

Students protest collective punishment at New York City high school

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Students left their classrooms at Murry Bergtraum High School in New York City on Thursday, December 9th, in reaction to a school-wide suspension of bathroom usage. As a punishment for a fight between two students that had broken out in the morning, principal Andrea Lewis forbade teachers from allowing any of the 2,445 students to leave classes to use the bathroom.

Students began to text-message each other about the ban and as classes changed at the end of one of the morning periods, hundreds of students crowded into the hallways and ran up and down stairwells (something they are normally forbidden to do) for about 20 minutes.

The next day, armed police officers were on the premises in addition to the unarmed School Safety Agents (SSAs), who are also members of the New York Police Department (NYPD) and routinely patrol the city's 425 high schools.

On the following Monday, school authorities set up mobile metal detectors at the entrance of the school. Students were instructed to place belts, electronic devices and metal objects in paper bags that were either scanned or searched. Approximately 500 cell phones were confiscated.

Unlike many city high schools, Murry Bergtraum does not regularly scan students for weapons or cellular phones.

Many students, realizing they would be forced to go through the metal detectors, opted to skip school instead. Fights between students have rarely included the use of weapons, leading many to believe that the scanners were a further punishment for the previous Thursday's events.

Principal Lewis is known at Murry Bergtraum for her extreme disciplinary measures. She has implemented policies of confiscating hats and electronics from students on site. Students have even been suspended for visibly displaying headphones. She has also permanently expelled students for infractions that would usually warrant a suspension.

According to the GothamSchools blog, a number of recent actions by Lewis led to the student explosion, including a change in grading practice, the mandatory assignment of homework, and the cancellation of a senior cruise.

First leading the much smaller ACORN Community High School in Brooklyn, Lewis transferred to Bergtraum to supposedly

get the school "back on track." For her agreement to stay at Bergtraum for three years, Lewis received a \$25,000 bonus.

Some New York City education bloggers have speculated that the city's Department of Education (DOE) deliberately brought in Lewis to make life so intolerable for teachers and students that the school would be forced to close.

Murry Bergtraum recently was labeled an "impact school" due to violence and low test scores. The school received an overall grade of D in a DOE report card last year. The school also received an F for school environment.

Bergtraum has experienced an influx of students in recent years caused by the closing of several large neighboring schools. In a 2008-2009 survey the school was rated 135 percent overcrowded (A rating of 100 percent would mean the school had no free space but wasn't over crowded).

Most of Murry Bergtraum's students come from the poorest families in the city, the section of the population most severely affected by the economic crisis. In 2009-2010, 73 percent of students received a free or reduced price lunch, higher than the average 53 percent for other high school students. To qualify for these subsidies, a family must show an annual income at or near the official poverty line.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) delegate in the school, John Elfrank-Dana noted in a letter to Murry Bergtraum faculty that the student actions were "the last straw, i.e., that the revolt wouldn't have happened if it were not for a deep seated resentment that brewing in the students. That resentment stems from the fact that they know they are getting junk education. They understand that they aren't getting their needs met by this system. That they need smaller class sizes, more family and guidance support, a genuine curriculum and not some cookie cutter/corporate template imposed on them like Kaplan. They know that elsewhere in the city and country there are schools with class sizes of 12 or so, with students using the latest computer technology to engage in enrichment activities and not meaningless drill exercises ... [w]here teachers who are not over-stressed and threatened by U ratings on a daily basis, are patiently providing needed individual attention to their needs."

The emphasis on test scores is being used by both Democrats and Republicans to dismantle public schools and to subordinate education to the capitalist market. New York City now has over

100 privately owned but publicly funded charter schools. Charters have little oversight to protect working conditions or professional competencies for teachers. Basic educational rights for students, such as curriculums in the arts or physical education, or programs for special needs students, and—a vital need in New York City—English Language Learners, are largely absent.

These policies have been implemented on a national scale first through George Bush's "No Child Left Behind" and now under the Obama administration's Race to the Top (RTTT) program.

Schools in New York City are expecting budget cuts of \$500 million in state education aid in 2011. Nondiscretionary costs and enrollment are expected to grow by roughly \$1.2 billion from the previous year. Last month, Mayor Bloomberg announced the layoff of nearly 6,000 city public school teachers.

Teachers' unions, including the United Federation of Teachers, have played a critical role both in supporting the pro-testing policies, and allowing budget cuts in education to pass in state after state. The UFT, as part of a deal to support New York State's application for Barack Obama's Race to the Top program, has agreed to allow 40 percent of teacher evaluation to be based on student test scores. The UFT has collaborated with the DOE to implement performance pay based on student test scores.

Billionaire New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently appointed his wealthy crony, former Hearst executive Cathleen Black, as Schools Chancellor. Black, who is completely without experience or qualification in education, will continue the drive to shut down schools, lay off teachers, and breed more charters.

Attacks on public education and opposition to them by young people are part of a growing international phenomenon. Thousands of British and Italian students have taken to the streets in recent weeks to protest massive tuition hikes and cuts in education budgets. They have been met with increasing police violence.

Budget cuts have also led to protests in the tri-state area. Students in New Jersey last April boycotted classes to protest Governor Chris Christie's plans to cut \$820 million from the state's education budget. The protest was organized on Facebook and drew in tens of thousands of participants statewide.

The protest at Murry Bergtraum, however spontaneous it was, has social and historical roots in the deepening social inequality in New York City—already greater than that of Chile—and the efforts of a tiny layer of billionaires and multi-millionaires to destroy the largest public school system in the United States and replace it with for-profit institutions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of Murry Bergtraum students on their way to school. Fabio, a sophomore, said, "It's unfair that [Principal Andrea Lewis] did this. That's the reason all the kids left classes. Everyone should not have been affected because two people were fighting."

Another sophomore added, "I think this is a good school and that what she did wasn't right. She's stepping on our rights. I feel that she should not have punished the whole school for what only two students did."

Another student remarked, "After she announced that no one

could use the bathroom, kids got on their cell phones and left class starting on the third floor. Pretty soon it spread to every floor. It was unfair. What does it have to do with discipline?"

Sasha, a junior, observed that after the event, "The head of security came out and told us that they would close the school if we did that again. If that happens we'll be sent to zone schools that are worse than this one. I don't want this school to get a bad reputation and hurt my chances at going to college or getting a job in the future."

Another student, David, emphasized that student resentments weren't simply the product of the principal's actions on that day. "This has been building up for a long time." Referring to Lewis, he said, "The issue was more of how she approaches students. She's downgraded us. She felt that she could talk to us anyway she wants. We need a nurturing environment. We're not adults yet, we're children really. She got a \$25,000 bonus to run this place. This is one of the last schools in the city that has not been cut up."

David went on to detail budget cuts at the school: "The lunch price has gone up here. It used to be free but now it costs \$2.50, and it's a pretty bad lunch.

Kids on sports teams have to buy their jerseys out of their own money, and pay for their own tournaments. After-school activities have been cut and student government has been cut.

The teachers feel the same way. They want to get students more into school activities instead of reprimanding them."

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