

The Military Invades U.S. Schools: How Military Academies Are Being Used to Destroy Public Education

In Chicago, there's a push to replace public schools with military academies

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For the past four years, I have observed the military occupation of the high school where I teach science. Currently, Chicago's Senn High School houses Rickover Naval Academy (RNA). I use the term "occupation" because part of our building was taken away despite student, parent, teacher and community opposition to RNA's opening.

Senn students are made to feel like second-class citizens inside their own school, due to inequalities. The facilities and resources are better on the RNA side. RNA students are allowed to walk on the Senn side, while Senn students cannot walk on the RNA side. RNA "disenrolls" students and we accept those students who get kicked out if they live within our attendance boundaries. This practice is against Chicago policy, but goes unchecked. All of these things maintain a two-tiered system within the same school building.

This phenomenon is not restricted to Senn. Chicago has more military academies and more students in JROTC than any other city in the US. As the tentacles of school militarization reach beyond Chicago, the process used in this city seems to serve as a model of expansion. There was a Marine Academy planned for Georgia's Dekalb County, which includes 10 percent of Atlanta. Fortunately, due to protest, the school has been postponed until 2010. Despite it being postponed, it is still useful to analyze the rhetoric used to rationalize the Marine Academy. Many of the lies and excuses used to justify school militarization in Chicago and Georgia may well be used in other cities as militarism grows.

Not for Recruiting?

A favorite lie used to defend the expansion of military academies is that they are not used to recruit for the military.

"This is not a training ground to send kids into the military," Dekalb Schools' Superintendent Crawford Lewis told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in March. Those same words could have come straight from Col. Rick Mills, director of military academies and JROTC in Chicago, who explained away recruitment in a similar fashion.

"This is not a recruiting tool, but a way to help students succeed at whatever career they might choose," Mills told the Chicago Tribune.

Yet military academies receive money from the Department of Defense (DoD). The DoD would be derelict in its responsibilities were that money not spent as an investment in future

soldiers. Accepting the claim that there is no recruiting in military academies makes about as much sense as allowing gangs to fund and operate within schools, on the assumption that they won't recruit on school grounds.

Moreover, since military academies are staffed with ex-service members (many don't even require valid teaching certificates), students are likely to receive career advice that favors a military path.

There are more blatant examples of recruiting at RNA. The cadets - the label applied to students at military academies - have taken a school-sponsored field trip to the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Furthermore, last year the school hosted Adm. Michael Mullen, the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Mullen told the cadets that the Navy was a "great career choice." RNA has hosted ten admirals in their short four-year history.

In addition to these direct tactics, the academies use more insidious approaches. A military culture permeates these schools. Students dress in uniform, receive demerits, and are introduced to the military hierarchy and way of life. For example, I have witnessed students marching with fake rifles. This cultivation of a militarized mind is the best explanation for why 40 percent of all Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program graduates wind up entering military service. This statistic is especially telling, considering that less than one percent of the population has served in the military at any given moment since 1975.

The Choice Argument

Military academies are promoted as an option within the public school system for parents. We heard it from Arne Duncan (ex-CEO of CPS and current secretary of education) and we hear it from Dale Davis, public information officer for the Dekalb County School System, who calls the military school "an addition" for parents to consider. Compare that with what Colonel Mills said in December 2007 in the Online News Hour: "The purpose of the military academy programs is to offer our cadets and parents an educational choice among many choices in Chicago Public Schools and to provide an educational experience that has a college prep curriculum, combined with a military curriculum."

We must dissect what kind of "choice" parents are given. If one's only choices are a school in desperate need of repair or a shiny new military academy, parents will often "choose" the "better" school.

The unbalanced funding presents an incredibly difficult decision for many parents, as Marivel Igartua, mother of a cadet inside the Naval Academy, told me. She didn't want to have to send her daughter to RNA, but she felt squeezed into the choice because her area school was in such bad shape. The unequal allocation of resources, which favors military academies, can serve as a form of economic coercion upon parents.

If public schools were given the resources they need to improve, then we could offer parents a more real choice.

Military pushers also argue that the academies are a popular option among parents. According to Mills, quoted in *In These Times* in 2005, "These kinds of programs would not be in schools if there weren't kids who wanted it, parents who supported it and administrators who facilitated it."

Arne Duncan claimed there were waiting lists filled with children hoping to attend a military academy. However, CPS has never released the so-called waiting lists, and concrete numbers tell a different story. RNA's goal for student enrollment for this year was 500-600 students. RNA finished the year with 376 students. Where's the demand?

Military Academies in the Context of Dismantling Public Education

Viewing militarization in the broader scope of "school improvement" can provide a helpful lens. In Chicago, military academies often represented one offshoot of a general plan to break down public education and replace it with charter schools and contract schools, siphoning public money to business people and "nonprofits." However, these "chosen" schools don't perform any better than public schools. A recent Chicago study compared ACT scores between charter schools and neighborhood schools, and no statistically significant difference was found. There was a difference in the number of English language learners and special-needs students accepted. Charters received fewer of both students. We see the same dichotomy with Senn and RNA.

What may be more problematic is that sometimes the charterization movement masks hidden agendas. Sometimes the hidden agenda is union busting. Sometimes it's gentrification. Sometimes it is militarization. We have seen all of these hidden agendas in Chicago. We all agree that public schools are in desperate need of renovation and repair. But simply demonizing public schools as failing without giving them the resources to succeed - and replacing them with experimental schools - is unjust.

The push to destroy public schools and replace them with military academies and charter schools was further facilitated under the mayoral control of schools in Chicago. Mayoral control means that a city's once publicly elected school board is replaced by mayoral appointees partial to the agenda set forth by the mayor. In Chicago, it also meant replacing the school superintendent, who was legally mandated to have public education experience, with a CEO, who is only mandated by his scruples. Duncan served as the CEO for several years. He helped administer and finish off the largest militarization of a school system in the US, under the banner of "school improvement."

If we look at the history of Chicago's "school improvement" plan, we can see the hidden agenda pushed by the charter movement. According to Pauline Lipman, writing in Substance News in 2005, it is a plan whose blueprint was ripped from the Commercial Club of Chicago, a conglomerate of Fortune 500 companies in Chicago. Schools are closed and reopened while students are shuffled around to other schools, which are often performing worse than their original school. Little regard is paid to the education of the majority of students, almost all of them poor, black and Latino/a. Simply put, Chicago's plan is not a school improvement plan. It is the dismantling of a public good for the benefit of a chosen few. School militarization was accelerated as this plan was being implemented in Chicago.

The pushing of similar plans can be expected throughout the US now that Duncan is secretary of education. With the stimulus bill's \$100 billion in emergency aid for public schools and colleges, Duncan is in an incredible position of power. He could use it to promote renovation and increase resources to existing public schools. Or he could spend it on costly privatization and militarization, squandering our tax money and endangering our children's futures.

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