

The Militarization of Classrooms: Weapons Companies Are Making Money by “Taking Over” British Schools

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Image: A 12 foot effigy of the BAE chairman at the ‘people’s jury’ protest outside the BAE AGM.
Credit: Demotix/Peter Marshall.

Europe’s largest arms manufacturer, BAE Systems, has applied to sponsor the failing Furness Academy. The reason is profit.

Corporations have already established a growing foothold in many UK schools, but the idea of [Europe’s biggest arms company](#) running a school still seems like something out of an Orwellian nightmare.

However, it may be about to happen in Barrow, Cumbria, where [BAE Systems is on the verge of taking over the faltering](#) Furness Academy. The proposal is currently going through due diligence before being opened to a consultation with stakeholders, parents and staff, where it is expected to be supported. If it is agreed, BAE will become the school’s sole sponsor later this year. They will also take responsibility for the ‘strategic direction’ of the school.

Education isn’t just about grades, it’s also about promoting values, informing perspectives and expanding minds. Could a weapons manufacturer ever act in the best interests of school children? How can a company that profits from international hostility ever be trusted to teach about areas like conflict resolution or the human cost of war?

BAE has a shameful, inglorious history of corruption and deals with dictators. It has been the subject of investigations across a number of countries and was fined [\\$400 million](#) in the US for bribery. It has also sold weapons to human rights abusers and dubious regimes across the world, including [Saudi Arabia](#), [Libya](#), [Bahrain](#) and [Egypt](#).

Despite all of the ramifications for education, the move has been welcomed by local MP John Woodcock, who greeted it as a “[really exciting](#)” development. Furness Academy’s acting head called it “[a fantastic opportunity](#).”

Arms companies and schools

If education is a public good, should it be given away to big business? Arms companies already spend a lot of time and resources on infiltrating schools and trying to influence the curriculum.

One way they are doing this is through their marketing and promotional materials. Raytheon, an arms company that has been [linked to the production of bombs](#) used against Gaza last summer, [hosts competitions for science, technology, engineering and maths \(STEM\) students](#). Similarly, fighter jet manufacturer Boeing [works with schools to design mock military planes](#) and BAE runs a schools “ambassador” program, [with the stated objective of](#) improving its “corporate reputation at both a local and national level.”

Things will get worse this September, with the opening of a number of institutions that are directly tied to arms companies. These include [South Wiltshire University Technical College](#), which will teach science and engineering to 14-18 year olds “in the context of the defence industries.” Its ‘sponsors’ include Chemring, [which has been linked to the use of tear gas in Hong Kong and Egypt](#), and [QinetiQ](#), which has applied for arms export licences to sell weapons to countries including Bahrain, Pakistan, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Israel.

Although these arms companies are described as ‘sponsors’, [their roles will](#) include “helping to construct the curriculum”, allowing them to build “close links with students who will be potential future employees.”

The end goal for these companies is not to help produce an educated, questioning cohort of young people, it is to normalise their business practices and influence potentially impressionable young minds, while making a profit.

The militarisation of classrooms

All of this represents a worrying expansion of militarism into our schools, but it’s not the first sign of it. [Forces Watch estimates](#) that around 900,000 young people come into contact with the armed forces every year through their schools.

A [disproportionate number](#) of these students are those from disadvantaged backgrounds, which is where many of the resources are targeted. Some of this is done through recruitment fairs, and some through the government’s own ‘[military ethos](#)’ programme, which brings military veterans into schools to “[build character, resilience and grit in their pupils](#).”

The military also provides [free ‘support and resources’ for schools](#); these include promotional materials for classrooms and [Armed Forces Day assembly plans for children](#) as young as seven.

In simple terms the military wants to transform our schools into a recruitment ground. This is acknowledged by the head of army recruitment, who [described](#) army careers advisers as “skilled salesmen”, saying: “It starts with a seven-year-old boy seeing a parachutist at an air show and thinking, ‘That looks great.’ From then the army is trying to build interest by drip, drip, drip.”

As Turkish academic Serdar M. Değirmencioğlu has [said](#): “Schools provide fertile ground for militarism: there is a captive audience, a comprehensive mandate, a hierarchical structure and a clear power differential between students and professionals.”

Groups such as [Veterans for Peace](#) and the [Peace Education Network](#) do crucial and invaluable work in promoting peace and non-violence in schools and countering the growth of youth militarisation by offering an alternative to the army’s pro-military messages. But neither has anywhere near the same level of access and support that is enjoyed by the

armed forces or the arms industry.

What kind of education do we want?

Central to the debate is the wider question of what kind of values we want in our education system and what kind of future we want for young people.

Arms manufacturers would not commit to these kinds of programmes if it wasn't profitable to do so. These companies may pay lip-service to encouraging critical thinking and promoting positive learning outcomes, but their shareholders will always be the main beneficiaries of any arrangement.

This kind of involvement gives them a chance to gloss over the human rights abuses they facilitate and to present themselves as legitimate businesses. It also gives them direct access to potential future employees and allows them to influence young people's decisions and direction.

Schools are fundamental to our society. They are meant to be safer places for learning and should not be sold hotbeds for militarism and corporations. They exist to educate children and young people and to develop their ideas and understanding of the world. They should not be allowed to become training grounds for arms companies and those that profit from war.

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