

New York City: random searches for public school students

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In a further erosion of democratic rights in New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced that after April 24, School Safety Agents and police officers will perform random searches with metal detectors of students attending the city's middle and high schools. Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said the searches might affect as many as 10 schools a day, noting that the Police Department already had the necessary material and personnel. The president of the United Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, praised the policy as a "very important first step" and called for the "enforcing of codes of conduct."

Despite the fact that major crime has declined in city schools over the past year, neither students nor school staff will have warning before being scanned, though the city will honor legal obligations by posting the new policy on school buildings. The authorities will not only confiscate guns and knives but also other prohibited items, including cell-phones. Currently 82 of the city's public schools have permanent metal detectors installed, through which more than 100, 000 students pass on their way to classes.

On April 12, five students were arrested outside of John Jay High School in Brooklyn during a walkout of over 200 against a stricter metal detector scanning policy that had resulted in the seizure of cell phones from about 80 students. According to press reports, a number of these students were manhandled and bruised by the police.

One student, Jaditza Lopez, 14, who had a large bruise on her left arm, told the *New York Daily News*, "They threw me on the ground because they thought I was protesting." Lopez spent the night in jail. Another student, Maurice Reid, 16, was arrested and charged with kicking a cop. According to Reid, "She pushed me and I tried to get past her so she clubbed me." A

witness told the *News*, "We were yelling at the cops to let go of the boy. He must have bruises on his legs where they hit him. I feel bad for this student. In this situation, he did nothing wrong."

Although it is located in the relatively affluent Park Slope neighborhood, John Jay's students come almost entirely from working class minority families. It is among the lowest performing schools in the city. Fewer than 4 percent of its students graduate in four years and slightly under half graduate at all. The average class size is 34 students per teacher. The school building is decaying and infested with rats and cockroaches.

Even at better performing schools, however, students have reacted with indignation at the city's intrusions into their right to privacy. In September last year, 1,500 walked out from DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, with a predominately working class minority population and an 89 percent graduate rate.

The students were protesting new rules that obliged them to stand in line, often missing classes, while waiting for airport-style security checks. They were prohibited from leaving the building for lunch and subject to scrutiny by security cameras. Police confiscated pens necessary for art classes, assuming that they were used for writing graffiti.

Reacting to the imposition of random scans, Juan Antigua, one of the student leaders from Dewitt Clinton, told the *New York Times*, "It's a bad idea; just another tool that will treat us as criminals." Another Clinton student, Jessica Sosa, said, "Putting these metal detectors in deprives us of our self-esteem, of our confidence that we are going to school to learn."

Donna Lieberman, the executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), which is examining the new policy, told the Associated Press, "This moves us closer to a surveillance society. First,

we have unannounced searches in the subway. Now it's in the schools. It's a short step to unannounced searches in the street."

New York City has the country's largest school system, with over 1 million students and 80,000 teachers. The system is fraught with social tensions. Police presence in schools has grown, including both regular armed officers and School Safety Agents, who are uniformed employees of the Police Department but do not carry firearms. The city hired 200 more of these school officers in September, for a total of over 4,600.

A series of recent confrontations between teachers and administrators on one side and police on the other have raised the question, who is running the schools? The NYCLU filed a suit last month on behalf of two high school teachers who "were arrested, abused, and verbally harassed" by police officers in their school, according to a press release.

Teachers Quinn Kronen and Cara Wolfson-Kronen were arrested at the New School for Arts and Sciences in the Longwood section of The Bronx in March 2005 after Mr. Kronen questioned the handcuffing of students following an altercation. Police yelled at Mr. Kronen and arrested Ms. Wolfson-Kronen when she objected to their behavior. She was arrested and held outside in freezing temperatures. Mr. Kronen was arrested shortly thereafter.

A month earlier at the Bronx Guild High School, a police officer arrested a student who had made "a loud statement in the hallway," according to NYCLU documents. The police officer, Juan Gonzalez, disrupted a class in progress to arrest the girl. When the principal, Michael Saguaro, and school aide James Burgos intervened, Gonzalez arrested them.

Gonzalez had been reported in January to the Civilian Complaint Review Board, the city's oversight board for police abuse, for allegedly placing a student in a chokehold. Incredibly, he was not reassigned. Soguero and Burgos were suspended from their jobs for over two months.

Another principal, Aurelia Curtis of Curtis High School in Staten Island, was removed from her position in December 2005 "after police complained that she had been insubstantially deferential to authority," according to another NYCLU document.

New York's educational system has come to increasingly reflect the stark social polarization that

characterizes the city as a whole. The wealthiest children attend expensive private institutions while there are a few good public schools, including examination high schools, where admission is hotly contested. For the vast majority of the city's youth, however, there are the large schools that increasingly resemble holding pens and a panoply of often ill-conceived "small schools" that promise a better education but, for the most part, are unable to deliver. It is these last two categories, almost entirely consisting of working class youth, that are facing the brunt of the police repression.



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