

Save Our School

North Andover students walk out in opposition to announced teacher cuts

NORTH ANDOVER — Hundreds of high school students walked out of class on a March morning in support of North Andover teachers slated to be laid off next fall due to budget cuts.

At 10 a.m. March 24, there was a mass exodus of students heading to the football field, holding signs saying “Save Our Teachers, Don’t Make Them Pay For Others’ Mistakes” and “You Cut Our Future,” while donning red attire. Students then marched to the school administration building on Main Street with megaphones, yelling “Save Our Schools.”

On March 21, 40 staff members from North Andover Public Schools were informed that their positions would be terminated for the next school year. The impending layoffs affected staff from pre-K to grade 12 as school officials look to stay within a proposed \$68.2 million budget for fiscal year 2026.

North Andover Middle School students and teachers joined in the rally, crowding the lawn in front of North Andover Middle School during the morning, attracting the attention of traffic driving by.

“We respect their (students’) desire to advocate



CARL RUSSO/Staff photo

Hundreds of students participated in the rally on the football field before walking to the administration office.

and encourage respectful dialogue as part of the learning process during these challenging times,” Assistant Superintendent Kristen Ando said in a statement Monday about the student walkout.

“Today, some of our

students chose to express their voices through a walkout, demonstrating their desire to advocate for themselves and engage in respectful civic dialogue,” Superintendent Pamela Lathrop said. “As Assistant Superintendent Kristen

Ando has shared, we are proud of our students for the thoughtful and respectful manner in which they expressed their views.”

NAHS junior Allie Roberts was one of the students who organized the walkout along with classmates

Theresa Lister and Cici Choi. Roberts is a student representative for the School Committee. She said she found it necessary to allow students to have an outlet to voice their feelings about the teacher cuts.

“We wanted to rally

students and unify them,” Roberts said.

After the rally, Roberts went back into the school and spoke to teachers who described an empty school Monday during the walkout. As Roberts led the way, she was not inside the building when students began filing out.

Roberts was part of a group that met with the school administration Sunday and Monday in order for the students to safely protest. While the administration could not condone the rally, she said, the school’s main goal was to ensure the students were safe. The North Andover Police Department drove next to the students as they walked to the school administration building.

Roberts said it was “beautiful to see” so many of her peers march down the road to the school offices on a cold and rainy morning.

High school students held signs on the football field and later against the windows of the school administration building in solidarity with world language teachers. Students talked about hearing their language teachers express sadness about receiving a layoff

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REAL NEWS IN SCHOOLS

How the program works

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CARL RUSSO/Staff photos

Around 600 students participated in a rally on the football field March 24, before walking to the Public Schools Administration office attempting to talk to officials.



Walkout organizers Theresa Lister, left, and Allie Roberts, both juniors, saw hundreds of students take part in the walkout.

» School

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notification.

“It was totally decimated,” senior Tori Lytle said about the cuts to the World Language department. “I would call the language department one of our most communal groups of academics.”

Lathrop said five teachers in the department received layoff notices. However, she said that doesn’t mean there will be five less teachers for the World Languages program.

“We are currently restructuring World Language at both the Middle School and High School and we have yet to announce any transfers,” Lathrop said.

Senior Meghan Daley is enrolled in the Advanced Placement Spanish program and said she saw her teacher upset Friday. Daley said the language teachers aren’t just educators to her, but people she has built a personal connection



Seniors Vanio Pernikliev, left, and Isa Gatling hold up their signs.

with over her high school career. “It isn’t the solution,” Daley said. “They should find other

solutions than cutting the language department.” Senior Ena Deasy talked about

the community built on the language classes who participate in exchange programs and the impact larger classes may have on learning a new language.

“Language is such a difficult subject to learn,” Deasy said. “You’re not really going to get anything done with 32 kids.”

Lytle agreed, and added that there won’t be as much of a chance for students to grow if exchange programs are taken away.

“There are a lot of opportunities to make connections with people who don’t speak your language, so it’s really frustrating for that to not go on for further generations,” Lytle said. “We’re seniors here, but we’re here to fight for our teachers.”

