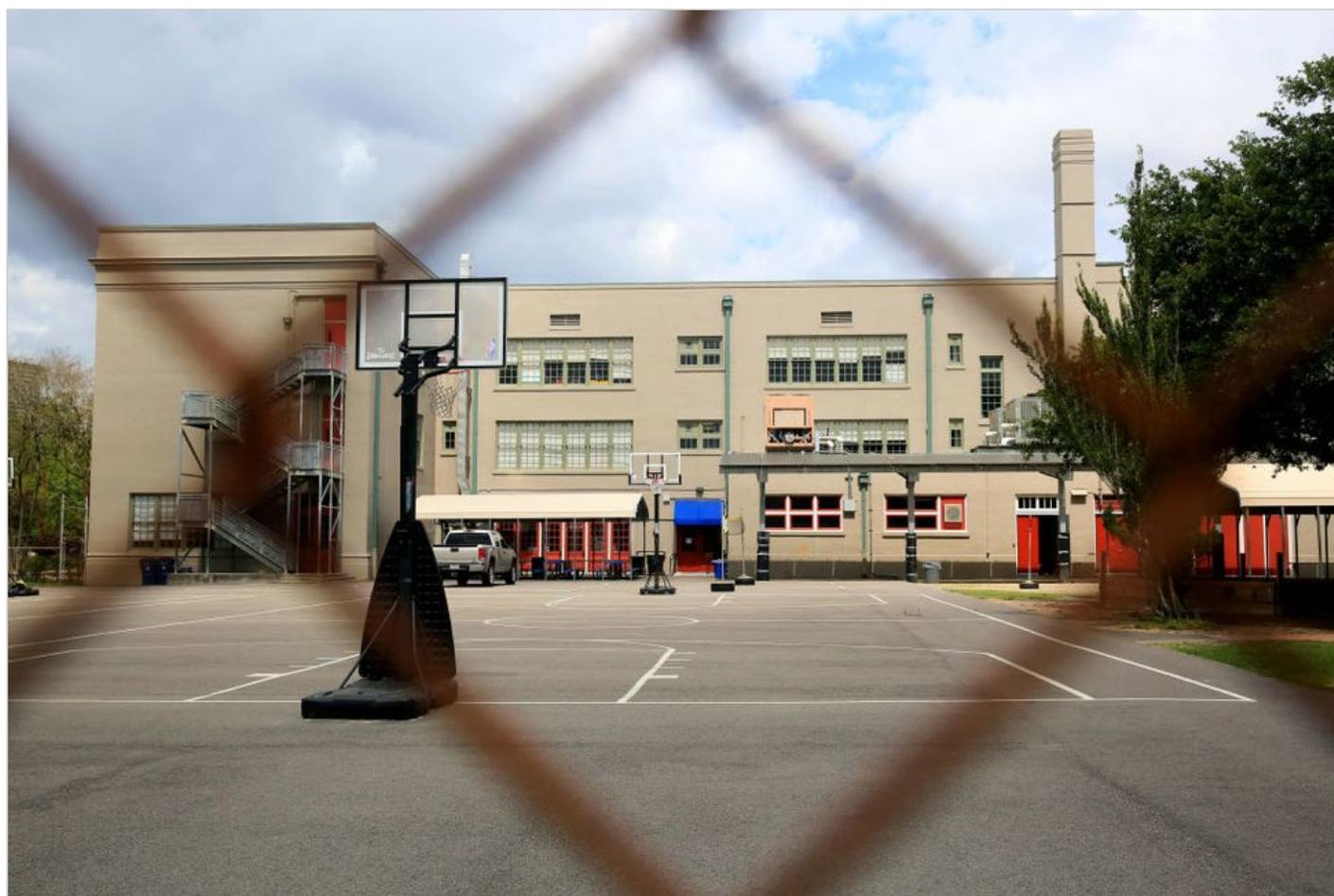


Schools Face Nightmare Scenario After Coronavirus Crisis

While schools debate reopening amid the coronavirus pandemic, some are worried about the budget cuts that lay ahead.

