

Pentagon supplies grenade launchers and armored vehicles to schools

Nick Barrickman
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Twenty-six US school districts have received assault rifles, grenade launchers, Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles, and other equipment from the US military, the Associated Press reported last week.

The hardware was obtained under the Defense Department's 1033 program, which has shipped over \$5.1 billion in military gear to law enforcement agencies across the US. The AP noted that "since the Columbine school shooting in 1999 school districts have increasingly participated" in the 1033 program.

Earlier this month local press reported that the San Diego Unified School District had obtained its own Mine Resistant Ambush Protected vehicle (MRAP), which it had absurdly sought to justify by claiming that the nearly 20-ton vehicle was intended for conducting "rescue" missions of children in schools. To "assuage community worries," AP reported, the tank-like vehicle would be "outfitted with medical supplies and teddy bears."

The largest school district to participate in the Defense Department program is the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which enrolls more than 900,000 students and is the second largest school system in the US. After outrage from local residents, the district recently announced it would be returning several grenade launchers it had obtained under the program, claiming them to be "not essential life-saving items within the scope, duties and mission" of the school district. The school district would continue to keep over 60 M16 assault rifles and the MRAP it received.

"We have to balance the need for a vehicle that can save lives and what's best for our department, with what perception is and what community expectations are," Los Angeles Police Department chief Steven

Zipperman told *Wall Street Journal*.

Similarly, the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District, which rests on the Texas/Mexico border, possesses its own SWAT team thanks to equipment from the Pentagon. "We just want to be prepared for the kind of things that have happened elsewhere in the country, Sandy Hook and earlier before that, Columbine," Ricardo Perez, Edinburg's police chief, told the *Wall Street Journal*. "These officers are trained in tactics. Some are former military," said Perez.

The Defense Logistics Agency, which oversees the 1033 program, claims on its web site that as many as 8,000 local law enforcement agencies have received equipment under the program.

A number of local law enforcement agencies involved with the program were notable simply for the unwieldiness of their acquisitions in relation to their overall size. Of note is Stagecoach, Texas, located north of Houston. According to the government watchdog MuckRock, the town of barely 500 people and a police force of three received a military truck under the 1033 program, while other towns in the vicinity received assault rifles, vehicles and other hardware.

The creation of what amounts to paramilitary units in communities and the abridgement of basic democratic rights were demonstrated in last month's protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in which peaceful protests against a police killing of an unarmed youth were subjected to massive repression by militarized police.

The news that school districts would be armed with military-grade weaponry has justifiably outraged local residents in these communities, many of whom are already terrorized by local police. Several dozen community groups recently penned an open letter to the

US Department of Defense, stating that “adding the presence of military-grade weapons to school climates that have become increasingly hostile due to their overreliance on police to handle routine student discipline can only exacerbate existing tensions.”

Officials have raised concerns that the usage of guns and other military items, in areas that in some cases do not even have qualified personnel to operate them, are an undue waste of resources. This call for “efficiency” was the refrain at a Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee hearing held earlier this month. At the hearing, which was nominally intended to “review” the militarization of police, committee chairman Tom Harper, a Democrat, said that “these programs were established with very good intentions. The question is whether this equipment matches what the police truly need to uphold the law.”

In fact, the policy of arming local police with military-grade hardware is of a piece with the general aims of the US ruling class, which, facing a growing social and political crisis, is turning to ever more dictatorial forms of rule in response to growing popular opposition to war and social inequality.



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