

States, districts across US expand police presence in schools

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Amid crisis conditions in the American public school system brought on by decades of bipartisan austerity and the criminally negligent response to the COVID-19 pandemic, students and staff are faced with renewed efforts by state and local officials to beef up the presence of armed security forces inside schools. In areas across the US, this push is taking precedence over addressing dire teacher and staff shortages, providing mental health services for students, reducing class sizes or fixing crumbling school infrastructure.

Multiple states have recently passed laws to require armed security personnel on school grounds.

These include Texas, which passed a bill in June to require armed officers at all schools, effective September. Under the law, the term “officer” is loosely defined such that armed teachers and school staff could be used to fulfill the requirement.

The footing of the bill to meet this requirement will fall largely on cash-strapped school districts, as the state is only covering \$15,000 per campus out of an estimated cost of \$80,000 per armed officer. As Joy Baskin with the Texas Association of School Boards stated, “Given that a school district budget usually commits about 85 percent of the budget to pay salaries of instructional staff, this does eat up another very important slice of the pie.”

Meanwhile, districts across Texas, like others across the US, are already facing huge budget shortfalls.

In Wisconsin, state lawmakers passed a bill this summer which forces the Milwaukee Public Schools to have at least 25 school resource officers (SROs) in place by January 1, 2024. The district had removed all officers from school grounds in 2020 following student-led protests. As in Texas, the Milwaukee school district, the only one in the state required to have SROs, will be responsible for the cost of the officers.

Other school boards that have voted to expand the presence of police this year include Perkiomen Valley, Massachusetts and Oakland, New Jersey.

Meanwhile, other districts are beginning to roll back prior efforts to reduce the presence of police in schools, including reneging on promises made following the nationwide protests after the police murder of George Floyd in 2020.

The Denver school board voted unanimously in June 2020 to discontinue its relationship with the Denver Police. But earlier this year, following a school shooting, Denver Schools Superintendent Alex Marrero demanded an armed officer at each high school. The

board immediately agreed.

In Portland, Oregon, the district has recommended a new partnership with the Portland Police Bureau, with the possibility of bringing officers back onto campuses after having eliminated school resource officers in 2020 due to threats felt by the student body. The board is worried, however, about widespread opposition among students. ‘Our students, for the most part, don’t really want to see armed uniformed officers in their school,’ said one board member.

The chief of staff at Portland Public Schools commented that the district and the police bureau were working to “reimagine” the role of the Youth Services Division. The official said: “When we say reimagine, I think we’re looking forward to having conversations with the bureau and our students about what this future would look like with law enforcement near our schools. For example, we would look at what type of uniforms they might be wearing.”

This is similar to developments in Montgomery County, Maryland. In March of last year, less than six months after the county removed police from its public schools, the district undertook efforts to bring them back. They have been given designated “work stations” in the high schools, and re-branded as “community engagement officers” (CEOs). They wear plain clothes rather than police uniforms. The agreement between the district and the police department notes that “CEOs should also be invited to and encouraged to attend meetings with school-based counselors, social workers, and the MCPS (Montgomery County Public Schools) Restorative Justice Coach.”

This decision was met with protests led by a group of students who demanded more mental health resources rather than police officers. One of the students told the *Washington Post* last year: “I’m at a point where I’m not sure exactly what we can do. We’ve presented the data; we’ve done the protests; we’ve testified at every possible hearing. ... After all that, they’re literally going back to the same exact program that we’ve been fighting against.”

One of the most reactionary and alarming efforts to police the schools is taking place in Florida. In Broward County, the district is actively hiring civilians as armed school guards. The 40 positions the district is looking to fill are full-time, include benefits, and are open to anyone with certain “security licenses” and “two years of some sort of experience.”

The justification cited by school and state officials is an increase in violence in schools, particularly the record number of school

shootings. According to the K-12 School Shooting Database, 2023 is currently on track to surpass 2022, which was a record year, for the number of school shooting “incidents.” The database uses a wide definition, including any incident in which a gun is fired or pointed at a person, or a bullet hits school property. So far in 2023, there have been 197 incidents and 149 victims.

At the same time that they are broadening the presence of police in public schools, lawmakers across the US have begun passing laws that require harsh discipline policies against students, such as expulsion or suspension for “disruptive” non-criminal behavior, against children as young as kindergarten age.

A large body of research contradicts both the use of police and harsh discipline to create safer school environments. A 2019 study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* reviewed data on school shootings between 1999 and 2018 and found that “the presence of a school resource officer was unassociated with any reduction in school shooting severity.”

Another study published in 2021 in *JAMA Network* examined data from school shootings between 1980-2019 and concluded that there was “no association between having an armed officer and deterrence of violence in these cases.” Moreover, “an armed officer on the scene was the number one factor associated with increased casualties after the perpetrators' use of assault or submachine guns.”

It should be recalled that last year in Uvalde, Texas, over a dozen police and Border Patrol officers equipped with advanced weaponry, armor and shields did nothing to stop gunman Salvador Ramos as he massacred 19 children and two teachers, despite the fact that police were on the scene within three minutes of Ramos' entering the building. Video shows that they actually ran away when they heard the sound of gunshots.

In addition to the fact that it does not prevent school shootings, the presence of police in schools strongly correlates to increased rates of suspensions, expulsions and student arrests, all of which can have long-term negative impacts upon both individual students and the student body at large.

University of Exeter researchers found that a new onset mental disorder may result from exclusion from school (suspension or expulsion), and that poor mental health is a risk factor leading to exclusion from school. Lead researcher Professor Tasmin Ford noted:

For children who really struggle at school, exclusion can be a relief as it removes them from an unbearable situation with the result that on their return to school they will behave even more badly to escape again. As such, it becomes an entirely counterproductive disciplinary tool as for these children it encourages the very behaviour that it intends to punish. By avoiding exclusion and finding other solutions to poor behaviour, schools can help children's mental health in the future as well as their education.

However, under conditions of chronic under-funding and further cuts to school budgets once emergency pandemic funding expires

next year, adequate mental health support for all students remains a pipe dream, despite universal acknowledgment of a mental health crisis among the youth, including a historic rise in youth suicides in the last two decades.

Students and teachers are right to be skeptical of and hostile to the push to expand the police presence in schools. The stated concern of officials and lawmakers for “student safety” is contradicted by their failure to guarantee funding for school counselors, nurses, social workers, etc., as well as their obedient enforcement of the Trump and Biden administrations' demand for schools to reopen amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, without any serious measures to filter the air, with no mask mandates, and with the scrapping of testing, quarantining and contact tracing. This is after the pandemic has infected nearly every American child, killed over 2,300, and left millions suffering from Long COVID.

The recent developments in Denver, Portland and Montgomery County, all of which are run by the Democratic Party, highlight the dead-end of trying to appeal to capitalist politicians to address police violence. They expose the political bankruptcy of organizations that foster illusions in the possibility of “reforming” the Democrats.

The priority of both big business parties, Democratic and Republican, is to subordinate all resources to the war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for war against China, along with the bailing out of Wall Street. To this end they agree on a policy of further cuts to education and healthcare, as well as attacks on basic entitlement programs such as Social Security.

Such a deeply unpopular agenda, at odds with the interests and needs of the working class, requires the strengthening of the state's repressive forces. This includes buttressing the police presence in schools, where students and teachers have been engaged in widespread protests and strikes against budget cuts, the impact of the pandemic, and attacks on democratic rights.

The fight for high quality education, free of police repression, requires a struggle to stop war and abolish its root cause, capitalism. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality is leading this fight among young people and encourages youth and students to join today.



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