By **Lauren Camera**, Senior Education Writer May 1, 2020



A school closed due to the COVID-19 epidemic sits empty in New Orleans, Louisiana, on March 21.  LAN WEI/XINHUA NEWS AGENCY/GETTY IMAGES

SCHOOL OFFICIALS FROM the country's biggest school districts recently sent a message to Congress: Inject the K-12 system with a serious infusion of cash ahead of what forecasters say

is the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, or brace for the catastrophic results of hallowed out school budgets.

"Dark clouds are forming on the educational horizon that will spell disaster if Congress does not intervene," 62 superintendents from school districts like New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami wrote. "Significant revenue shortfalls are looming for local school districts that will exacerbate the disruption students have already faced."

[**SEE:** [Education Cartoons About Betsy DeVos, Education Standards and Teachers](#)]

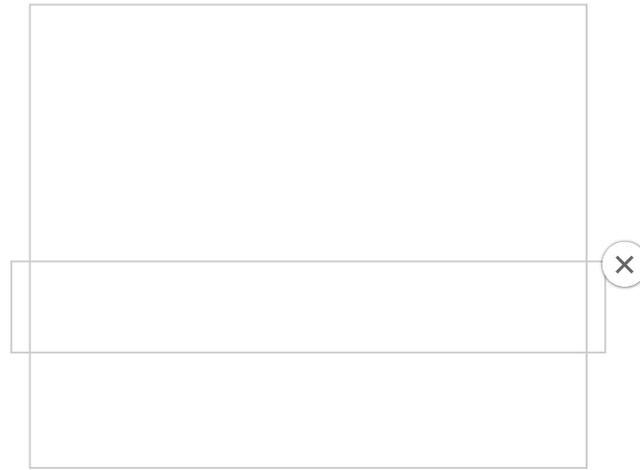
They paint a nightmare scenario that's "far more severe and promises to cause much more substantial damage" than the budget cuts that occurred in 2008 during the Great Recession.

They're bracing, for example, for 15% to 25% cuts in overall revenues going into next school year. A 20% loss in combined state and local revenues, they warned, would likely result in the big city public schools laying off about 275,000 teachers.

Without federal support, they warn of the perfect storm in which the majority of students enter the next school year significantly behind academically at the exact moment budget cuts due to local and state revenue shortfalls occur.

"The ramifications are not only profound for the students involved, but for the nation," the 62 big-city superintendents wrote to Congress. "This educational catastrophe could weaken the country's economic foundation for years to come without significant financial support from Congress."

They're far from the only ones sounding the alarm, as the education community in near lockstep pressures Congress for help.

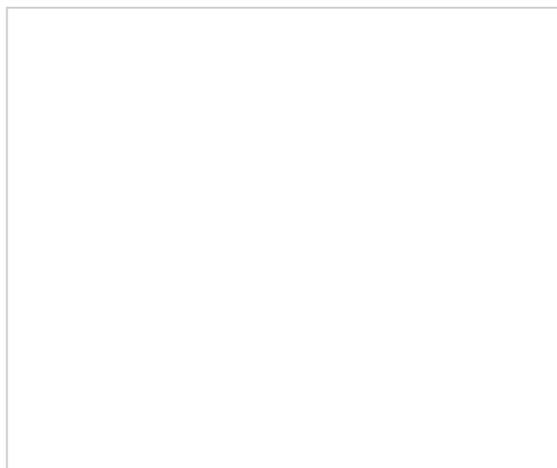


"The most terrible and lasting effects of the coronavirus pandemic will of course be measured in loss of life," a new report from the Albert Shanker Institute, a policy organization aligned with the American Federation for Teachers, begins. "But a parallel tragedy will also be unfolding in the coming months and years, this one affecting those at the beginning of their lives: an unprecedented school funding crisis that threatens to disadvantage a generation of children."

Educators, principals, superintendents and education policy experts are already thinking aloud about the myriad complications and expenses involved with reopening schools in a world where so much has changed: continued efforts to get digital learning tools and working WiFi in the hands of every student should a second wave of the virus force school closures in the fall; effective training for teachers about how to make distance learning work; more mental health workers in schools to help students who experienced trauma during a pandemic; increase in support staff should some districts decide to stagger reopening by having groups of students come certain days and learn remotely on others.