Deasy has a brother in sixth grade and she worries about his education with the announced teacher cuts and program changes. She said it’s devastating to think about the classes and programs getting cut, such as the mixed English and history class

called Global Thought, which she said she believed is considered for elimination.

Lytle said town officials should step in and help North Andover Public Schools.

“They (town officials) have money for emergencies,” Lytle said. “I’d call this an emergency.”

About a dozen students met with school officials to address their concerns about next year’s budget on Monday morning. Ando called it a “productive discussion.”

“The district is committed to working toward a budget that ensures the best possible outcomes for all students,” Ando said.

“These are challenging times, but we remain hopeful for the future, inspired by the passion and engagement of our students,” Lathrop said. “We are committed to continuing open dialogue and working with the entire North Andover community to support the educational and social-emotional needs of all students.”

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STILL FINDING OUR WAY

5 years after pandemic, effects carry on

By Christian M. Wade

» Statehouse Reporter

It's been five years since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, triggering lockdowns, restricted travel, and limits on public gatherings, along with disrupted work and school.

Hospitals would quickly become overwhelmed with the sick and dying as Americans hoped COVID-19 would go away in a few weeks or months.

It didn't.

When it finally subsided, the virus that causes the disease — SARS-CoV-2 — had killed more than 1.2 million Americans, including more than 24,000 in Massachusetts.

In many ways, life has returned to normal in the past five years. Tens of millions of people are vaccinated, stay-at-home and workplace restrictions are long rescinded, and, of course, children are back in classrooms. Tallies of COVID infections and deaths, common during the height of the outbreak, are

seldom reported by news media anymore.

Even so, the long tail of the pandemic continues to touch lives every day, from how Americans work and play, to the ways they worship, receive healthcare, and participate in democracy.

The pandemic also led to higher rates of anxiety, depression and substance abuse, experts say, and people are still dealing with the impact today.

Here's a look at some of the more notable changes:

Nagging youth mental health crisis

While children were spared the worst health effects of COVID-19, their mental health was a different story.

Lockdowns, school closings and restrictions on social gatherings to prevent the spread of the virus, coupled with a lack of access to in-person services, exacerbated a mental-health treatment gap for children, according to medical experts. Seniors couldn't even participate in sports

or graduate together. Data shows that low-income and minority children were disproportionately affected.

Recent studies support claims that mental health issues are growing among children — even five years after the pandemic.

Mary Bourque, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, said schools are dealing with the pandemic's lingering effects on behavioral health, learning gaps and delayed development that occurred as a result of remote learning and social isolation.

“As a result of the pandemic, school administrators have had to pay much closer attention to the social, emotional and mental health needs of students,” she said. “They are continuing to work on ways to address learning gaps and chronic absenteeism.”

Learning losses fueled by the pandemic persist today, despite the millions of dollars the federal government has diverted to schools to help struggling students get up to speed.

The average student lost half a year of instruction in math because of the pandemic and a third of a year of instruction in reading, according to the Education Recovery Scorecard.

Before the pandemic, only 15% of students missed much school, compared to 25% now, state and federal data shows. Recent studies suggest many of the reasons kids missed school early in the pandemic are still hampering attendance: financial hardship, transportation, mild illness, and mental health struggles, according to experts.

Massachusetts' absenteeism rate was 19.7% as of September, according to the latest state data. That's down substantially from the 2021-22 school year when the statewide absenteeism rate was 27.7% statewide. But it's still higher than the 2018-19 school year, when the state's rate was 12.9%, the data shows.

Education officials say learning gaps that resulted from the pandemic also showed most students can't learn if they aren't

physically at school.

But Bourque said the pandemic also showed how schools can use technology — such as remote video conferencing — to reach students who need targeted tutoring or other assistance outside of the classroom.

“There is a role for the technology, and we learned that during the pandemic, not to be afraid of it,” she said. “But it will never replace the need for the (in-person) educator relationship with a student.”

Mainstream remote work

During the pandemic, stay-at-home orders meant millions of people would be working from home. Downtown commercial districts, including in Boston, emptied out.

