

# School communities protest removal of principals in São Paulo

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Teachers, students, parents, and school staff held numerous local protests on Monday and Tuesday against the arbitrary removal of 25 principals from the São Paulo municipal public school system, one of the largest in the Americas.

The main reason given by right-wing mayor Ricardo Nunes for removing the principals is that between 2019 and 2023, schools saw a decline in their scores on two external assessments, the Prova Brasil and the Prova São Paulo, which determine the Basic Education Development Index (IDEB) and the São Paulo Education Development Index (IDEP), respectively. These external assessments are conducted every two years and will be held again at the end of this year.

The tests were not held in 2021 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced students to stay out of school for almost a year and a half between 2020 and 2021. Particularly for students in the literacy phase, as was the case for fifth-grade elementary school students who took the external assessments in 2023, and considering the inability of many to participate in remote learning, a decline in the IDEB was more than expected.

Mayor Nunes has been advancing a pro-corporate policy of holding teachers and principals accountable based on the results of external evaluations. Last November, he echoed the reactionary argument of the global far right that there is supposed leftist indoctrination in schools, saying: “We have schools that are working with a huge ideological concept and the IDEB is down there.”

In February, Nunes also stated: “Everyone receives the same salary and has the same [work] structure. How can some schools have a score of 7 and others a score of 4.5? We cannot accept this under any circumstances.”

As elsewhere around the world, accountability policies based on external evaluations have paved the way for the privatization of education. At the beginning of the year, Mayor Nunes announced his intention to transfer the 50 most vulnerable schools in the municipal public network to the private sector. In fact, as reported by the daily *Folha de S. Paulo*, “Most of the schools affected by the measure work with students who are highly vulnerable socioeconomically and with disabilities.”

The school community at EMEF [Municipal Elementary School] Mario Lago, one of the schools whose principal was removed, wrote in a “Letter of Repudiation” that this measure “is guided by the neoliberal perspective” of Mayor Nunes, disregarding “a scenario of overcrowded classrooms, students with disabilities without AVEs [assistants], interns, and specialized teachers.” Listing the various projects that the school carries out, such as artistic gymnastics, ballet, music, crafts, gardening, chess, marching band, youth press, and many

others, it wrote that “The removal of the school's principal not only disrespects the professionals and students involved, but also threatens the advancement of educational projects that have already demonstrated their social relevance and importance to the community.”

The dismissed directors will take a training course until the end of the year offered by the pro-corporate educational think tank Instituto Ayrton Senna and the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV). During this period, they will be replaced by intervenors. Many experts claim that this measure has no legal basis and constitutes moral harassment and abuse of power. The São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office questioned Mayor Nunes as to whether the principals had the opportunity to exercise their right to a fair hearing and full defense.

Broad political issues lie behind Mayor Nunes’ decision. The removal of principals is provided for in the “Programa Juntos pela Aprendizagem” [“Together for Learning Program”], established in late April by the São Paulo city government amid a three-week strike by teachers and staff for better wages and against the privatization of schools. Many schools whose principals were removed were actively involved in the strike.

In addition, these schools have close ties with the school communities where they are located, carrying out unique educational projects that have already been recognized nationally and internationally. This fact was brought to the attention of the Congregation of the Faculty of Education of the University of São Paulo (USP), which wrote in a motion of repudiation that these projects are committed to “the constitutional principle of Democratic Management of Public Education” and “to confronting inequalities and discrimination.”

The removal of principals in São Paulo has a clear political objective: to intimidate teachers and principals throughout the municipal public school system and make it clear that nothing will prevent Mayor Nunes from privatizing schools. What happened initially to these 25 principals will certainly affect dozens of others and pave the way for the removal and dismissal of pedagogical coordinators and teachers who stand up against Mayor Nunes’ pro-corporate educational policy.

Commenting on Mayor Nunes’ measure, education expert Helena Singer told the website *Educação Integral*, “Removing a principal and replacing him with an intervenor is an absolutely authoritarian and unprecedented act in a democratic context. It is tantamount to civil dictatorship. This type of measure is only taken when there are allegations of crimes such as corruption, abuse, or harassment. There is no justification for the removal, and it must be revoked.”

The attacks on education in São Paulo are part of a broad offensive

by global ruling elites against the social and democratic rights of the working class as it turns toward fascism and war. This movement is personified by the “chainsaw” of Argentine fascist President Javier Milei, who has as his allies US President Donald Trump and the fascist former president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who worked for the reelection of Mayor Nunes in São Paulo last year.

