

Majority of Southern US public school students are poor

By Sandy English
7 November 2007

In an indication of the deepening social inequality in the United States, a report issued last week shows that 54 percent of students attending public schools—just over 18 million children—in 15 states of the US South are low-income.

The report, “A New Majority: Low-Income Students in the South’s Public Schools” <http://www.sefatl.org/showTeaser.asp?did=542>, issued by the Southern Educational Foundation (SEF), an Atlanta-based non-profit organization that studies educational issues in the South, shows a dramatic rise in the number of low-income students in public schools over the last 20 years, which now includes 84 percent in Louisiana, 75 percent in Mississippi, and 62 percent in Florida. In some major cities in the South, such as Memphis, Tennessee, 80 percent of public-school students are low-income.

Low-income students were defined as those who came from a family of three or more that earned \$22,231 or less a year, making them eligible for free lunches, or students from a family with a combined annual income of \$31,765 who were eligible for reduced-price lunches.

The South has historically been the poorest region of the United States and had the most children living in poverty and the lowest per capita state spending on students. The number of poor children in public schools in the South dropped in the 1960s because of federal anti-poverty programs that were implemented largely as a response to the mass civil-rights movement.

But by 1970, this decrease had fallen off, and, the report notes, “In 1975 the trend lines for low income students in the South and across the nation began to creep upward,” although as late as 1989 only Mississippi had a majority, at 59 percent, and in the South as a whole the figure was 39 percent.

The SEF report cites a number of factors for the rise, including the high birthrates among African-Americans and Latinos, traditionally the groups with some of the highest rates of poverty in the United States, but more profoundly, the new majority of low-income students reflects the redistribution of wealth from the working class and middle class to the wealthiest layers of the population over the last two decades.

This is the fruit of a deliberate policy of government budget cuts that the report cites as one of the chief causes of the trend, in particular the cutbacks in federal anti-poverty programs begun under the Reagan Administration.

Intimately connected to these policies has been the globalization of production, which has hit workers in Southern industries hard. As businesses searched for cheaper sources of labor around the world, textile mills shut down in the Carolinas and Appalachian coalmines laid off workers. Poor children now make up 49 percent of the public school population in North Carolina, 52 percent in South Carolina, 52 percent in West Virginia, and 50 percent in Kentucky.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* quoted Steve Suitts, SEF program coordinator, “We understood from our general monitoring of trends there had been an increase,” he said. “But we had not expected as rapid an increase as there had been in the last two decades.”

The developments in the South—the most impoverished area of the United States—are only the forefront of a national trend. The report shows that three states outside of the South also have majorities of low-income students in their public schools: New Mexico (62 percent), California (51 percent), and Oregon (50 percent).

The report observes, “Since almost three-fifths of the nation’s public school students reside in Southern and

Western states, these two regions guide the national pattern ... If recent rates of growth continue in the South and West and in two other large states, Illinois and New York [with current figures at 49 percent and 42 percent respectively] then the United States could have a majority of low income students in public schools within the next 10 years.” In New York City, with 36 resident billionaires and enormous wealth in the financial sector, 68 percent of public school students in the nation’s largest school system qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The report adds to mounting evidence that the single most debilitating factor in American education is poverty. According to testing by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, lower-income students in the fourth to eighth grades scored 20 to 30 points lower than other students in reading and math.

A report published in October by the Center of Educational Policy found that low-income students perform the same in private schools, traditionally regarded as havens of superior education, as they do in urban public schools. The report noted, “To the extent that students attending independent schools come from more affluent backgrounds, they may be more likely to progress rapidly.”

The report indicates that a cultural disaster is now affecting an entire population of young people, since students not included in the study at private and parochial schools make up a small percentage of all students in the South and nation-wide, about 9 percent in the South according to the most recent information from the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as those who are home-schooled (slightly over a million in the United States).

Furthermore, even private schools are not immune from the ravages of inequality and poverty. The SEF report states, “there are suggestions that part of the growth of in the South’s private schooling includes the enrollment of a larger, more significant share of lower income students”.

Steve Suitts of the SEF noted in the *Kansas City Star*, “low-income students as a group begin school least ready. They are the students most likely to drop out of school. They perform at the lowest levels on tests that decide graduation and advancement. They have the least access to college.”

But inequality in education dogs poorer students even

when they enter higher education. A recent report by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education observed that only 36 percent of low-income students complete bachelor’s degrees within 8-1/2 years, as opposed to 81 percent of higher-income students.

In January, the journal *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* reported that low-income students are often not aware of the availability of low-interest federally guaranteed loans, reporting that, “of all independent private loan borrowers, 49 percent are low-income, with a family income of less than \$20,000.”

Increases in social inequality have distinct effects on the younger generation of the working class. Fewer will have adequate reading and math skills to place themselves into college even if they can finish high school, and many will not finish college.

The effects of mass poverty among students go far beyond prospects for employment and a decent income. These trends reflect a blatant attack by the ruling oligarchy on the right of millions of students to understand the nature of the society they live in, to grasp the scientific laws that govern reality, and to assimilate the best achievements in the arts.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>