

Trump, AI, and the Capitalist Restructuring of Education

A major restructuring of education is underway nationwide, at both federal and state levels, to better align education with shifting economic needs. There are several converging factors increasing the momentum and magnitude of this restructuring, including declining birth rates, low enrollment, federal and state budget cuts, greater curriculum control and political repression. And then, on top of all of this, there is the global race to dominate AI, which has opened the door to a rapid and dramatic reshaping of the entire system of education.

Background

Part of this story isn't new, and flows directly from the general function of education under capitalism: *social reproduction*. The primary aim of education under capitalism is not to produce an enlightened population, but to prepare the next generation of the necessary workforce. For the masses, this typically means being trained in discipline and docility, the sort of obedient behavior expected of K-12 students: sit down, be quiet, be on time, and follow directions. This is education as socialization: the process of normalizing the kind of behavior a boss can expect of a worker. Education is also the place to normalize the dominant views of society through the centralization of curriculum, where a narrative of U.S. history and world history can be controlled and disseminated. Higher education, on the other hand, primarily serves to train the workforce in more specialized areas, from engineers and doctors to scientists and statisticians.

In 1909, in a speech to educators and administrators in New York City, future U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (then president of Princeton University) stated the function of K-12 education clearly:

We want one class of persons to have a liberal education, and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class ... to forego the privileges of a liberal education and fit themselves to perform specific difficult manual tasks... We are either trying to make liberally-educated persons out of them, or we are trying to make skillful servants of society along mechanical lines, or else we do not know what we are trying to do.

What Wilson calls a "liberal education" refers to a study of the liberal arts, a university level education. Wilson is clearly describing the core function of education as social reproduction, that K-12 education should prepare most to students to become obedient productive workers and a smaller number should be prepared for a university education to become more specialized. Since 1909, many social movements have pushed back against this narrow, core function of education, creating the space for education to be more than just indoctrination and behavior modification for the working class. But education as social reproduction remains. And educational funding and government policies have continuously chipped away at the gains of prior social movements in order to strip education back down to its core function. This has been a constant back and forth within public education over the last several decades, and today it is happening at an unprecedented scale and pace.

A Decades Long Attack on Education

The attempt to restructure education to better align with shifting economic needs is nothing new, and has been an ongoing project of both Democratic and Republican administrations for the past decades. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration led the charge against public schools. Not only did Reagan introduce school voucher programs, but he also floated the idea of getting rid of the federal Education Department. Reagan appointed a National Commission on Education, which issued the report "A Nation at Risk" in 1983. Its message was that the U.S. education system was failing and needed to be restructured, the goal of which was to slash education budgets and refocus education on degrees and skills that would better align with the changing corporate interests of the time. In the words of "A Nation at Risk": "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation."

In the 1990s and 2000s, the strategy introduced by Reagan was accelerated and expanded under the administrations of President Clinton, Bush and Obama. The primary idea was to link the funding of K-12 schools to standardized testing in order to better control the curriculum and cut costs. Under Clinton, this began with the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, which was then massively expanded under the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 of the Bush administration. That law mandated more standardized testing and punitive measures for schools that failed to improve test scores. The Obama administration expanded No Child Left Behind much further with the Race to the Top Program of 2009. This program dangled large sums of money in front of states to encourage them to test more, open more charter schools, make it easier to fire teachers, integrate more technology into teaching to promote a greater interest in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields, use data to measure success, and blame teachers for poor test scores.

One of the key goals of these policies was to undermine teachers and their unions, making them out to be villains in the eyes of the public, as a way to lower teacher salaries and union density. States and school districts were pressured to invest millions in charter schools, where teachers are not unionized, subject to longer workdays, and have less support staff. Non-unionized teachers are often paid less, and often do not have a pension, allowing states and districts to save millions, and redirect funds to the ruling class. As the so-called education reform movement proceeded, the number of public school teachers in a union decreased from about 85% in 1990 to 68% by 2020.

Overproduction in Higher Education

Since the 2008 crisis, there has been an increasing overproduction of students with a college degree. Viewed through the narrow lens of state planning under capitalism, the quantity of jobs available doesn't warrant the volume of students going through higher education.

The evidence for this is plentiful. First there is a declining birth rate. The number of births has declined by about 16% since the recent peak of 2007. This is showing up in the declining numbers of school age children. The rate of high school grads enrolling in college immediately after high school has declined about 11% since its peak in 2009 (70.1%). There has been a 15% decline in college enrollment between 2010 and 2022, about 2.7 million fewer college students. And the lower birth rates of recent years will continue to increase this trend. Under capitalism, higher birth rates mean greater competition among the working class, which can help lower general wages and labor costs. The ruling class as a whole has been very explicit about their desire for a higher birth rate, which does help explain some of the reactionary policies to eliminate access to reproductive health care.