"We are almost certainly going to be asking school districts to do more with less," says Jess Gartner, CEO and founder of Allovue, an education finance organization that helps schools districts craft more equitable budgets. "All of those require additional training, additional devices, additional services, potentially extended hours, which will require more staff. And we're talking about all those solutions in a landscape of 15 to 30 percent budget cuts."

"That is just an impossible situation," she says. "So we are yet again setting up our schools for failure. Six months from now we will point fingers and say education leaders are so incompetent and states are so wasteful because mistakes will be made because everyone is trying to do even more with even less."



It's difficult for education finance experts to predict exactly how deep the looming cuts will be. State and local revenues, which fund almost 90% of school budgets, aren't yet tallied for the month of March, so there's no reliable data for how the social distancing policies and shuttered storefronts will impact funding levels.

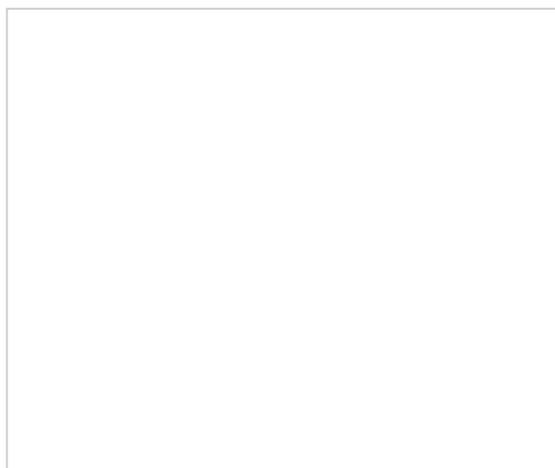
[**READ:** [One Third of Teachers Are at Higher Risk for Coronavirus](#)]

"For most states, they're kind of guessing and the numbers will come in May 7-15," Marguerite Roza, research professor at Georgetown University and director of the Edunomics Lab, says. "Every state differs in how they collect revenues. Property taxes are relatively stable. People are paying them and they are wrapped into their mortgages. The districts, I think they are waiting for a bailout before they make any changes."

To date, Congress has injected \$13 billion into the country's public school system through the \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief package. National education leaders have been clamoring for Congress to inject more federal relief into the system, characterizing the initial stimulus as wholly inadequate.

For a school system like New York City's, which serves more than 1 million children, the 20% budget cut New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo floated last week would equate to a \$5 billion hit.

So big city superintendents asked lawmakers for an additional \$175 billion to offset unexpected costs districts are incurring in providing meals to students, equipping them with computers, tablets and other electronic learning devices and erecting temporary WiFi hotspots.



They also asked Congress to provide an additional \$13 billion to bolster services for students with disabilities, \$12 billion for schools that serve lots of poor students and \$2 billion for a federal program that establishes broadband connections in rural and low-income communities.

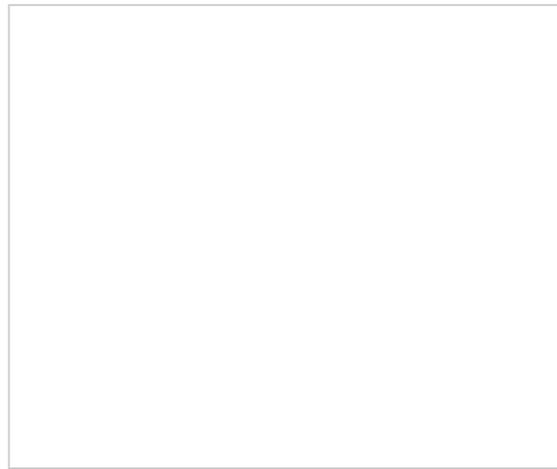
The budget crisis can't be fixed by Congress alone, many are quick to point out.

"States cannot continue business as usual," Bruce Baker, professors at the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University and co-author of the Shanker Institute report, says. "If they once again rely on federal aid to help them during this recession and recovery without putting their own houses in order, they risk prolonging the damage, and they will also be less prepared to weather economic downturns in the future."

Make no mistake, he says, immediate relief in the form of a federal stimulus is necessary, preferably a prolonged injection of funding that's distributed over a number of years to avoid the so-called fiscal cliff that occurs when aid suddenly ends. But Baker says it's also incumbent upon states to do their part by increasing funding for K-12, especially for states that haven't returned to pre-2008 funding levels, prioritizing those dollars for the most vulnerable children and building up budget reserves.