As has been the case in Argentina and the US, the working class and youth of São Paulo have not accepted these attacks without resistance. Last Friday, one day after the principals learned of their removal and on their last day at their schools, the school communities held emotional tributes to them. On Monday and Tuesday, classes were suspended in many schools and the school community held protests against the removal of the principals.

At EMEF Espaço de Bitita, in downtown São Paulo, students held signs at the school entrance saying: “One test does not define a student!” and “We are the voice of the future and we say no to school privatization.” On a poster with the flags of various countries, one could read: “My school is not just about Portuguese and Math, but about welcoming people. My school is my safe place. I defend my principal.”

EMEF Espaço de Bitita is the school in São Paulo with the highest number of migrant students, with more than 40 percent of them coming from virtually every continent. According to a video and text by pedagogical coordinator Carlos Eduardo that went viral on social media, at the beginning of the last decade, the first Bolivian and Peruvian students arrived from families who came to work in the textile industry in the Brás and Bom Retiro neighborhoods, adjacent to the school.

“Today,” he continued, “we received a large group from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Morocco, Egypt, Bangladesh, Angola, and Congo. This group of children is faced with a language that is different... Some of them did not attend school where they were.”

In addition to migrant students, in 2018, after years of worsening economic and social crisis in Brazil, the school began to receive students from three shelters for homeless children and adults. From five students in 2018, today the school has more than 120, many of whom attend Youth and Adult Education (EJA) classes in the evening to complete their elementary education.

According to coordinator Eduardo, these characteristics make EMEF Escola de Bitita a “transitional school,” characterized by high student turnover. “The students come to live in the region at the shelter, and just as quickly as they arrive, they leave for other places. ... Between February and May, there were 98 transfers. Ninety-eight students left, and 98 students arrived, just in elementary school” (not including EJA). Many of them are “victims of violence and social inequality [and] arrive with a very outdated school experience, [having] sometimes attended four or five schools in the same year.”

In 2023, the year of the Prova Brasil and Prova São Paulo, coordinator Eduardo said that “in the fifth year, we had a mass exodus of students who were being sheltered” due to real estate speculation and gentrification in neighborhoods around the school. “In one classroom, over the course of the year, 20 out of 32 students left. Of those who arrived, ... 10 [of the 20] were migrants, new arrivals to the country. They were arriving in April, May, June. In November, they would have to take an assessment that would define the school’s IDEB.”

In addition, the class had three children with disabilities or disorders, a number that has grown enormously in São Paulo schools since the end of the last decade. “The highly qualified, very

experienced teacher,” according to coordinator Eduardo, “sought every possible way to teach them to read and write. And, more than that, she taught these children to read and write. Obviously, they would not have the proficiency expected of a fifth-grade child taking an assessment. Well, the grade came in at 4.8.”

For its work with migrant and socially vulnerable students, EMEF Espaço de Bitita has received several national and international awards. Much of this work is due to principal Claudio Marques, who was recently removed. Born in the state of Bahia, he received the title of citizen of São Paulo last year and has extensive pedagogical training, including a postdoctorate from USP. The school run by Marques was celebrated in the last decade for its good results in the IDEB. In 2017, it exceeded the target of 6 and reached 6.1 in the fifth year of elementary school.

In an interview with the Metrôpoles website, Marques explained that “Mayor Nunes’ strategy is to target the most militant schools, where the school administration is deeply rooted in the community, to launch the first wave of privatization.”

The recent attacks on education in São Paulo intersect with extreme social inequality in São Paulo, a megalopolis of 12 million inhabitants where the ruling elites have sought to extract maximum profit at the expense of dismantling public services and transforming the city into a place where large companies – from the education sector, to construction, to the social organizations that control much of the city’s public health – can pursue profits without restriction.

In recent weeks, in addition to the school community fighting against privatization, São Paulo has seen protests against the removal of hundreds of families living in slums in areas of high real estate speculation interest. State public school teachers have been holding one-day strikes since the beginning of the year, and municipal civil servants held a three-week strike in April against Mayor Nunes’ sweeping attacks on social services.

This growing movement needs to unite with municipal public school teachers and their families fighting against the removal of principals and Mayor Nunes’ plans to privatize education. The social reality in São Paulo is found in all major cities around the world where the population faces the same acute problems. This highlights the need to build a unified international movement against the source of the privatization offensive and attacks on social rights: the capitalist system.



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