

Thousands of Virginia students from almost one hundred schools walk out in protest over new proposed anti-transgender school policies

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On Tuesday, thousands of Virginia students from nearly one hundred middle and high schools walked out in protest over reactionary new policies proposed by Republican Governor Glenn Youngkin which target the rights of transgender students.

On September 16, the Virginia Department of Education released new policies for the treatment of transgender students which, if approved by the Virginia Board of Education, will roll back protections for students and give parents effective veto power over their children's ability to have their gender identification affirmed by school personnel.

The new policies require that students under 18 must be referred to by the name and pronouns in their official records, unless a parent approves the use of something else. In addition, student use of school facilities like bathrooms or locker rooms must be based on a student's biological sex.

In addition, Youngkin's new guidelines require that parents "be informed and given an opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given" to students. Further, the policies prohibit school districts from encouraging or instructing "teachers to conceal material information about a student from the student's parent, including information related to gender."

Obscenely, Youngkin's policies undermine transgender students' civil liberties in the name of free speech and freedom of religion. The policies correctly note that the First Amendment "forbids government actors from requiring individuals, including children in public schools, to adhere to or adopt particular ideological beliefs." However, instead of guaranteeing to transgender students the right to freely adopt the gender identity of their choice, the policies require transgender students and public school personnel to adhere to the ideological beliefs of the far right. For these bigots, parents and school personnel have the right to override the gender identity of students in the name of freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

Further turning the meaning of individual freedom on its head, the policies state that the "First Amendment guarantees religious freedom and prohibits compelling others to affirm

ideas that may be contrary to their personal religious beliefs." In other words, reactionaries are guaranteed the right to harass transgender students in the name of "religious freedom," while the freedom for transgender students to identify their gender and sexuality is wiped out, with untold mental health consequences for these youth.

According to the Trevor Project, 45 percent of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bi-Sexual, transgender and queer) youth in the United States "seriously considered" suicide in the past year. The group notes that "LGBTQ youth are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but rather [are] placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society."

Tuesday's protests took place in at least a dozen counties, ranging from districts near Richmond and Hampton Roads in the southeast of the state to the suburbs of Washington, D.C. The demonstrations were organized by the Pride Liberation Project (PLP). According to their website, PLP is a student-led group "advocating for LGBTQIA+ rights in Virginia."

In a Tweet announcing the protest, the group stated, "We're walking out today to make it clear to @GovernorVA that students can't learn if we're worried about abuse, harassment, depression, and our rights. All we want is to be able to learn in inclusive schools that let us thrive like every other student."

Echoing these sentiments, Aniela Tolero, a student at Courtland High School in Spotsylvania County, told the *Fredericksburg Freelance-Star*, "We walked out because our education should not be affected by our gender identities. We are tired of being mistreated and will not stand for it."

School policies for transgender students became a hot button issue in the November 2021 Virginia governor's race between Youngkin and Democrat Terry McAuliffe. In 2020, under Democratic control, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation requiring the state's Department of Education to adopt policies for the 2021-2022 school year allowing students to use names and gender pronouns reflecting their gender identity and to allow access to school facilities corresponding to a student's gender identity. The policies also advised schools to evaluate whether to share information about students' chosen

gender identity with parents on a “case-by-case” basis, considering the health and safety of students.

In the run-up to the November 2021 election, Youngkin’s campaign used a May 2021 sexual assault in a girls’ bathroom at a Loudoun County high school to whip up far-right support against the new policy. The parents of the victim claimed the charged youth was “gender fluid”, which Youngkin’s campaign used to attack the permissive bathroom policy for transgender students. In fact, the bathroom policy was not effective until the 2021-2022 school year, after the incident took place. In addition, the victim testified that she had had two prior consensual sexual encounters with the defendant in the same bathroom and on the day of the assault the two had agreed to meet there.

Also, back in May 2021, a Loudoun County elementary school teacher, Byron Cross, became a cause célèbre for the far right after he testified at a school board meeting that, in the name of religious freedom, he could not conform to a county policy requiring teachers to use students’ preferred pronouns. He was suspended but later won his position back after the Virginia Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling reinstating him.

In an indication of the deep popular revulsion at Youngkin’s far-right policy changes, 24 hours after a 30-day public comment period began, more than 15,000 comments had been posted, with most opposing Youngkin’s changes. Once this 30-day period ends, the policy will be decided upon by the Virginia Board of Education, on which Youngkin appointees hold a majority.

Virginia Democrats, posturing as defenders of civil rights, have spoken out against Youngkin’s policies. Former CIA agent and current congresswoman Abigail Spanberger tweeted, “His mandate will out kids, require their identities not be respected, and hurt them in the very places where they are supposed to learn and thrive...These attacks on LGBTQ kids again affirm the need to protect the rights of all Americans.”

In fact, Democrats in Virginia, led by Governor Ralph Northam until Youngkin’s November 2021 victory, failed to fully enforce the transgender policies the Democratic-majority state legislature put in place for the 2021-2022 school year. According to Equality Virginia, more than a year after the 2020 law requiring school divisions to adopt protections for transgender students, 21 of the state’s 132 public school divisions either rejected the policies, partially adopted them or did not consider them.

In recent years, Republicans have been pushing a whole series of anti-LGBTQ bills in state legislatures. According to LGBTQ advocacy group Freedom for All Americans, as of late March of this year, there were at least 166 measures to restrict LGBTQ rights pending in state legislatures across the country, almost four times the number of similar bills introduced three years ago.

Republican bigotry has allowed Democrats to pose as

defenders of the civil rights of LGBTQ individuals in an attempt to shore up their tattered image as a party of progress and reform. In May 2016, the Obama administration issued guidance requiring all public schools in the United States to permit transgender students to use the bathroom of their choice. That guidance was issued just months after a North Carolina law required transgender individuals to use the bathroom that corresponds to the gender listed on their birth certificate.

At the time of the Obama administration’s intervention, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained:

There is an immense element of political and electoral calculation and cynicism on both sides of this [transgender] controversy. In an election dominated by mass anger over economic inequality and the control of the political system by Wall Street, there is a desire by both parties to change the subject. The Republicans are seeking to mobilize their base among more backward, disoriented and economically depressed middle class layers. The Democrats are seeking to appeal to layers of the more privileged upper-middle class that have made various issues of identity—race, gender, sexual orientation—their obsessive focus.

Fast forward six years and any claim on the Democrats’ part to be defending the democratic rights of the population lie in complete shambles. A pandemic continues to rage in which more people have died under President Biden than Trump, and in response to which the Democrats have abandoned all measures to contain the crisis; Trump and his co-conspirators who attempted a coup on January 6, 2021 remain on the loose to continue their plotting; inflation has reached levels not seen in forty years and a major recession is looming; and the Democrats are leading a head-long charge into a possible nuclear confrontation with Russia.

The posturing of the Democrats in defense of the rights of transgender students is an attempt to cover up these right-wing policies which are undermining the health and safety of millions.



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