

Oklahoma Superintendent of Instruction spearheads far-right attack on public education

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12 February 2024

Since taking office in January 2023 as Oklahoma's Superintendent of Instruction, Ryan Walters has been at the forefront of the far-right campaign to destroy public education and attack public school educators. This has included attempts to introduce Christianity into public schools, an expansive school voucher program, and far-right smear campaigns against educators.

Most recently, in late January, Walters' crusade made national headlines after his months-long witch-hunt of a well-regarded school principal, Shane Murnan, resulted in Murnan's forced resignation. Walters had initiated his public attacks on Murnan last September, appearing on Fox News to publicly denounce the educator after learning that he is a part-time drag performer.

Soon after, Walters launched a baseless investigation into Murnan's teaching certificate and threatened the accreditation of Western Heights school district, where Murnan worked. In response, buckling to the right-wing pressure, the school district initially placed Murnan on administrative leave.

After Walters' public comments, Murnan faced death threats, protests at school board meetings featuring homophobic signs and two stints of administrative leave. He was also barred from entering his school while students were present and had to work as a principal off-site.

"It was scary, I've never had to deal with anything like this before," Murnan told the *Wall Street Journal*. "I've always been supported in being who I am."

After initially defending Murnan, the district came under direct pressure from Walters to force Murnan's resignation. After a meeting between Western Heights Superintendent Brayden Savage and Walters in December, the superintendent gave Murnan two options: resign or be terminated.

In explaining the decision, Savage alluded to the pogrom-like atmosphere that had been whipped up by Walters, "The hate has not stopped. To bring Shane back to the building is a risk to safety for all. ... I cannot be totally sure that one of those crazies would not show up to 'cleanse the building,' which is something that I've seen over and over again and something that we've heard over and over again."

Another educator in the district who performs drag, Paul Stafford, also resigned in January after being given an ultimatum to resign or be fired, according to Murnan.

Walters' shameless campaign against drag performers is just one aspect of his fascistic attack on teachers and public education more generally. A few weeks prior to the ouster of Stafford and Murnan, he proposed at a state board of education meeting vague new policies that would supposedly protect students from "predatory" educators.

"What we have seen is radical leftists and the teachers' unions turning our schools into Epstein Island," Walters said at the meeting. "They have opened up our schools and allowed sexual predators to target our kids unchecked, unwatched, and without accountability," he added incendiary slanders meant to whip up and mobilize the most reactionary layers to intimidate and terrorize educators.

Since taking over as superintendent in January of 2023, Walters has also systematically undermined the First Amendment's wall of separation between religion and the state. "The Supreme Court has been wrong. There is no separation of church and state in the Constitution or Declaration of Independence. It doesn't exist," Walters claimed in September. "We will bring God back to schools and prayer back in schools in Oklahoma and fight back against that radical myth." He has also called for the posting of the Ten Commandments in classrooms.

Central to his agenda is the decimation of public schools altogether, which underlies his heavy promotion of the use and expansion of a school voucher program. Such schemes funnel public funding for education into private and religious schools. Oklahoma's universal "school choice" program, which went into effect this year, provides parents up to \$7,500 in public dollars per tax year to cover private school tuition.

Additionally, Walters has backed the creation in Oklahoma of what would be the nation's first religious public charter school, largely funded by taxpayers, but run by the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City and the Diocese of Tulsa.

Following the start of Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza last October, Walters issued an executive memo urging every

school in Oklahoma to have a “moment of silence and prayer for Israel” and disseminated a sample prayer for schools to use: “Let us offer a prayer for safety and peace for the people of Israel. We pray that violence against the Jewish nation should stop and that a time of healing occurs for those lost. We pray for our leaders to stand strong and defend any attacks against the Israeli people.”

In Walters’s prior role as state secretary of education, he called for the revocation of the teaching certificate of Summer Boismier, an English teacher in the state, after she protested against the censoring and banning of books in Oklahoma schools. Teachers were told prior to the 2022 school year to pull books from their classroom that might run afoul of a 2021 state law that bans the teaching in classrooms of concepts that could lead to feelings of “discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.”

In response, Boismier covered her classroom library with red butcher paper with the words “Books the state doesn’t want you to read” and a QR code to the Brooklyn Public Library’s Books Unbanned initiative. Boismier resigned after school administrators asked her to drop her protest.

In response to Boismier’s principled stance in defense of freedom of thought, Walters took to Twitter to accuse her of “providing access to banned and pornographic material.” In the same post, he called on the Oklahoma State Board of Education to revoke her teaching certificate. As with Walters’ witch-hunt against Murnan, Boismier received online threats of violence.

Walters has also repeatedly targeted the teachers’ unions, stating before the Oklahoma House of Representatives last May that “I don’t negotiate with the teachers’ union. They’re a terrorist organization.” Aside from brief denunciations on social media of the Superintendent’s rhetoric, the Oklahoma Education Association has barely responded to these attacks, neither demanding Walters’s removal nor mobilizing teachers to defend victimized educators.

Last November, Walters posted a video endorsement of the fascist coup plotter Donald Trump for president, in which he stated “President Trump will be able to end radical indoctrination in our schools. ... This woke ideology will be driven out of our schools. This cancer that is the teachers’ union will be driven out of our schools, and parents will be put in charge of their kids’ education.” He also called for the dismantling of the federal Department of Education.

Walters is supported by numerous far-right groups, including the 1776 Project PAC, Americans for Prosperity, and Moms for Liberty, even speaking at the latter’s conference this past summer.

Walters’s attack on educators who do not conform to religious fundamentalist notions of acceptable gender and sexual identities is also of a piece with a nationwide far-right campaign to demonize LGBTQ people as “pedophiles” who are “grooming” children in order to abuse them.

In 2023, Tennessee, Texas and Montana all passed laws banning drag artists from performing in certain public spaces. Florida, under the control of fascist Governor Ron DeSantis, passed a law banning drag performances in front of minors. These laws have been stopped from going into effect through legal challenges. At least eight other states saw lawmakers introduce bills in 2023 of a similar nature that did not pass.

In a similar vein, much of the so-called “Parents Rights” legislation in recent years has focused on the prohibition of classroom instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation, including Florida’s 2022 “Don’t Say Gay” bill. These bills, disguised as means of “protecting” children and giving parents “freedom” to control education, are in reality another blow against the democratic rights of educators and students.

According to the ACLU, in 2023, 510 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in state legislatures. So far in 2024, 398 such bills have already been introduced, with a sharp increase in such bills since 2018, when 42 were introduced.

The fascist attacks against LGBTQ rights are part of a wholesale assault by the capitalist class on the democratic rights of the entire working class. The campaign against democratic rights, while led by the Republican Party, is fundamentally supported and enabled by the Democratic Party, which itself is lurching to the right and launching innumerable attacks against public education and democratic rights more broadly.

The Biden administration, which is overseeing vast cuts in public school funding across the US while funneling endless billions to war, is leading the bipartisan campaign against students’ democratic rights on college campuses in order to stifle popular opposition to Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Underlying the bipartisan assault on democratic rights are historic levels of social inequality and the growing subordination of society’s resources to war, neither of which are compatible with democracy. At the same time, the deteriorating living and working conditions, including in public schools, are fueling a growing movement of the working class throughout the US and internationally.

It is this growing movement of the working class, fighting independently of and in opposition to both capitalist parties, that has the power to stop the growth of the far-right, the expansion of war and the growing attacks on workers’ living standards.



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