

Colorado high school students protest “patriotism” indoctrination

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Hundreds of Jefferson County high school students walked out of their classes this week in response to a proposal submitted by members of the Jefferson County school board seeking to revamp the county's US history curriculum.

Reports from local media confirmed that hundreds of students from Dakota Ridge, Chatfield, Arvada West, Pomona, Ralston Valley, Evergreen, Wheat Ridge, and Golden high schools participated in the walkouts and demonstrations which included the blocking of a main intersection in suburban Denver on Wednesday morning.

The proposal, submitted by a three-member majority of the school board calling itself the "Board Committee for Curriculum Review," stated:

"Theories should be distinguished from fact. Materials should promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights. Materials should not encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law. Instructional materials should present positive aspects of the United States and its heritage. Content pertaining to political and social movements in history should present balanced and factual treatment of the positions."

The walkouts came on the heels of a "sick-out" involving some 50 teachers on Friday, which was planned in response to the US history curriculum proposal and to new teacher evaluation measures.

A statement issued Monday by Conifer High School teachers participating in the sick-out denounced "the Board's insistence on censoring the college preparatory AP US History curriculum," saying it would "require teachers to completely ignore certain aspects of American history." The statement further condemned

the imposition of "an arbitrary, nontransparent evaluation system that vests absolute authority in administrators."

Students organized their own protests for the following week via Facebook after learning of the teacher sick-out. The students were strongly warned against participating in the demonstrations by school administrators but proceeded to walk out anyway, local parents said.

Jefferson County, the second largest school district in Colorado, is among several districts that have become focal points for controversy surrounding efforts to revise the AP US History curriculum (APUSH) nationwide.

Opponents of the revised history curriculum, described by Jefferson County school board member Julie Williams as unduly emphasizing "race, gender, class, ethnicity, grievance and American-bashing," have sought to alter local education statutes to favor a more "conservative" approach to US history.

Such efforts have already met with some success in Texas, where operating rules drawn up by the State Board of Education (SBOE) in 2013 contain language almost identical to that of the Jefferson County proposal: "The materials should not include selections or works that encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife, or disregard of the law. Violence, if it appears, should be treated in the context of its cause and consequence. It should not appear for reasons of unwholesome excitement or sensationalism."

The Texas SBOE rules state openly that historical curricula should be designed to promote "an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods; investments that are determined by private decision rather than by state control; and prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are

determined in a free market."

No serious history of the United States could be written without giving extensive treatment of "civil disorder, social strife or disregard of law," including such epochal advances as the American Revolution, the Civil War, the struggles of the labor movement over a century, and the civil rights movement. Presumably the defenders of private ownership are outraged by positive treatment of the greatest state attack on "private" property in world history up to that point, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves throughout the Confederacy, without compensation to the slave-owners.

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While media coverage presents the issue as a struggle between "conservatives" and "liberals," in reality the assault on historical knowledge by the ultra-right is bound up with the broader education "reform" agenda being implemented nationwide by the Obama administration, which has continued and deepened the reactionary education policies of the George W. Bush administration.

In its education policies, as in everything else, the Obama administration stands shoulder to shoulder with the most rabidly pro-corporate elements in American society, advancing a program of merit pay, teacher evaluations based on standardized testing, and privatization of education through promotion of charter schools.

In a commentary published in the *Colorado Observer* commending the newly elected Jefferson County school board, Dustin Zvonek of the ultra-right Americans for Prosperity, part of the Koch brothers lobbying empire, called for "common sense reforms" such as "funding fairness for charter schools" and "a merit pay system which links better documented performance to higher pay for teachers." Zvonek's recommendations have the full support of the Democratic Party leadership and the Obama administration, not just the Republican right.

No struggle against the destruction of public education and the associated process of historical falsification can succeed without a complete break from the Democrats and the entire "liberal" establishment. This has to be the starting point for the Jefferson County students and all who support their efforts.

The Jefferson County student protests appear set to continue, in one form or another. The JeffCo Students Defending History Facebook page announced Wednesday that students and teachers should come to school on Friday dressed as historical figures or movements responsible for "civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law."



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