

Colorado teachers denied reemployment by panel of private consultants and administrators

Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee
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At the beginning of the semester, all teachers, school staff and paraprofessionals at Mitchell High School in the city of Colorado Springs were summarily dismissed as of the end of this school year and informed that they would have to reapply for their jobs for 2021-22. With the support of the local unions, every educational employee was told to either seek employment elsewhere or compete against others to secure a new contract at Mitchell.

Veteran and new educators lost their jobs at Mitchell, a high-poverty school with many students coming from first-generation immigrant families. The claim made by the school district—that this was done out of concern for the children because of their low college admission test scores—is a lie.

When considered in combination with the devastating physical and psychological toll that the global pandemic has had on young people, it is clear that the student body at such a school is most in need of continuity and the experience built up by educators at the school over the course of years, not a complete overhaul of the entire staff. A significant portion of the student population requires enrollment in English language learning classes, and these students likely will be deprived of their right to equal education as the wave of teacher dismissals takes its toll on the learning environment.

Since the universal layoff was announced, new details have emerged concerning the interview process for teachers seeking to be rehired by Mitchell High School. Teachers who reapplied for their jobs report confronting a six-person interview panel that did not include a single individual, much less a fellow educator, from Mitchell High School itself. Instead, applicants faced a line-up of private educational consultants and district-level administrators with little to no knowledge of the situation at the school, a Human Resources representative from the

district, and even the new athletic director. While coaches can serve important roles at schools, athletic considerations have no place alongside evaluations about educators. This detail merely emphasizes the complete lack of administrative concern for the educational futures of students.

The interview itself was an entirely corporate process in which a teacher's rhetorical persuasiveness is prioritized over his or her body of work with students. This had the predictable result of forcing out fine arts, visual arts, language arts, and special education teachers, whose impact on students cannot be adequately represented without rigorous observation and conversation with students. Fewer than half of the teachers at Mitchell have been rehired through an interview process in which there were, according to one teacher who went through the process, "no real other sources of input" with regard to each educator's body of work at the school.

This example is most clearly evidenced by one humanities teacher who was denied a position despite over a decade of experience and success with students and other faculty. Predictably, the only field to have more than half of its teachers rehired was science. The bulk of the terminations have fallen upon the shoulders of teachers in English (two rehired), social studies (one rehired), and special education.

The tools usually used to evaluate a teacher's effectiveness, many of which are already geared to lay the blame for weak student performance on educators, include everything from lesson observations, curriculum reviews, end-of-year student feedback and student test scores accumulated over the course of several years. However, according to multiple teachers at the school, each educator's body of work at Mitchell was a secondary consideration in the interview.

Existing school administration and support staff were cut out of the picture altogether. Although many of the teachers used the assistant principal as a positive reference, said assistant principal only received one call for a reference check over the course of almost a month.

The Colorado Springs Education Association (CSEA) has made clear that it fully supports the mass firing of its members. The local union, the state Colorado Education Association (CEA) with which it is affiliated, and the National Education Association (NEA) have done nothing to defend the workers. Instead, they operate as an arm of the district's human resources department and collaborate in the shredding of job protections for the very educators from whom they collect dues.

Instead of mobilizing educators to defend their livelihoods, this week the union representing Mitchell has focused its energies on providing "equity training" and "interviewing to improve equity" while "avoiding implicit biases."

The betrayal at hand could not be clearer, and educators, parents and students must respond. In order to fight these assaults, they must form rank-and-file committees to defend public education, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In every country, the ruling elites are utilizing the pandemic to eviscerate public education and all the social rights of the working class. This must be opposed through a unified global struggle of rank-and-file workers, independently of the pro-corporate unions and big-business parties. Only the IWA-RFC is fighting to develop this coordinated international movement of educators and all workers, and our committee urges Mitchell High School workers to join this movement.

The attack on educators at Mitchell High School is just one manifestation of the widespread assault on public education being carried out under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of educational professionals across the US and globally have quit after spending the better part of the last year fighting overwhelming workloads with no support from the Trump or Biden administrations, media outlets, or unions.

Recently, the Austin Independent School District (AISD) in Texas was the target of a lawsuit filed by Disability Rights Texas, which argued that thousands of special needs students have been denied access to a free public education because of severe delays in special needs assessments.

The testing delays are a direct result of a shortage of

Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs), who conduct the vital work of testing children with learning or developmental challenges. The district hemorrhaged qualified and dedicated LSSPs over the course of the last decade due primarily to underpayment, unmanageable caseloads, and a "miserable work culture," as reported by local news in late February when over thirty workers within the Special Education department resigned. The level of turnover over the course of the past two years alone has been astronomical. In March of 2019, AISD had 51 LSSPs on staff; within two years, all but three of those 51 have resigned. Although the district has made hires, the student-to-psychologist ratio is nearing 4,000:1.

This week, the AISD Special Education department announced plans to overhaul both leadership and staff. Dr. Theresa Arocha-Gill will become executive director of the department, and 88 employees will be laid off and asked to "reapply for their positions." The district has attempted to fill in this gap by further contracting out the work of evaluating students to private consulting firms that have already proven incapable of responding to the time-sensitive educational demands of special needs students.

This is the endgame of education privatization: "unprofitable" students such as those at Mitchell High School, in AISD, and in thousands of other districts across the US are relegated to the margins of the system. Students living in poverty and those with developmental and behavioral challenges require additional resources, but their well-being is a secondary concern in the face of educational profiteering.



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