

# The way out of this crisis for Seattle schools? Retreat

By

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Two years ago, after Seattle teachers had gone on strike and won a 14% pay increase, this newspaper ran a little-commented-on story about [how the school district didn't have the money to pay for it](#).

"District officials have already projected budget shortfalls for the next three school years, and the union contract is adding about \$94 million to that shortfall," it said.

Down below, there were only 11 reader comments. Someone with the handle "curiosity" left the last word, on Sept. 29, 2022.

"Where is the money going to come from to cover the shortfalls? Closing schools?"

Ding ding ding! I nominate "curiosity" to be the next superintendent of Seattle schools. He or she may not be our best speller, but makes up for it with crystal ball-level forecasting.

But seriously: This crisis that Seattle schools is going through right now, with the district threatening to close 20 schools due to a cash crunch, was so predictable and preordained that any rando news thread commenter could call it.

The schools simply didn't have the money to pay what they agreed to pay. They did it anyway, knowing full well the current upheaval was likely.

I'm a union guy, so I don't begrudge the educators gunning for the best deal they could get. It's the other side — the management — that's supposed to be a counterweight. It's their job to be able to say "no."

Instead, what the School Board and district management said back then were things [like](#): "I believe that we reached a good collective bargaining agreement, and that it comes with a price with extraordinary deficits."

[Or](#): "Do our educators deserve to have a living wage and to be able to afford to live in the city where they teach? Hell, yes. Do we currently know the best strategies to figure out how to accommodate that within our subsequent budgets? We made it very clear that the answer to that question is no."

[Or](#): "My hope is that it'll all be worth it."

That last was from the superintendent, Brent Jones. Hope is

not a strategy, as some military general supposedly said. And here it's what's left us, Seattle, in a bit of a pickle.

I would gently suggest that the way out may be found in part by going back to that \$231 million employment contract. And in part by looking forward — toward attracting new students into the public schools.

School Board members [made pretty clear](#) at a meeting this past week that they are *not* going to close 20 schools. The proposals sounded dead on arrival. At least four of the seven-member board seemed to suggest, in their rambling edu-babble ways, that they would likely vote “no.”

That's good, because [closing many of the most popular schools and programs](#) would be a slow-rolling catastrophe for Seattle's public system. It would take years to recover.

One current board member, Gina Topp, said she would offer a fallback plan to instead close only about five schools.

That's a start but would mean more cuts elsewhere. Nobody is talking about this, but [buried in a budget presentation recently](#) was the fact that each 1% of salary reduction across the district produces \$7 million in savings. So to avoid closing any schools (which was estimated to save about \$25 million to \$30 million), the school workforce, including administrators, could take a 4% salary cut.

If you were a teacher or principal, would you take 4% less to save your own school?

I don't put this idea out there lightly — I'm the son of two teachers — or without bitter experience. In the last big recession, after the Seattle P-I shut down, my own union was asked to freeze our pensions. We agreed to the unthinkable, on the thought that it was preferable to have at least one daily newspaper left standing in Seattle. And for us to have jobs at all.

That schools labor contract didn't pencil from the day it was signed. Going back on it a bit to forestall a spiraling crisis in Seattle public education ought to at least be on the table. Plus it's easier to reverse, if the state ponies up more money, than emptying 20 schools.

As for looking forward, it still baffles me that the district has done so little to try to win back its fleeing market share.

Seattle's private-school enrollment is surging. We now have the second-highest private-school rate in the nation after only San Francisco, The Seattle Times' FYI Guy Gene Balk [just wrote](#). More than 19,000 Seattle kids now go private, a quarter of the city.

If the public schools could lure back just 10% of that, the system would get tens of millions in state funding and

wouldn't even be talking about shuttering schools.

How to do this? Give 'em what they want. Which is more academic rigor, more options, more sizzle.

Instead of closing, say, the beautiful old Stevens Elementary building on Capitol Hill, why not turn it into a foreign language immersion school, or a fine arts academy? Not everyone would want to attend this, but I guarantee some would stampede to it.

There should be more of these magnet schools all over the city, for all types of families and students. Such as another South End STEM K-8 to roll up into the successful [Cleveland High science and tech program](#). More alt schools. (Feature: no standardized tests!) How about a drama school or a "[Great Books](#)" academy. Or a [World School elementary](#). Imagine the excitement if school officials ever said something like "we're not going to close this school, instead we're turning it into a school for the performing arts." It'd be a cinch to raise private dollars to help with that.

Dreaming? Yes. But we've got to rally around our public schools, Seattle. Without them the whole premise of democracy and an equal opportunity society collapses.

That's my two-bit advice, learned the hard way. Retreat for now so you can live to fight the much bigger fights another

day.

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