed locally. Currently, 146,000 New York City students live in temporary housing, a figure that represents nearly one in eight children enrolled in the city's public schools. This alarming statistic marks a 23 percent increase from the previous year and highlights the persistent housing crisis gripping the school district.

Among these students, 60,395 reside in shelters, while another 79,000 are "doubled up," temporarily sharing housing with friends or relatives due to economic hardship. A smaller group of approximately 6,900 children live in hotels, motels, or even on the streets. The rise in student homelessness comes within the context of the broader social crisis in New York City. One in four New Yorkers lives in poverty—double the national average. Rising rents and stagnant wages have left many families struggling to afford basic necessities like food and transportation.

The ultimate aim of the Trump administration is to completely

decimate public education, eliminating every gain made by the working class over the past 150 years. Its austerity attacks are also coupled with broader efforts to suppress science and critical thinking, in an effort to subordinate every aspect of American society to the interests of finance capital and US imperialism.

Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul's latest state budget proposal would overhaul the current funding formula by replacing the 2000 Census poverty rate with more recent federal poverty data, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE). Additionally, free and reduced-price lunch eligibility would shift to include only those already on government assistance programs such as Medicaid, SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, food stamps) and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) programs, which themselves are under attack at both the federal and state levels.

The proposed change would use the federal poverty threshold—currently a ridiculously low \$32,150 for a family of four—as a benchmark for aid. The official poverty threshold in New York City for a family of four is \$47,190, with such a family really needing \$120,000-\$144,000 to live. Hochul's formula also does not factor in the especially high cost per student in the city's schools.

As a result of the change, New York City schools would lose about \$350 million annually. Hochul's pledges to return "excess" school funding to taxpayers echo the Trump administration's efforts to privatize education and completely eliminate public investment.

Hochul has also signaled a willingness to cooperate with the Trump administration on key priorities, despite voicing hollow concern about potential "federal overreach." It is clear that what she means is that she will work hand in hand with the Trump-Musk regime in slashing vital public services.

The state budget, delayed past its April 1 deadline due to factional disputes in the state legislature over crime policies, will inevitably leave several districts in limbo. State Budget Director Blake Washington admitted there's "no bottom" to potential federal cuts, with \$91 billion of New York state's \$252 billion budget reliant on Washington.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams has also been a driving force behind austerity. He initially opposed even the thoroughly inadequate 2022 class size law pushed by the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) union bureaucracy, the state legislature and various Democratic Party-aligned advocacy groups. That law, which gave the city five years to reach still-too-large class size caps, met with months of resistance from Adams, who instead imposed a sweeping hiring freeze that left 15,000 city jobs vacant and made compliance with the law

nearly impossible.

Now, facing reelection as an independent after the Trump administration's Justice Department intervened to have his federal corruption charges dismissed, Adams is attempting to save face by partially reversing his own cuts. His recent moves to restore only 3,700 of the frozen teacher positions—one new hire for every two vacancies—as well as a fraction of funding to move toward compliance with the legislation are little more than an attempt at damage control.

In a further blow to the credibility of the 2022 class size legislation, the New York City Department of Education's (NYCDOE) own December report revealed a shortfall of 70,000 classroom seats across the city. Yet the current five-year capital plan only provides space for 33,000 additional students. It is estimated that 500 schools, serving close to half of all public-school students, lack the space required to comply with the mandate. Additionally, only 700 of the 800 schools which applied for class size reduction funding were approved.

While the City Council had temporarily restored \$423 million in funding for arts education, mental health services and early childhood programs after federal pandemic stimulus dollars dried up, most of this funding was allocated for only one year. Such funds remain in the lurch for Fiscal Year 2026.

One hundred ninety-seven million dollars in funding for 3-K seats, special education classes and extended-day pilot programs is absent from the preliminary budget. Mental health services for students have also been scaled back significantly. The Mental Health Continuum initiative—which includes school-based clinics and crisis response teams—faces a \$5 million funding gap for next year. This comes at a time when youth mental health issues are at record highs following years of pandemic-related disruption.

At the same time, the city's Panel for Educational Policy (PEP), the public schools' governing body, comprised of local political appointees, has continued its approval of school closures, mergers, and co-locations with charter schools. In just the first three months of 2025, the PEP approved five school mergers and seven co-locations. School closures, mergers, and co-locations have devastating impacts on public education, particularly in the poorest neighborhoods. These actions lead to overcrowded classrooms, as multiple schools are squeezed into shared spaces or merged into fewer buildings. The converting of public schools into charter organizations funnels millions of dollars in public funds into private hands, fracturing neighborhood communities and diminishing oversight of whatever is left of federally protected educational rights.

The PEP is structured to exclude, as much as possible, the direct involvement of the working class in its proceedings. The majority of its officers are appointed by the mayor, with others appointed by the borough presidents. The body has been accused of routinely circumventing its own limited procedures of direct community participation, particularly with respect to school closures, mergers and co-locations.

In the mounting crisis of education in the city, as elsewhere, the union bureaucracy remains the greatest barrier to any genuine mobilization of educators against the criminal dismantling of public education. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the UFT's parent organization, has repeatedly pledged to “work together” with Trump's appointees, including Linda McMahon—this, even as she acknowledges her intent to completely destroy the federal department and gut public schools across the country. This willingness by the union bureaucrats to collaborate with those committed to privatization and budget cuts is not a tactical error,

but a conscious strategy to suppress independent action by educators.

Michael Mulgrew, president of the UFT, is cut from the same cloth. While issuing statements denouncing budget cuts and attacks on public education, Mulgrew has consistently refused to mobilize the union's membership for strikes or mass protests, instead channeling resistance into legal challenges and backroom negotiations. His role was especially clear when he helped broker the unsafe reopening of New York City schools in the midst of the pandemic. Like Weingarten and National Education Association President Becky Pringle, Mulgrew's approach is to preserve the union's institutional relationships with city and state officials—even when those officials are complicit in the attacks on public schools. These organizations remain the primary bulwark preventing educators from fighting back against the criminal attacks on public education.

The treacherous role of the AFT bureaucracy and its local affiliates was just demonstrated in Chicago, where union officials blocked a strike by 28,000 educators and worked with Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union lobbyist, to impose a contract by concealing the full scope of the coming cuts of the district, state and federal levels.

An urgent response from the working class is necessary. The defense of public education, jobs, and the social rights of students and families—along with the defense of democratic rights for the entire population from the threat of a Trump dictatorship—cannot be entrusted to Democratic Party politicians or union leaders whose interests are fundamentally aligned with those of Wall Street and corporate power.

To break through this impasse, educators, school staff, parents and all workers must organize independently, forming rank-and-file committees in every school and workplace. The Educators Rank-and-File Committee, aligned with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), provides the means to unite educators and parents with workers across sectors and national boundaries in a common struggle against austerity, privatization, and the subordination of education to profit.

Only through independent organization and collective action can educators and the working class as a whole launch an industrial and political counter-offensive to assert their interests and defend the right to high-quality, public education for all.

Join the fight to build educators rank-and-file committees, by filling out the form below.



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