

The Militarization of American Public Schools

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This fall, Syracuse, New York will join the still small but growing list of public schools dedicated to the training of students for military service in the United States Armed Forces.

This past April, the Syracuse Central School District (SCSD) approved the closure of Fowler High School in the city's impoverished Westside section and its transformation into the Public Service Leadership Academy (PSLA), which will focus on training students for military service, to work in the Department of Homeland Security, or as police officers and firefighters.

There are 18 military academies as part of the public school system in the United States. Six are located in Chicago. All of these schools are associated with the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), whose goals include indoctrinating students with "patriotism," "responsiveness to all authority" and an increasing "respect for the role of the US Armed Forces in support of national objectives."

Most of these schools are located in working class and low-income communities and rely upon the lack of job and college options available to students to push them into the military.

The Westside section of Syracuse is one such area. It is a poverty-stricken area of the city that has been struggling with increasing inequality in the Obama "economic recovery," and staggering levels of poverty, particularly among children. Childhood poverty approaches 50 percent and for those in the 18-24 year age bracket—those just out of high school—the rate approaches two thirds. (See: "[Syracuse, New York housing in shambles](#)" and "[Deindustrialization and unemployment in Syracuse, New York](#)")

Employment opportunities for vulnerable students are slim and decent jobs are rarer still, thus leaving them as targets for poverty conscription to the military and police forces. In addition, the new Public Service Leadership Academy will also grant recruiters earlier access to students, allowing them to get their foot in the door to recruit among this young and captive audience.



Abandoned factory adjacent to Fowler

High

PSLA will be comprised of four career academies. In addition to the Military Science Academy are the Homeland Security Academy, First Responders Academy and Entrepreneurial Academy. The academies will be phased in over four years, beginning this September with ninth graders and adding a grade each year.

The Military Science Academy begins this September. This program will consist of the Navy's Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC), which relies on partial funding from the Syracuse school district. Those enrolled will "gain a foundation in maritime heritage, the significance of sea power, the fundamentals of naval operations, seamanship, navigation and meteorology."

The Homeland Security Academy will feature computer forensics, cyber security and geospatial intelligence. The First Responders Academy will focus on training students to be police officers, firefighters and emergency medical technicians, while the Entrepreneurial Academy will give students training in cosmetology and barbering as well as in the electrical trades.

In addition, students enrolled in the First Responder Academy, Homeland Security Academy and the Military Science Academy will also take four years of Arabic, American Sign Language or Spanish. Not being bashful about these languages being needed as US imperialism engages in more wars, the SCSD web site states, "The intelligence community has been open about the need for interpreters, engineers, scientists and other professionals who speak these languages, which are essential for emergency/disaster management."

The JROTC was part of the legislation of the National Defense Act of 1916 to bolster recruitment efforts as the United States was expanding its military to participate in World War I, concurrent with growing public opposition to the war effort.

The act authorizes the military to seek and have contact with students 17 and older, but there is a program geared to establish early contact with students as young as 11 for the Middle School Cadet Corp. For many decades the JROTC functioned as clubs in public high schools. What is new is that entire high schools are now being transformed into military training centers.

The closing of Fowler High School and its replacement with the PSLA is part of a plan by the SCSD to close three public schools in Syracuse. In addition to the high school, the school district will close Delaware Elementary, also in the Westside section, and Hughes Elementary in the city's Southside.



Photo from the Syracuse City School District web site promoting the Military Science Academy

The increased scrutiny and threats for reorganization of the school began in 2009 by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and culminated with a recent review, which cited the continued poor performance of Fowler High and the necessity of a drastic intervention. The NYSED based their decision on insufficient academic improvement when taking into consideration what the state describes as their “significant financial investment at Fowler.”

The flow of money administered by the state for Fowler has amounted to only \$5.6 million overall since 2010. During this period other budget cuts still allowed teacher levels to drop and class sizes to increase, with the accompanying frustration of teachers, students and parents. Without any doubt, the main factor negatively affecting student achievement is rarely mentioned when reforms are discussed: Poverty and inequality are marginalized as the primary causes of the decaying educational system.

Lindsay Gordon and her fiancé Joe Buske spoke with WWSW reporters. When asked her thoughts on the lack of resources for education, she responded indignantly, “Instead of spending money on other things I think they should be defending our children’s education.”

She was unaware of the statistic that 85 of the world’s richest individuals have as much wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion people. “It’s a shame,” she exclaimed, “They do nothing for our future; our children are our future—the next generation.”

She added, “Money needs to be spent for having a brighter future; children are not going to have the appropriate education and the appropriate help they need because of the budget cuts. Our children are not getting a fair chance to a fair and equal education.”

Lindsay described how she worries about her own child’s future. “I have a two-year-old daughter,” she said. “She goes to school in three years, and I’m going to make sure that she receives that education. I don’t think it’s fair. Children [remaining] in these areas are [always] getting budget cuts ... so it is absolutely unfair, it’s unethical.”



Joe Buske and Lindsay Gordon

Joe Buske commented on the militarization plans for Fowler High, saying, "We've spent money on wars, which I believe could have been better spent on needs at home. We were sold a story to send troops there to bring 'democracy' and I think that is something that should be left up to people there to decide on."

He added, "No one asked for our opinion before going to war." He said he is currently working for a hospital earning \$15 an hour and knew of many who were struggling with unemployment, food stamp cuts and lack of health insurance.

A number of young people who asked to remain anonymous felt strongly about social conditions in the area. One young person said, "I would say that my experience having gone to Fowler High two years ago was that class sizes are larger and the amount of what we were learning was not equal to the time I had spent in a high school in the suburbs."

A senior-year student who had just finished his final exams that afternoon said that in his experience over four years at Fowler High, there was a noticeable lowering of the quality of education. He said his future plans were for higher education, but that nearly two out of three students at Fowler would not graduate their senior year.

The lack of opportunities for work leads to the preying on young people to join the military. The transformation of public high schools into institutions such as the Public Service Leadership Academy in Syracuse is a continuation of the political establishment's militarization of society, to support US military policy and to utilize police state measures to impose even deeper levels of social inequality.

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