

“I needed to use this to make a stand against the system we have in place”

LAUSD high school valedictorian rips into the erosion of public education in graduation speech, sparking mass support

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On June 6, Axel Brito, Hollywood High School Class of 2022 valedictorian, gave a powerful speech during his senior graduation ceremony at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. His speech is an indictment of the entrenched corruption within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) at the expense of quality education and services for students and the working conditions of teachers and school workers.

Video footage of Axel’s speech has gone viral on social media, having been viewed over 2.6 million times on TikTok, over 24,000 times on YouTube and over 11,000 times on Instagram. Social media posts have been flooded with statements of support for Axel and the content of his remarks, showcasing the overall discontent among students, teachers and parents to not only LAUSD but the present dire state of K-12 public education.

During the speech, the school administration cut Axel’s mic. Immediately the crowd chanted, “Let him speak! Let him speak!” Axel waited on stage, took the microphone off the stand and moved away from the administrator who had come onto the stage. Fearing the opposition brewing in the crowd, the sound to Brito’s mic was switched back on, allowing him to finish.

Reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Axel about his speech and the conditions in the district, including the negative impacts of privatization and charter schools, the pandemic, racial politics, lowering standards for graduation, overworked teachers, and low quality education.

Axel began the interview by laying out the impact of school privatization efforts in the district: “Corruption is just rampant. Either by LAUSD inflating graduation rates to keep schools open and get better funding; or in the school board of education, where we have people like Nick Melvoin and others such as Monica Garcia, who are elected by having super PACs that centrally funnel millions of dollars into their campaigns.

“There is no way that a teacher or even a parent who *actually* cares about the kids can win against them in running for school board member, because they are always going to be out-funded by multimillion-dollar entities. And in some instances, it is multi-billion, like Eli Broad...

“We have very few entities that are manipulating our school system. Broad has passed away, but his foundation still lives on, and it’s still funding and churning out superintendents and principals who are ready to have a pro-charter stance. It’s more of the problem of the illusion of free choice because they are funneling money and taking the cream of the crop of the student population and transferring them to other schools.”

District half composed of charters

During his speech, Axel also criticized former superintendents John Deasy and Austin Beutner, who “were put into power by the late billionaire Eli Broad and his heavily charter-centered foundation. ... Both of these men were put there with no experience in education and left amid controversy and successfully paved the way towards privatizing LAUSD. Broad disrupted our education to achieve a district half-composed of charters. He, alongside the Gates Foundation and the Walton Foundation, wormed their way through this district to privatize our human right to an education.”

The recently-elected LAUSD Superintendent Alberto Carvalho will continue this process. As former superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools in Florida, he oversaw \$2 billion in school cuts in 2008-09. Now, Carvalho will divert even more money to charters and other school privatization schemes in LAUSD.

For his part, Superintendent Carvalho rakes in \$440,000 per year. Showcasing the level of corruption in the district, LAUSD board members make the highest salaries of any school board in the US, with each board member taking in over \$125,000 annually. Significantly, LAUSD school board member Nick Melvoin, who was present during Axel’s speech, walked off the stage.

Speaking with the WSWS, Axel detailed the impact of school closures on students and families. Regarding a middle school closing in his neighborhood to be replaced by a new charter school, he said, “They say the school is ‘underperforming,’ but now they are replacing all the students with people that don’t even live in this community. They are not serving the community. Parents who used to walk a block to take their kids to school now have to go two or three miles or more. It doesn’t make sense to me.

Education is a human right

“Why are we burdening parents and students to get an education? Education is a human right, isn’t it? They are privatizing education, making it more difficult for parents and students to get a quality

education. We [students] are treated as commodities; we are just data points so that schools can remain open. They don't care about us. We are being taught to take standardized tests and Advanced Placement tests. At the end of the day, it's not about us, it's not about an education."

Axel also spoke about the hypocrisy of the school district when it came to keeping students and staff safe from contracting COVID-19 as well as the overall impacts of the pandemic on teachers and students. "The district was heavily hyping the fact that our classes would be smaller, and we would be six feet apart. But then you walk in the first day, there's no COVID protocols, nothing. It's just 32 students crammed into a room, sometimes 40. That's not right, that's not COVID safety."

"My girlfriend had a lot of health issues after she contracted COVID, and she still had to go to school because it wasn't an excused absence. She no longer had COVID, but she still felt sick like she had some of the underlying conditions, and she had to go to school or else she wouldn't be able to graduate. That's not fair at all!

"There are a lot of students still coping with the pandemic. They don't have access to counselors, therapists, psychologists. [The district] should have thought everything out, but they didn't. Every aspect of LAUSD was so poorly planned out. We also were not given any heads-up or support—either emotional or academic."

