

US schools deploy weaponized drones as testing ground for dictatorship

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With the new school year underway, at least nine public schools across Florida, Georgia and Colorado have installed or are scheduled to install fleets of remotely piloted drones designed to swarm, pepper spray and physically ram individuals identified as targets. Sold as a response to school shootings, they are in fact a testing ground for police repression.

The devices, branded Campus Guardian Angel, are built by Austin-based Mithril Defense, founded by technology entrepreneur Justin Marston and by Bill King, a retired Navy SEAL and former Naval Special Warfare force master chief. The founders say the idea grew from observing Ukraine's use of drones against Russian infantry.

Florida, site of the 2018 Parkland massacre, which killed 17 students and staff, and Georgia, where two students and two teachers were killed in the 2024 Apalachee High School shooting, have appropriated a combined \$1,671,500 for drone pilot programs: \$1,121,500 over two fiscal years in Florida and \$550,000 in Georgia. Florida ranks dead last nationally in average teacher pay, while Georgia has an average of 386 students per school counselor, more than 50 percent above the 250-to-one ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association.

Stored in ceiling-mounted charging stations the size of a pizza box, the drones can be activated by a teacher through a mobile app or panic button, then flown remotely by operators up to 1,000 miles away. They can blast sirens and strobes, deploy pepper gel and ram a target at speeds up to 60 mph.

Campus Guardian Angel is the latest development in "school hardening," the spread of metal detectors, automatic locks and surveillance cameras. In 1999–2000, after the Columbine shooting, only 19 percent of public schools had security cameras; by

2015–16, 81 percent did. Annual spending on school security was estimated at roughly \$3 billion in 2024.

School shootings have become more frequent, but this does not mean all forms of violence in American schools are escalating. Federal data show that nonfatal victimization of students at school has fallen sharply over the past three decades, even as school security spending has grown. The company's own materials concede the point: Campus Guardian Angel acknowledges it expects "far more false alarms than real events," and Michael Dorn, a school safety consultant and expert witness in school shooting cases, calls the drone system "a really impractical approach" based on assumptions that do not match how attacks unfold.

"My first question [to schools] is going to be, 'Have you done all of the other things that are far more likely to prevent deaths?'" Dorn said. Federal guidance emphasizes controlled entrances, locked exterior and classroom doors, staff monitoring of access points, visitor-management procedures and reinforced doors and windows. The Education Department warns that a single propped exterior door can defeat an entire access-control system.

But chronic underfunding and the diversion of public money into school-choice and privatization schemes leave too few staff to monitor entrances and too little money to repair broken hardware or retrofit aging buildings. The same governments starving schools of staff and capital improvements are now hanging military-derived drones from their ceilings, while immense resources are diverted to the US war drive.

The issue is not only whether a weaponized security solution is proportionate to the threat. Once remotely operated weapons are installed in schools, who will be defined as a threat, and when will force be used?

The potential for mission creep—the expansion of a system beyond its stated purpose—is explicit in the company’s description of the system. Marston told the *Washington Post* that the drones would not intervene in an ordinary school fight but could be used if a student pulled a knife. But Campus Guardian Angel concedes the possibility of “mistaken actions.”

The drones are part of a broader militarization of the schools that has already crossed the line into direct violence against students. In Omaha, police deployed the same G.L.O.V.E. electric shock gloves that ICE is purchasing en masse, before public outrage forced their withdrawal from most schools.

Mithril installs equipment connecting its operators to a school’s existing security cameras; the company says those feeds are accessed only during an activated emergency response. A designated “threat tracker” is assigned to “find and follow the threat,” while another operator monitors video feeds for the team and law enforcement. Its marketing materials say it records “everything” during a response and stores school security footage, drone video, chats and voice communications afterward.

The introduction of privately operated weapons and camera access into public schools takes place amid a sweeping expansion of surveillance under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). ICE and CBP draw on license-plate readers, networked cameras, facial recognition and Palantir systems in their efforts to locate and track individuals, including protesters against immigration raids. In Minneapolis, federal immigration agents also shot and killed Renée Good and Alex Pretti during the administration’s immigration crackdown.

States are installing this third-party surveillance in public schools amid accelerating social unrest. Students have joined walkouts against ICE raids and deportations as part of broader opposition to the Trump administration’s attacks on immigrants and democratic rights. During an activated response, Guardian Angel operators can track individuals through school and drone cameras and preserve recordings from the incident. These records could later be sought by immigration authorities to identify or track students.

School surveillance footage that qualifies as an education record can be disclosed under a judicial order or subpoena or in a qualifying health-and-safety

emergency; recordings created and held by a school law enforcement unit for law enforcement purposes may fall outside those federal privacy protections altogether. This creates the danger that footage collected in schools for purported safety purposes could later be sought in immigration investigations, even though no such use of Guardian Angel has been documented.

This is not the first time the administration has used public institutions as laboratories for repression. When ICE agents were deployed to airports in March, former Trump strategist Steve Bannon openly described the operation as a “test run” for the midterm elections.

Mithril’s Marston has said he ultimately sees the drones operating “anywhere there’s a mass gathering,” giving the technology a role in surveillance and crowd control.



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