Northampton’s Public Schools at Risk? Community Rallies for More Funding Amid Budget Cuts

Priscilla Liu

2025-02-15

On a rainy November night in 2024, over 60 teachers, parents, students, and community members gathered outside Northampton City Hall to demand more school funding, reported The Shoestring. Calling themselves Support Our Schools (SOS), they drew comparisons with nearby towns to emphasize the insufficient funding in Northampton. And they are right.

In terms of expenditures per student, Northampton ranked **241 out of 397** school districts, according to the newest data released by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. SOS argued that this lack of funding led to job losses and larger class sizes, reducing education quality.

This wasn’t the first outcry. A rally already took place in June 2024, and school funding advocates had fierce discussions with city councilors and reached out to the mayor a few times (but did not get a response). Eventually, the major’s plan moved forward and cut about 20 school jobs, putting an unpleasant end to the mid-year discussion.

“I think what we have discovered during this process is how undemocratic this process really is, and how much power is concentrated on the mayor.” Barbra Madeloni, a Northampton educator and former president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, commented in the summer.

At the end of the year, the SOS brought up the topic again, stating that more jobs would be cut if the budget did not increase, making the situation in public schools even more concerning. Class size is a main concern. Teachers need to give students with special needs more attention or personalized assignments to help them learn, but that would not be possible in large classes.

“Opt-in kids first.”, “Kids deserve good schools.”, “It’s not a deficit - It’s a choice.” are among the slogans advocates lifted up in front of the city hall. For educators who love their jobs, parents who want their children to get a good education, and kids who want to learn, putting more money into public schools should be a top priority for a government that cares about the people. Given that the city was expected to have more than $6 million “free cash” at the end of 2024, advocates think it is reasonable to put more cash into public school programs.

However, the mayor and some city councilors have different opinions. Mayor Sciarra wrote in the city newsletter that the surplus is “non-recurring” and should not be spent on recurring expenditures like school personnel salaries. In other words, having money in 2024 to hire more teachers does not mean still having money to pay the teachers in 2025 and onward.

Even though it looks unlikely that the mayor will increase the budget significantly soon, the education quality in Northampton may not be too dire yet. In 2023-24, the city’s student-teacher ratio was 10.4 to 1, lower than the state average of 11.8 to 1. Northampton also exceeded state averages in experienced and in-field teachers, while student performance on MCAS tests remained on par with the rest of Massachusetts.

But how long can Northampton maintain its standing? Without increased funding, the future of its public schools remains uncertain, hinging on the mayor’s next budget decisions.