

Austin school district latest target in wave of Texas school closures and cutbacks

Dan Conway
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The prospect of extensive school closures looms over the Austin Independent School District (AISD) after 12 of its schools received failing marks from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). As a result, the affected schools will need to either close or make significant changes to improve their ratings based on performance on the state's Assessments of Academic Readiness, a form of standardized testing.

Most of the schools with failing marks are in poor and ethnic minority communities. They have been starved of funds, and now deal with the threat of ICE and border patrol agents arriving to take away their students and family members.

The TEA's plans have nothing to do with actually improving student outcomes. So-called turnaround plans typically involve firing teachers and administrators at affected schools and relinquishing campus space to private charter school operators.

In addition to the 12 schools in AISD, roughly one-third of the district's 116 campuses also received "unacceptable" ratings. Many of those will also need to submit turnaround plans by November as well.

The plight of the Austin school district is part of a nationwide attack on public education at all levels of local, state and federal government. Trump's billionaire education secretary, the wrestling magnate Linda McMahon, has overseen the termination of more than 1,400 workers from the Department of Education as part of Trump's efforts to dismantle the agency altogether.

The funding cuts for education are accompanied by a campaign of political indoctrination of young school children. As Trump's Deputy Chief of Staff, the fascistic Stephen Miller, stated in May, "Children will be taught to love America. Children will be taught to be patriots." Miller further clarified that any schools the administration believes to be promoting "communist ideology" and left-wing ideology in general will have federal government funding withheld.

Under Trump, ICE agents and border patrol agents are invading the areas around public schools, terrifying innocent children, parents and teachers alike.

In response, the trade unions have done absolutely nothing to mobilize workers against these horrific attacks. The Democrats, for their part, have responded to Trump's mobilization of the National Guard by claiming that local police forces are

sufficient for a crackdown.

This has left teachers, parents and workers to fend for themselves. It makes clear that the only way to counter the attacks is through independent action, organized by rank-and-file committees of workers. Parents and teachers have been compelled to form their own school and neighborhood watch groups in case their campus ends up being the latest target of the ICE Gestapo.

In Austin, staff and parents at Guerrero Thompson Elementary told the *Austin American Statesman* how teachers shepherd immigrant parents and children to dark classrooms and supply closets until ICE agents depart, akin to the hiding of Jews in Nazi Germany.

The attack on public schools is also being carried out by local Democrats, with the support of the union bureaucrats. The School District of Philadelphia has announced school closures two weeks after the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers rammed through a contract that union president Arthur Steinberg said would provide the city with "three years of labor peace."

The city of Chicago, which is also a target of Trump's threats to deploy the National Guard, has announced hundreds of teacher layoffs following dozens of school closures despite the recent "transformative" contract announced by the Democratic Socialists of America-led Chicago Teachers Union.

In addition to Austin, the Texas school districts with some of the most recent closures include:

- The Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District, located in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The district is warning of imminent school closures of an unspecified number due to shrinking enrollment and financial strain. Up to three schools could potentially close, with a parent-led petition to keep one of the three schools, Bransford Elementary, open gathering roughly 500 signatures within a single day's time.

- Also in North Texas, the Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD closed three elementary and one middle school at the end of the previous academic year. Parents and community members, who were never informed of the closures, have filed a lawsuit over the failure to provide notice.

Two schools in the Lufkin School District in East Texas were closed at the end of the 2024-2025 academic year due to

declining enrollment. The growth of private charter schools and private school voucher programs was a significant factor in the declining enrollment numbers.

- In an 8 to 0 vote, the Forth Worth ISD approved a plan in June to close 18 schools over the next four years. The school closures are part of a plan to save the district \$10 million, a tiny fraction of the city's latest general fund budget of \$1.097 billion.

- The Aldine school board in the Houston area voted in February to close six schools in addition to three previous closures. School board member Paul Shanklin remarked: "We still have to balance [the] budget and if you're watching the news, you know what's going on in our state, in our nation. We're not getting extra money."

Although the Texas state government loudly trumpeted a new public education funding bill in May, the bill does nothing to offset massive long-term cuts.

Prior to the bill's passage, the state of Texas had not increased the basic funding allotment to public schools since 2019, despite the fact that overall inflation rose by 26 percent during the same period.

But the bill only increased the basic allotment by \$55 per student per year. A previous state bill, which would have increased the basic funding allotment by \$220 per student, was vetoed by far-right Texas Governor Greg Abbott earlier this year. Abbott also vetoed \$60 million in funding for summer lunch programs for low-income children in the latest bill.

Abbott also signed into law this year a private school voucher program, one of the largest in the country, providing up to \$10,000 per family with taxpayer funds to attend private schools, including religious schools.

Other regressive measures recently passed by the Abbott administration include bans on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies in K-12 schools and encouraging ultra-right parents and school boards to ban books and attack science.

In a blatant attack on the separation of church and state, the Texas state government has also attempted to make displays of the Ten Commandments mandatory in public school classrooms. The recently passed Senate Bill 11 allows district school boards to dictate policies allowing time during the school day for students to read the Bible and other religious texts.

Attempts to convert public schools into centers of religious indoctrination are accompanied by massive crackdowns on free speech. Dr. Tom Alter of Texas State University was terminated from his position merely after attending a conference on his own personal time held by the International Socialist League. Alter was provided with no hearings prior to his termination and has been given no right to appeal it.

This is being replicated at the K-12 level. The TEA announced Friday that it will investigate teacher comments critical of the recently assassinated fascist provocateur Charlie Kirk. Agency commissioner Mike Morath wrote in a letter to

Texas schools on Friday that "while the exercise of free speech is a fundamental right we are all blessed to share, it does not give carte blanche authority to celebrate or sow violence against those that share differing beliefs [sic] and perspectives."

This is part of the nationwide attempt to equate all criticism of Kirk's politics, or even frank characterizations of his right-wing views, as equivalent to inciting violence and supporting terrorism. Given the fact that Kirk himself made a career out of launching provocations on college campuses, which helped to inspire right-wing violence, this is not only utter hypocrisy but amounts to banning all criticism of fascism.

In Oklahoma, State Superintendent Ryan Walters threatened to revoke the license of any teacher who glorified the death of Kirk.

In the wake of all these attacks, the Texas teacher unions have done absolutely nothing. Education Austin president Ken Zarifis sought to minimize the nationwide attack on public schools, declaring, "It's all about local. That's all that matters to me. I can't do a damn thing about national stuff."

But a national movement is the only way that the right to public education can be defended. As bad as the latest attacks are, they are only a foretaste of what is to come should the working class not mobilize independently to stop it.

The only way forward is for teachers and other workers to form their own rank-and-file committees of struggle to defend the democratic rights of teachers and students. Such organizations must fight not only for better pay and against school closures, as important as those demands are, but for the rights of immigrants and for student learning to be completely free of government censorship.

They should be part of a struggle not just by teachers, but of the working class as a whole, not only in Texas but across the country and internationally.



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