"The seniors graduating this spring started kindergarten in the fall of 2007," says Baker. "Most of these students have spent almost their entire K-12 careers in schools with less funding than there was when they started. If this happens again, it will be because we let it happen."

In the meantime, states and school districts are bracing for the hit.



[**READ:** [COVID-19 Pandemic Is Slowing Down States](#)]

In Detroit, where revenue for schools is forecasted to be down 6% to 13%, school officials said they will likely be forced to delay salary increases they expected to give. In Colorado, where revenue shortfalls are expected to be \$2 billion to \$3 billion, state budget officials said it would likely delay school construction plans and the hiring of social workers, and could, if bad enough, threaten funding for the state's full-day kindergarten program. In Indiana, some school districts are asking residents to approve property tax hikes to bolster school funding. And in Hawaii, Gov. David Ige proposed cutting the salary of state workers, including public school teachers, by 20%.

Notably, Chicago seems to be in a better position than other big city school districts, though there are still concerns. Educators there led a historic 10-day strike last year to force the city to give teachers raises and increase funding for special education and to hire more counselors, nurses and librarians, but [school officials recently announced](#) they're on track to fulfill those

obligations by injecting \$125 million into the system thanks in part to funding from federal coronavirus relief package.

"My biggest concerns are equity because we know from historic situations of recession that in situations where there are cuts, equity is often treated like a luxury item," Gartner says. "It is a scenario where we need to be taking an equity first approach because our students with the greatest needs are going to have even greater needs during this time."

"My concern," she continues, "is that any prior attempts to be thinking about resource equity and how to best serve high-needs and high-poverty students will get pushed to the side or down the priority list when they really need to be moved up on the priority list."

Lauren Camera, Senior Education Writer

Lauren Camera is a senior writer at U.S. News & World Report. She joined the News team as an ... **READ MORE »**

Tags: coronavirus, public health, education policy, K-12 education



Coronavirus Bulletin

Stay informed daily on the latest news and advice on COVID-19 from the editors at U.S. News & World Report.

Email address

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

The 10 Worst Presidents

BRANDFUSE
ad content by **MANSCAPED**
Manscaping Made Safe, Hygienic and Easy [Free Shipping]

Cartoons on President Donald Trump

Photos: Obama Behind the Scenes



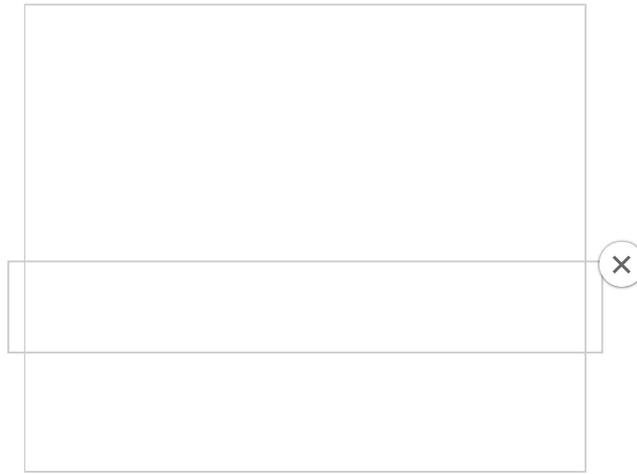
Photos: Who Supports Joe Biden?

Photos: Tourism Industry Amid COVID-19

Italy Begins to Lift Lockdown

Trump Raises Virus Death Toll Estimate

7 States Partner in Coronavirus Fight



Birx: Coronavirus Vaccine Possible by January

New York Tests 15K for Virus Antibodies

Load More

BEST COUNTRIES

BEST STATES

HEALTHIEST COMMUNITIES

NEWS

CITIES

LEADERS

THE REPORT

PHOTOS

AMERICA 2020

EVENTS



About Our Mission Contact Press Advertise Newsletters
Jobs Site Map Store

Copyright 2020 © U.S. News & World Report L.P.

[Terms & Conditions](#)/[Privacy Policy](#)/[California Privacy Notice](#)/[California Do Not Sell My Personal Information Request](#)