

US states push discipline against “disruptive” K-12 students

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Numerous bills have been introduced by state lawmakers around the US in recent months with the intent to make it easier to discipline, suspend and expel school children, including through physical force. This is part of a wider campaign by America's ruling elite to militarize and police public schools.

Politicians cynically claim the measures are meant to curtail to the growth of gun violence and behavioral problems in schools, are intended to give educators more control over their classrooms and are necessary to ensure safe school environments.

All of these are lies coming from the same lawmakers who have systematically gutted school funding, are actively censoring teachers and students, and have schools open during a deadly pandemic, which has cost the lives of thousands of educators and children and left millions to suffer with Long COVID.

The bills introduced so far have been concentrated in Republican-led states, but in many instances have the support of the Democratic Party.

Last month, Kentucky Democratic Governor Andy Beshear signed into law HB 538 with bipartisan support. The law will require local boards of education to expel for at least 12 months students who have physically assaulted or threatened other students, faculty or staff. The law also allows principals to permanently remove “disruptive” students from their classrooms and expands the ability to suspend students who are deemed “chronically disruptive.”

In Nevada, three Democrats and one Republican have introduced a bill that would rescind a 2019 requirement for schools to implement a restorative justice plan before removing students from classrooms. Tellingly, the bill's co-sponsor, Democrat Assemblywoman Angie Taylor, cited “teacher/staff shortages, low retention, increased stress and workload” as the underlying issues causing “disruptive behavior,” conditions which both capitalist parties have created through decades of budget cuts, layoffs and school closures.

In Florida, a bill under review in the state Senate would allow teachers to remove students from their classrooms for being “disobedient” and “disrespectful.” The bill also says a teacher may use “reasonable force” to “protect himself or herself or others from injury.” The subheading of this portion of the bill is

cynically titled “Right to control the classroom.”

Since becoming governor of Florida in 2019, Republican Ron DeSantis has spearheaded the far-right attack against public education and the democratic rights of teachers and students. He oversaw the passage of multiple laws that expressly limit educators’ control over education and embolden the far right, under the guise of “parental rights,” to dictate school curriculum. Entire school libraries have been emptied or closed in fear of violating a 2022 censorship law that requires all books to be “vetted,” with teachers and librarians facing possible criminal prosecution and job loss for supplying reading material that the state deems inappropriate.

Nebraska lawmakers are considering a law that would allow teachers and school staff to use “reasonable physical intervention” to “manage [student] behavior.” In North Carolina, lawmakers are attempting to make it easier to use long-term suspension and expulsion against students for “use of inappropriate or disrespectful language, noncompliance with staff directives, [and] dress code violations.”

Other bills target students as young as kindergarten for suspension. The Arizona legislature is attempting to roll back a 2021 law that banned suspension and expulsions for students in kindergarten through fourth grade except in the most serious circumstances. The bill under review would allow for K-4 students to be suspended for up to two days for any reason.

A recently enacted bill in West Virginia will require students in kindergarten to 12th grade who are removed from their classes for “disruptive behavior” to be held from class the entire day in in-school suspension and to be automatically given an out-of-school suspension if they are removed from their classes three times in one month.

The urgent push to beef up law and order in the schools against “disrespect” and “disobedience” underscores that the true purpose of these laws is not to ensure safe school environments but to preemptively crack down against the growing radicalization of the working class and youth. The bills are being introduced amid an upsurge of student and educator struggles against the deteriorating conditions inside public schools, including the gun-violence epidemic, the ongoing danger of COVID-19, and the generally dilapidated and crumbling state of school infrastructure.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, tens of thousands of teachers, school workers and students across the United States have staged sickouts, strikes and walkouts against being forced into unsafe school buildings. Students have held dozens of walkouts in response to school shootings, including last year following the Uvalde massacre, and last week following the latest mass shooting at a Nashville private school.

The justifications for the new laws—gun violence and student behavioral issues—are contradicted by decades of research, which has demonstrated such exclusionary and zero-tolerance discipline to be ineffective. Moreover, such practices have many serious long-term consequences, including increased likelihood of dropping out and negative mental health outcomes for punished students.

A 2011 policy report by the National Education Policy Center details the overwhelming evidence against such practices, including research from the American Psychological Association which, after reviewing all the available literature, found “no evidence that zero-tolerance disciplinary policies and their application to mundane and non-violent misbehavior improve school safety or student behavior.” One study found that only 5 percent of school suspensions were related to guns, violence or drugs.

A study published in 2021 by the American Institute for Research found that in addition to multiple negative long-term effects on students who were suspended, “these ... are not offset by any improvements to their peers’ outcomes or their peers’ or teachers’ reports of their school’s climate.”

Meanwhile, state and federal lawmakers are actively gutting schools of desperately needed funding, resources and personnel. The same states seeking to increase discipline, including Arizona and Florida, have passed laws to vastly expand school voucher programs that will divert public funding to private and charter schools.

In particular, mental health support for students is woefully underfunded amid a staggering mental health crisis in the youth. The 2021 annual report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on School Crime and Safety found that between 2019-2020, “the majority of schools (54 percent) reported that their efforts to provide mental health services to students were limited in a major way by inadequate funding. Forty percent reported inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals as a major limitation.”

At the same time, the American ruling class has exploited the school shooting epidemic to increase the repressive powers of the state inside public schools. A 2019 report by the ACLU titled “Cops and No Counselors” highlights the vast chasm between police in schools, whose presence continues to grow, and the dearth of mental health professionals. They found that 3 million students attended schools that had police but no nurses; 10 million attended schools with police but no social workers; and 14 million attended schools with police but no counselor, nurse, psychologist or social worker. Nationally, there were

more sworn law enforcement officers than social workers in US schools.

The security industry has also ensured that a good crisis not go to waste. According to market research firm Omdia, the education security industry was estimated at \$3.1 billion in 2021, with an expected 8 percent annual growth. Districts have purchased advanced surveillance technology, including software to continuously monitor students’ social media. However, the National Association of School Psychologists stated in 2018, “There is no clear evidence that the use of metal detectors, security cameras, or guards in schools is effective in preventing school violence” and have been shown to harm students and school environments.

The string of punitive laws against students and their right to an education has been bolstered by the treacherous complicity of the trade unions, allowing right-wing lawmakers to claim they are championing teachers. Both in Nevada and Nebraska, union bureaucrats have been vocal supporters of the proposed bills. The West Virginia Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, spearheaded a campaign in 2009 called “Discipline Without Delay” to make it easier for teachers to exclude “disruptive” students.

This is in line with the union apparatuses’ function as a support system of the Democratic Party and the capitalist state. This includes the unions’ determined efforts to coerce teachers back into COVID-infected classrooms throughout the pandemic, their support for the US-NATO war drive against Russia, and their routine sabotage and isolation of educators’ strikes across the country, most recently in Los Angeles.

The conditions inside public schools reflect the broader social crisis and brutality that characterize everyday life under American capitalism: vast social inequality, mass poverty, 1.1 million dead from a preventable pandemic, and endless money for war and the police, while schools, hospitals and social programs are cut to the bone. It is the task of the international working class, supported by a movement of the youth, to abolish these conditions in a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system itself.



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