Axel has been researching charter schools and following conditions in the district for years as he saw the quality of education in the district changing. On the 2019 LAUSD teacher strike, he noted that teachers' demands for better wages, lower class sizes, more nurses and psychologists, etc., were not met under the new terms of their contract and that the pandemic only exacerbated these issues.

"It was a lie. Yeah, it was all a lie. ... From my experience from what I've seen is class sizes went down by maybe one or two students. That's still ridiculous. But when you compare it to a private school, which is like one teacher for 12 or 20 students, that's what education should be. We shouldn't be like all huddled into a room and have one teacher catering to 32 students, sometimes even more; like sometimes they go against the new set regulations. Like that shouldn't be the case."

"In my senior year of high school, I had a teacher—an amazing teacher—who was teaching 14 classes at the same time because there weren't enough math teachers. The average teacher was teaching six classes. He was teaching two classes simultaneously, where he would be teaching a specific class and then he'd run across the hall and teach a different class. That's what our education became. Teachers are just not paid enough..."

The UTLA accomplished nothing

"The [United Teachers of Los Angeles union] accomplished nothing. It was a sham. Class sizes didn't go down significantly. Teachers got paid such a small fragment of what they should be paid. And even with nurses and psychiatrists, there are only enough in the district to have on site two times a week, at best."

"The teacher shortage is still an ongoing thing. We had three counselors in the span of one year: Our first counselor retired. The second was anti-vax, so she just left when vaccines became mandatory for staff."

"And then we had a third counselor step in. *She* was amazing! She was an intern, working a job that was not meant for an intern. She was overworked, chewed up, and spit out by our school system. She was an amazing person who helped me get into Brown University and helped other people get into prestigious universities. She wasn't supposed to be a college counselor, but she worked as a college counselor and sometimes became a therapist, and she was amazing. It's people like that, that keep

our schools open, and yet they chew them up, spit them out, and that's not right. It's not right at all."

"We need more funding. The district does fund but they do it in the form of virtue signaling. For example, during the pandemic, we had the BLM movement in the summer of 2020. There was a movement calling for defunding school police. Okay, I'm fine with that. But where did that money go to? It went to black students, only black students. Yes, who cares about Hispanics, or you know, Middle Easterners that are coming who don't know how to speak English. It's always about virtue signaling."

"At Hollywood High School, we had \$1 million for Title I funding, the general funding for the school, and then there was \$833,000 that was used just for 11.6 percent of the school, which was black. That was how it was arranged because it's always about virtue signaling. They don't care about us."

Programs should be for all races, not just one race

"So white students are always held up as the metric, like everyone wants to use that metric. ... Before, the disparity between Hispanics and blacks was minuscule. It was like a 5 percent difference. Then black students were performing 17 percent worse than white students, I believe on average. And then Hispanic students were performing 12 percent worse, but Hispanic students aren't given any additional support at LAUSD. They're just ignored, sidelined. I think the Black Student Achievement Plan (BSAP), the program that funds all this, is a great idea. It is a great idea! Honestly, I love it. But I feel it should be implemented across the board to all races, not just to one race because of virtue signaling."

"Black students at my school, only black students, were given access to a full-time psychiatrist, a full-time counselor—we didn't have one, most of our school didn't have one. They had a special coordinator. They had a school climate advocate, they had tutors, they had all this extra stuff."

"And we didn't. It's like, why aren't we given any of this?"

"I've been labeled racist by a lot of students at my school because I wrote an article about this, how no one else is getting funding, how this is not fair at all. This is just virtue signaling because they did this immediately after the BLM movement. They could have done this at any other moment. They could have helped the black community; they could have helped the Hispanic community at any other moment in time. But they chose to do it right after the BLM movement. They don't care about us. They were just virtue signaling. They were like, 'Oh, students have always had a problem with school police. Oh, man, there's a protest about police being violent. I guess we have to defund the police now. Oh, okay. Now we'll do it.'"

A WSWS reporter ended the interview by asking, "What if the working class, if the teachers and students could run society and run the schools, what do you think it would be like?" Axel responded, "It definitely would not be like what we have now—it would be ideal. It would be ideal to have students and teachers leading. ... And I really hope that someday we do accomplish that."

"Whenever I push towards anything like this happening, no one really cares in my community. No one really notices it. And that's why I had to use my, you know, my right as the valedictorian of Hollywood High School. ... I needed to use this to make at least one final stance against the system we have in place, and hopefully at the very least, inspire someone to lead a revolution against what we have now."

"You're right. It is capitalism that is deeply entrenched in our system, and it is affecting us. It does have its benefits, right? We have all this amazing technology and whatnot, but at the end of day it doesn't really matter if we have all these issues from health care all the way down to

education.”



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