

Texas A&M professor, dean and department head fired in far-right backlash

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Across the United States, educators and public workers are increasingly finding themselves at the center of political witch-hunts. In the weeks following the assassination of far-right commentator and Trump ally Charlie Kirk, a wave of firings, suspensions and internal investigations has swept through schools and universities. Part of a coordinated effort to suppress dissent, the crackdown has targeted teachers, professors and students for any comments deemed unacceptable.

Nowhere is this more visible than in Texas, where more than 280 complaints have reportedly been filed against K-12 educators alone for alleged “disrespect” toward Kirk or his political legacy.

At Texas A&M University, senior English lecturer Melissa McCoul was dismissed in early September after a student filmed her referencing gender identity in a children’s literature course. The video captures audio of a student objecting to McCoul teaching that there are more than two genders. The student claims that McCoul’s lesson was in violation of Trump’s executive order and her religious beliefs. McCoul responds that she has a right to teach the lesson and that the student also has a right to leave the classroom.

After spreading on social media, the recording of McCoul sparked backlash from Republican lawmakers and calls for investigations and even a response from the US Department of Justice. The Texas A&M System chancellor swiftly released a statement pledging to discipline the professor. Soon after McCoul was fired, College of Arts and Sciences Dean Mark Zoran and department head Emily Johansen, who oversaw McCoul’s course, were also removed, for allegedly approving plans to teach material that was inconsistent with the published course description.

Within 48 hours of the audio from McCoul’s course being posted, a Republican state representative framed

the lesson as “indoctrination” and Governor Greg Abbott publicly called for her to be fired. University officials claimed the course material diverged from the official syllabus, but McCoul and her defenders state she has taught the course with similar material for years.

Not long after, at Texas State University, tenured history professor Tom Alter was fired after speaking at a socialism conference where he made remarks critical of US capitalism and imperialism. Though no threats were made, and no laws broken, the university accused him of promoting “extremism” incompatible with his role. Alter is now suing the university, alleging wrongful termination and violation of his First Amendment rights.

Also at Texas State, a student was expelled for mimicking Kirk’s assassination at a campus vigil. While the act was tasteless and widely condemned, civil liberties advocates argue that it did not amount to a violent threat—and that expulsion is a disproportionate punishment for expressive behavior, however offensive.

Similar incidents are playing out across the country:

In Florida, a teacher was suspended for posting “I don’t mourn fascists” on a private Instagram story.

In California, a counselor was placed under review for sharing a TikTok satirizing media coverage of Kirk’s death.

In Ohio, a paraprofessional was reprimanded for wearing a pin that read, “Teach the Truth,” interpreted by some as a political statement.

Since Kirk’s high-profile death at a campus speaking event on September 10, state officials and right-wing groups have moved swiftly to elevate him to a near-mythic status. Statues are being erected. Scholarships are being renamed. Memorial bills are being introduced

in state legislatures.

But along with the garish eulogizing there has developed a serious campaign to establish dictatorial forms of rule. Educators who speak critically of Kirk or challenge the framing of his death as a national tragedy are now at risk of being professionally punished. Across at least 28 states and the District of Columbia, school employees have been suspended, fired or placed under investigation for online comments, meme sharing or even private expressions of dissent.

In many cases, the evidence used against them is tenuous at best—a retweet, a sarcastic caption, or a post made before any formal policy was in place. Nevertheless, state officials and school districts are moving quickly to discipline perceived offenders, often in response to pressure from social media outrage campaigns or demands from politicians.

Texas, long a political bellwether of reaction, has become a focal point in this new crackdown.

In Houston, a high school government teacher was suspended after liking a Facebook post that referred to Kirk as a “reactionary provocateur.” In Austin, a middle school librarian was removed from her position after sharing a *New York Times* article critical of Kirk’s influence on education policy. In Dallas, an art teacher was dismissed outright for posting a meme that read, “Charlie Kirk is not my hero.”

In most cases, these educators were acting in their personal capacity—outside school hours, on personal accounts, speaking to personal audiences. Yet their speech is being treated as a violation of professional standards, with some districts citing “insensitivity,” “unprofessionalism,” or “disrespect for national grief.”

The result is a widespread chilling effect. Teachers are deleting social media accounts. Professors are canceling public appearances, while campus speech narrows out of fear.

Despite the First Amendment protecting public employees from being punished for private political speech, constitutionally protected expression is now being treated as grounds for removal. Charlie Kirk’s death has been utilized as a catalyst and a justification to silence dissent, punish ideological nonconformity and impose new standards of loyalty at public institutions. Public education, already under strain from budget cuts and privatization schemes, now faces a new threat: ideological enforcement from above.



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