

From classroom to war economy: Trump's youth workforce agenda

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11 June 2025

The Trump administration is imposing crippling cuts to all aspects of public education, measures which are affecting the lives of nearly every family in the US. But, alongside redirecting millions of dollars from education into tax cuts for the rich and various privatization measures, there is another agenda at work. Trump's sweeping reorganization of schooling is being expressly directed at readying the US for war with China.

Trump's recent budget proposal slashes an estimated \$15 billion from the Department of Education, with plans to eliminate more than 40 federal K-12 programs. This is part of a broader drive to break up the federal education infrastructure, shift funding away from public schools, and accelerate privatization, under the banner of "school choice."

Little attention is being paid by the media to the plans for the parallel process of re-prioritizing education towards "workforce outcomes," e.g., getting working class young people trained early and on the job.

The measures being implemented are wide-ranging, including the systematic loosening of child labor laws, creating business-led training of students in high schools and community colleges, and a whole series of cuts aimed at ending college accessibility for low and middle-income students. Tragic cases like Derrik, who lost both legs at 16 in a school-based construction program, and the deaths of Duvan Tomas Perez, Michael Schuls, and Will Hampton in 2023—each just 16 years old, killed in hazardous workplaces—offer a grim preview of what awaits a new generation of youth pushed into the war economy pipeline.

The lack of publicity on this issue is no accident, as the Democrats are in agreement on prioritizing war readiness. Support for the US proxy war in Ukraine against Russia was the central focus of the Biden-Harris government. It allowed the ending of ESSER Covid relief funds, plunging schools into fiscal crisis across the US, while providing nearly \$1 trillion to the military budget. Kamala Harris, in the final days of her campaign, toured a semiconductor plant in Michigan, touting the same school-to-workplace pipeline now championed by Trump.

Despite their ceremonial "opposition" to the closure of the Department of Education, the Democratic Party-aligned teachers' unions have likewise welcomed Trump's workforce initiatives. American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten specifically defended education-axe-wielder-in-chief Linda McMahon for her support to apprenticeship programs.

Trump's April 23 executive order, "Preparing Americans for

High-Paying Skilled Trade Jobs of the Future," calls for "reindustrialization" and the "reshoring" of manufacturing, with a target of creating over 1 million new apprenticeships annually in sectors like construction, manufacturing and technology.

K-12 and higher education is to be transformed into a pipeline for the military-industrial base and the broader war economy. Curricula are being refocused on technical and vocational skills, specifically to compete with China. This dovetails with the administration's industrial policy, including tariffs, supply chain "onshoring," and a campaign to rebuild domestic military manufacturing.

A critical aspect of workforce development is a focus on the development of artificial intelligence (AI). The alarm of the American oligarchy over the rise of China turned to near-panic after the unexpected release of China's revolutionary AI program DeepSeek. Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, a close Trump adviser, called it America's "Sputnik moment."

Trump issued two executive orders stressing the urgency of AI education as a matter of "global dominance." On January 23, he signed the executive order "Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence" and a follow-up, "Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth." Trump directed federal agencies to remove any regulatory barriers in order to prioritize AI development to outpace China.

The Heritage Foundation's chilling report, "A Strategy to Revitalize the Defense Industrial Base for the 21st Century," lays out part of the playbook. The report calls for "increasing the size of the relevant labor pool" by expanding access to business-friendly re-skilling by taking grants previously tied to higher education, such as Pell, and redefining them for vocational education and apprenticeships. It would further allocate public funding to schools based on their "returned-value," defined by producing graduates in targeted sectors for the "defense industrial base." It advocates improving military-to-civilian transition programs like SkillBridge. The goal outlined in the report is to turn the education system into a feeder for the broader war economy.

School districts are already implementing this approach, slashing liberal arts and social studies requirements to expand technical education aligned with local defense and manufacturing needs. Ohio has invested \$300 million in expanding career technical education programs in its high schools, prioritizing trades and technical credentials to align with state and federal workforce priorities.