Five years later, business groups say many companies are requiring employees to return to the office — a challenging task — but others still embrace the work-from-home ethos as a new way of doing business.

Kyle Pardo, executive

vice president of AIM HR Solutions, a subsidiary of Associated Industries of Massachusetts, said remote work has become a permanent part of the modern workplace.

A February AIM survey found that about 61% of Massachusetts employers are offering some type of remote work schedule for their employees. In some cases that means working hybrid, with the option of working from home a few days during the week.

“What we're seeing is that businesses offering at least one day at home are getting more applicants for jobs,” Pardo said. “People really like the flexibility of hybrid schedules.”

Massachusetts is not alone in the embrace of remote working, either. Roughly 14% of all workers aged 16 and older — more than 22 million people — were performing their jobs either fully remotely or in a hybrid manner in 2023, according to analysis of Census Some data by CoworkingMag, a

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Trump administration cuts \$106M from state's schools

By Christian M. Wade

» Statehouse Reporter

BOSTON — State leaders are blasting the Trump administration for pulling back tens of millions of dollars in federal funding for Massachusetts public schools.

The U.S. Department of Education announced earlier this month it is “terminating” more than \$2 billion in federal funding for Massachusetts and other states through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief, or ESSER, fund.

Massachusetts stands to lose at least \$106 million in unspent pandemic-related federal funding slated

for about 20 school districts, according to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

“States and school districts can no longer claim they are spending their emergency pandemic funds on COVID relief when there are numerous documented examples of misuse,” DOE spokeswoman Madi Biedermann said in a statement.

The agency spokeswoman blamed the former Biden Administration for setting an “irresponsible precedent by extending the deadline for spending the COVID money far beyond the intended purpose of the funds” and said “it is past time for the money to be returned to the people’s

bank account.”

Locally, the cuts include \$1.3 million earmarked for Lawrence public schools to complete HVAC projects in school buildings across the city, and \$648,702 for Dracut to install a new HVAC unit for Richardson Middle School, which is being partially funded by the town. Lynn public schools are slated to lose \$339,357.

Democratic Gov. Maura Healey blasted the move, saying it will set back the state’s efforts to address pandemic-related learning loss and the youth mental health crisis

“This action is jeopardizing mental health care and math tutoring for our students, as well as projects

that are already underway to enhance school security and ensure that the air in our school buildings is clean,” she said.

“Massachusetts has been making important progress helping students recover from the pandemic, but President Trump is trying to take us backwards.”

Many projects funded in part by these grants are underway and Secretary of Education Patrick Tutwiler said the state or local governments will need to pick up the difference.

“The Trump Administration’s outrageous and cruel decision, in which we received notice of a new arbitrary deadline, will have real harm to our students

and their learning and well-being,” Tutwiler said. He called the cuts “cruel.”

Lawrence Mayor Brian DePeña said the loss of \$1.3 million in ESSER funding creates a “significant challenge” for Lawrence public schools.

“These funds are vital for their recovery and overall success,” DePeña said in a statement. “It is imperative that we continue to invest in their future.”

Members of the state’s all Democratic congressional delegation also criticized the Trump administration for withholding the funds.

“The Trump administration’s unnecessary cuts to federal education funding for Fitchburg, Lawrence,

and Dracut are irresponsible and shortsighted,” Rep. Lori Trahan, a Westford Democrat, said in a statement. “Our kids deserve better.”

The move comes as the Trump administration is seeking to dismantle the Education Department by laying off thousands of federal workers and pulling back funding for states.

Jessica Tang, president of the Massachusetts chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, said the cuts will “disproportionately harm those most in need of services — students with disabilities, low-income students, and the districts serving at-risk students.”

» Covid

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digital magazine.

For employers that still offer a fully remote job, she said, that means being able to broaden their pool of applicants for job openings nationwide to find the best talent.

Pardo said remote work was made easier by an increased reliance on technology during the pandemic. Business software platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams allowed companies to conduct their operations outside of the office while allowing for strong collaboration. Now the use of these programs has become second nature.

