

Chicago-area high school students face expulsion for antiwar sit-in

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Students who participated in a peaceful antiwar sit-in last Thursday, November 1, at a Chicago-area school are facing disciplinary action, up to and including expulsion. The American Civil Liberties Union on Wednesday urged officials at West Morton High School, in the working-class suburb of Berwyn, to reconsider the suspensions and possible expulsions of more than two dozen students, calling the penalties “grossly disproportionate to the alleged offenses.”

Students and parents have reacted angrily to the decision of the school superintendent Ben Nowakowski, who threatened 19 students with expulsion and 16 others with varying terms of suspension for staging a protest against the Iraq war. Such harsh penalties are typically reserved for weapons offenses, gang activity, bomb threats, and distribution of controlled substances. The administration’s decisions are currently supported by the Cook County School Board.

About 20 parents and their children gathered outside the high school on Tuesday to protest the penalties. Parents and students say that punishments are being meted out on the basis of academic standing or athletic abilities. Students have reported that the variance in penalties is also based on students’ willingness to cooperate with the administration by pointing out those responsible for introducing the idea of the sit-in or who were instrumental in organizing it.

Parents say that some students with lower grades were given 10-day suspensions and could face expulsion, while others were given only five-day suspensions and do not face expulsions. The suspensions began the day after the protest.

Many parents are outraged that Morton West is intimidating their children so openly. In taking disciplinary measures that could irreparably damage

their academic careers, some feel the school is criminalizing students for expressing themselves and are calling for the students to be reinstated and the penalties removed from their records.

The November 1 protest began with about 60 students in the cafeteria during lunch-hour. About 30 students left the protest after being threatened by school authorities. Students said they were told they would not face suspension if they moved the protest to a room adjacent to the principal’s office. They also said they were initially told that they would have to serve a Saturday detention for participating in the sit-in.

Once the remaining students had moved to the new location, school officials cordoned off the protest with caution tape and barricaded the area with tables, in an effort to discourage other students from joining. By the end of the school day, the protesting students were told they would be suspended.

Adam Szwarek, Sr., the father of a student who participated, was shocked at the efforts of the school administration to root out those students who organized the sit-in. Szwarek, who said he was not initially supportive of his son’s participation, said his perspective was completely changed when he saw how the school chose to deal with the situation. “They’re persecuting these kids,” he told the WSWS.

Szwarek attended a meeting with his son, Adam Jr., and the assistant principal of Morton West, where they hoped to negotiate a suspension sentence and avoid expulsion. At this meeting, Szwarek Sr. said the assistant principal laid out photographs taken of the students in the cafeteria during the sit-in, with each student’s head numbered.

Szwarek Jr. was asked who the organizers of the sit-in were. When he insisted that he really did not know, the assistant principal refused to revoke his expulsion.

Szwarek Jr. also said that a student who named those thought to be organizers of the sit-in was readmitted to Morton West this week.

“My son will not be able to go back to Morton West after this, even if we are able to prevent him from being expelled. He will always be a target,” the student’s father said. He feels that parents will have to file an injunction against the school board in order to stop the expulsions. A meeting of the District 201 school board Wednesday night took no action on the expulsions.

Mark Serpico, the father of another student who participated, also spoke to the WSWS. He did not understand why student antiwar perspectives are unwelcome at Morton West. “Army recruiters are there three times a week. Why not let them [students] counter-recruit?” he asked.

Serpico is concerned that the students at Morton West will have little freedom to do much of anything on campus. He pointed out, “They can’t even wear hoodies in school any more because it blocks their faces from the security cameras.”

Serpico is planning a door-to-door campaign in Berwyn to gain support for the students who participated in the sit-in. He stated, “They’re trying to shut the kids up. I want them to help stop this unnecessary war.”

In a press release on the incident, Morton High School Superintendent Nowakowski states: “Not only do students have a right to express themselves on matters of conscience, but we encourage them to do so.” He maintains that school authorities moved against the students for their “disruption of the educational process.”

Contrary to the superintendent’s claims, the retribution against the West Morton High School students is a reaction against the growing opposition to the war policies of the Bush administration and its Democratic accomplices among wide layers of students and young people. The school administration’s actions are an open assault on the democratic and Constitutional rights of students to express their views and must be vigorously opposed.



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