

More attacks on public education in Louisiana

Aaron Asa
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A state law was ratified earlier this month in Louisiana that virtually eliminates any oversight of school textbooks, while the state Supreme Court last week reaffirmed sweeping attacks on teacher tenure enacted in 2012. The measures are part of the continuing statewide assaults on pre-kindergarten to university level education.

Bill 287, signed by Republican Governor Bobby Jindal on July 1, allows individual school districts to decide which textbooks to use in classrooms. The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) will have a reduced role in deciding whether textbooks meet state standards and local school boards will not be limited to textbooks reviewed by BESE.

The bill opens the door to the use of substandard textbooks, which could potentially include the teaching of Creationism and religious-based pseudo-sciences in public schools.

The bill was sponsored by Representative Gene Reynolds, a Democrat from Bossier Parish who is also a retired school teacher. Reynolds has a history of promoting religious beliefs and has been especially active in doing so under Jindal's reactionary administration. In 2014, for example, he voted against repealing Louisiana's homophobic and unlawful ban on "crimes against nature," i.e., sodomy and oral sex.

In June it was revealed that a school district in Reynolds' Bossier Parish uses the Bible in its science classes. In this particular case, students were allowed, and encouraged by individual teachers, to use "evidence" from the Bible to debunk evolutionary theory in class presentations. The schools sought to defend this clear violation of church and state by claiming students were not issued Bibles or religious texts as required class material, but were allowed to use them as supplementary resources.

Under the reactionary Louisiana Science Education Act signed by Jindal in 2008, and passed by a near-unanimous bipartisan majority, teachers are allowed to "supplement" state-approved science material with "outside sources" that challenge the theory of evolution and global warming. This is palmed off under the guise of "academic freedom" and "open mindedness."

The new law will make it easier for religious fanatics on local school boards to smuggle their obscurantist materials into classrooms.

Several attempts by Democratic legislators to repeal the Louisiana Science Education Act have failed, including one this summer. However, state Democrats are deeply implicated in attempts to stir up religious backwardness, as shown by their broad support for the original bill and by Reynolds' legislative history.

Governor Jindal has frequently been identified with the reactionary promotion of religion during his eight-year tenure. In January he held a controversial prayer rally at Louisiana State University and has consistently worked to deny access to abortion and gay rights in his state on "religious grounds."

Jindal has emerged as an opponent of science more broadly, publicly criticizing research on climate change in a state ravaged by Hurricane Katrina and dominated by low-lying coastal wetlands threatened with destruction by rising sea levels.

For years, the state has been at the forefront of the attack on education. In 2005 almost the entire public school system of New Orleans was turned over to the state-run Recovery School District to be converted into charter schools. To facilitate this, the entire teaching staff of the Orleans Parish School Board was laid off after Katrina. A lawsuit filed by the teachers was dismissed earlier this year.

Even Louisiana State University, the state's flagship

university, was forced to make contingency plans to file for bankruptcy this year when they were faced with a staggering 80 percent budget cut for the coming fall semester. This was eventually prevented at the last minute by a workaround solution drawing on one-time funding sources.

Meanwhile, the attacks on teachers continue unabated. Last week the state Supreme Court reaffirmed their ruling from last October upholding the supposed constitutionality of a 2012 law that makes it easier for school boards to fire tenured instructors, under the guise of “accountability standards.”

The high court heard another challenge to the law from a teacher, Kasha LaPointe from Vermillion Parish, after she was fired in 2013 without an adequate pre-termination hearing. Vermillion Parish Superintendent described the arbitrary reason for her termination as her alleged, “willful neglect of duty and dishonesty.”

The Third Circuit Court of Appeals upheld her challenge, citing the lack of a proper hearing. Once the case was taken to the state Supreme Court, however, the law was upheld and LaPointe’s case was sent back to the appeals court.

Under the law, school superintendents are given the authority to terminate any tenured position at their discretion. The terminated teacher then has two opportunities for an appeal hearing, once before a tenure panel and a second in a hearing before a judge. Two of the three members of the tenure panel are appointed by the school district (in LaPointe's case, the panel predictably voted by 2-1 to uphold her termination). The final decision, however, ultimately rests with the superintendent.

The law was rewritten last year to avoid further legal challenges. The tenure panel was eliminated from the law and replaced with a single “disciplinary officer,” picked at random from a list compiled by the school board.



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