Tennessee recently mirrored the federal agenda with Governor Bill Lee's Executive Order 109, which centralizes workforce development under the State Workforce Development Board and prioritizes partnerships with employers and technology to create personalized career pathways. Backed by an additional \$7 million in state funding for the Tennessee Youth Employment Program, this initiative doubles youth participation and establishes year-round operations, directly aligning with the Trump administration's push to transform education into a pipeline for high-demand industries and the defense sector.

Dr. Casey Sacks, president of BridgeValley Community and Technical College in West Virginia, has been appointed as a consultant to the US Departments of Education, Labor, and Commerce through December 2025 to help align federal workforce programs. Sacks' resume included working as a construction industry lobbyist and an Aspen Institute Presidential Fellow. Aspen is a high-level think tank associated with the US military and intelligence community.

The Heritage Foundation advises that the US "expand the available labor pool" by dismantling higher education's accreditation system, flood the workforce with apprentices and tie all public funding to job placement in defense and related industries. This is already beginning. Federal student aid is being redirected to technical and apprenticeship programs, and "returned-value" funding models are being adopted to phase out programs that do not directly serve the needs of industry.

These attacks on the very concept of education are both practical and ideological. In this context, the end of "liberal" education is not a byproduct, but a central objective. The very qualities once championed by American higher education such as critical thought, debate, historical truth, and exposure to diverse ideas, are obstacles to the demand for obedience, jingoism and brutal intensification of exploitation in the workforce. The attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) aim to normalize government censorship and conformity.

Intellectual inquiry, debate and dissent are entirely incompatible with war and fascism. This is why academic institutions renowned for scientific and intellectual rigor, like Harvard, have become targets of relentless attack by the Trump administration.

The union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party have lined up behind this agenda. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) have eagerly promoted partnerships with tech and defense firms to funnel students into the semiconductor and weapons industries.

At the end of May, Weingarten and the AFT proudly announced a partnership with the multi-billion-dollar private equity investment firm Apollo Global Management, four other unions and five Democratic governors in launching the Education and Apprenticeship Accelerator. The group aims to promote apprenticeships in microchip manufacturing, welding and electrical engineering, among other types of jobs required on the "home front."

This initiative is in line with Weingarten's long history as a US State Department asset in the prosecution of imperialist wars. She has traveled repeatedly to Ukraine and Israel to provide political cover for US-backed wars, meeting with far-right and neo-Nazi

figures, and has publicly endorsed massive military aid packages for conflicts in Ukraine, the Middle East and against China.

The consequences are already visible in the factories and plants where workers are sacrificed for profit. The recent deaths of workers at Hyundai and Hanwha sites in Georgia, and the killing of Ronald Adams Sr. in a Michigan auto plant, are not isolated tragedies but a warning of what lies ahead for the next generation. The expansion of apprenticeship and school-to-work programs without adequate protections will only multiply these horrors, as more youth are funneled into hazardous, low-wage jobs in the name of "national security."

At the same time, the Trump administration has gutted the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), freezing new regulations, cutting staffing and budgets and shifting enforcement to "voluntary compliance" by employers. The result is fewer inspections, lower penalties, and a regulatory environment where workplace safety is sacrificed to the demands of the war economy.

The coming months will see major struggles, as labor agreements expire for 77,000 educators in California, including Los Angeles, along with 14,000 in Philadelphia. These are not simply "contract struggles," but battles to defend the very right to public education. In every school, educators should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to prepare an industrial and political counter-offensive against Trump, including a general strike to stop his plans for a presidential dictatorship.

Like the attack on immigrants and democratic rights, the Trump administration's education and workforce policies are aimed at subordinating every aspect of social life to the needs of the oligarchy and imperialist war. This is already meeting with massive opposition.

The belief that youth have the right to a free, high-quality education that fosters critical inquiry, creativity and the exploration of knowledge is deeply felt by the population. But the defense of education, like every other social right, requires the conscious fight against the capitalist system and imperialist war.



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