Another, more subtle, way the pandemic continues to impact the workplace — at least when it comes to white-collar professions — is company dress codes.

“People got used to being at home in their jeans and casual attire,” she said. “So the thought of putting a suit and a tie on to go to work is not what some people are looking for these days.”

Expanded voting access, receding government

Mail-in voting allowed millions of Massachusetts residents to safely cast ballots amid fears about COVID-19 during the state of emergency. As it turned out, voters enthusiastically embraced the new way to participate in democracy.

The expansion of ‘no-excuse’ mail-in voting during the height of the pandemic prompted Beacon Hill leaders to approve a bill in 2022 making the voting options permanent for federal, state and local elections.

Prior to the changes, Massachusetts only allowed mail-in voting for absentee ballots. Voters needed an excuse, such as a disability, not to cast ballots in person.

“There are many ways that democracy was strengthened during the pandemic,” Geoff Foster, executive director of Common Cause Massachusetts, a voting rights group.

“Whether it was to vote by mail or the ability to participate in a local government meeting through Zoom, democracy was really

brought home to the kitchen table in a powerful way,” he added.

Foster said voting access groups are also pushing to make permanent the temporary rules adopted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic that allowed local governing boards to meet remotely to conduct business as part of broader efforts to reduce the spread of the virus.

Those emergency rules expired in May 2023 with the state’s public health emergency, but lawmakers have extended the temporary law allowing remote local meetings and public participation. It’s set to expire March 31.

Adam Chapdelaine, executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association, is among those pushing to make the rules permanent. He said the pandemic forced cities and towns to change how they conduct the public’s business “in ways that increased transparency and accountability and boosted public participation and confidence.”

Others say the pandemic allowed Beacon Hill’s notoriously secret dealings on the state budget and other legislation to pull back even

further from public scrutiny.

During COVID, the Legislature used a “hybrid” system of remote and in-person meetings that limited the number of lawmakers in chambers. Legislators and their staff worked remotely with the Statehouse closed. Lobbyists, advocates, and many constituents who were used to face-to-face interactions were suddenly cut off from policymakers.

But Beacon Hill watchers point out that Massachusetts was one of the last statehouses to reopen to the public, and in some ways is now even less transparent than before the pandemic.

“There’s so much remote participation now, fewer formal sessions and a lot of committees aren’t holding in-person executive sessions,” Scotia Hille, executive director of Act on Mass., which advocates for more transparency in state government.

“It exacerbated existing trends like things being done behind closed doors by leadership,” she said.

“One thing we’ve heard repeatedly is that access to lawmakers was difficult during the pandemic, and

since then it really hasn’t returned to the way it was,” she said.

Preparing for the next pandemic

Scientists and researchers have learned a lot about the coronavirus in the past five years, including how it infects people, the best treatments and what puts someone at risk for long COVID, according to Dr. Howard Koh, a professor at Harvard University’s T.H. Chan School for Public Health and former state public health commissioner.

But Koh said the rapid development and distribution COVID-19 vaccines was the “major success story” of the pandemic, with some 750 million doses administered worldwide.

“Those vaccines were produced in record time,” he said. “That’s just a massive public health achievement, and something we should all be proud of as we look back on it.”

The pandemic also spurred improvements in health practices, increased awareness of hygiene, amped up the use of telehealth, and drove home the

importance of getting vaccinated, he said.

“More people are also aware of the need for better air quality, and ventilation in workplaces,” he said. “That’s another step forward.”

Despite those and other advances, Koh said cuts in federal spending on medical research and to the health care system by the Trump administration threaten to roll back progress made as a result of the pandemic. Trump’s Health Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., has been a vocal critic of COVID-19 vaccines, he noted.

“Public health is under siege, in truly unprecedented ways,” he said. “We’ve unfortunately witnessed the overt hostility to science and the propagation of misinformation and the sense of mistrust that we have in our country right now. That breaks my heart, because public health advances are fragile and need to be sustained.”

Christian M. Wade covers the Massachusetts Statehouse for North of Boston Media Group’s newspapers and websites. Email him at cwade@cnnnews.com.

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