But the total decline in college enrollment goes beyond just declining birth rates. Last year, 50% of college graduates couldn't find work in a field that matches or requires their degree. For graduates in humanities and most social science disciplines, as many as 70% could not find jobs closely related to their degree.

But even for STEM graduates, the number is still at least 30% who can't find work related to their degrees. And this is significant because there was a clear shortage of STEM grads back in 2000. And part of the educational restructuring of those years pushed STEM in education at all levels. This push for STEM in K-12 was aimed at increasing the number of college students with bachelor and graduate degrees in STEM-related fields. By 2015, the STEM shortage had turned into the desired STEM surplus, and this was reflected both in lower labor costs in STEM related jobs and in higher rates of unemployment among STEM graduates. That trend has only continued since.

Today the unemployment rate for people aged 22 to 27 with a college degree has reached its highest level in over a decade, at 6%, and it is about equal between young people with and without a college degree. In 2024, less than 20% of job postings required a four-year degree, and 52% did not list any educational requirements at all. So, many students are making the calculation that the cost of higher education may not be worth it if you'll only end up with a job that doesn't even require a college degree.

Chris Rufo, one of the right-wing ideologues linked to the Trump administration and influencing education policy, has stated that he would like to see the number of students attending four year colleges cut by more than half. Whether Rufo's target is realized or not, what is clear is that there is a broad bi-partisan consensus that the educational system has plenty of room for downsizing in myriad ways, including more school closures and the elimination of many departments, especially in the humanities and social sciences.

The Attacks from The Trump Administration

It is with this backdrop that the Trump administration is seizing an opportunity to push through a massive restructuring of education, with the primary goal to make education cheaper, more aligned with corporate needs, and more reflective of the dominant ideology.

For the Trump administration they are accelerating many of the same trends of the past. A major reassessment is underway of which academic fields at the university level need to be prioritized and which might be expendable, opening up opportunities for major cutbacks and reorganization of education and departments.

The administration is also trying to control education as a tool for ideological indoctrination and political repression by eliminating dissent, criminalizing protest on campuses, and restricting the teaching or research of any ideas that are counter to the right-wing, nationalist, xenophobic ideology of Trump administration.

Their attack is partially motivated by budgetary reductions as a component of a general transfer of wealth away from social services to the ruling class in the form of tax breaks. They openly seek to dismantle the Education Department. The Education Department is neither a major source of education funding, nor is it a major portion of the federal budget. Individual states account for about 90% of all education spending, with the federal government covering the rest. The Education Department is only about 4% of the total federal budget, amounting to about \$268 billion in 2024. The majority (around 65%) of the Education Department's budget goes to Pell Grants and student loans. So, gutting the Education Department's funding will reduce the number of college students just by reducing or eliminating Pell Grants.

About 30% of the Education Department budget goes to K-12 schools in low-income neighborhoods and for programs to serve students with disabilities. Students attending school in many of the poorest urban and rural neighborhoods, disproportionately students of color, rely on these programs to help provide some basic standards, from food assistance, teacher training, technology, and programs for other disadvantaged students. And about 7.5 million K-12 public school students rely on a variety of special education needs, managed and funded by the Education Department. Cutting these funds will both push greater funding burdens onto states and simply eliminate this assistance for millions of low-income students and students with disabilities. The Trump administration aims to do both.

An additional source of funding for higher education also comes from other federal departments, like the Department of Energy, Department of Defense, National Science Foundation, Health and Human Services, and many more. These funds primarily go to funding university research programs and departments, and can represent significant funding sources, which are essential to keeping these departments going.

At the higher education level, the Trump administration is using threats of funding cuts to blackmail universities into restricting free speech and academic freedom by pressuring university administrations to crackdown on student protests and on faculty that publish material, teach curriculum, or make speeches that are critical of Israel's genocide, or critical of U.S. policies in general. Texas A&M is openly using AI to search faculty syllabi for keywords on topics like gender, race, women's rights, civil rights, and more. Other universities are following suit, and there is an increasing pressure to force universities to make faculty syllabi public for review.

At the same time, these threats of funding cuts have forced many university administrations to the table to negotiate with the Trump administration the specifics of these policies, which include the elimination of considerations of race in admissions or hiring, the reduction of the number of international students, and the elimination of transgender studies, ethnic studies, women's studies, Marxism, and more. Over 60 universities – many of them the top universities in the country – received warnings of severe funding cuts if they did not agree to the Trump administration's reactionary policies. Several schools have reached agreements, others still in negotiations, and many have resisted.

Beyond just funding threats, the general oversupply of higher education graduates has given the Trump administration additional leverage to pressure university administrations to reduce programs in humanities and some science departments, those promoting research or curricula that is critical of dominant ideology. In fact, many universities could make reductions in the number of degrees (bachelor and post-graduate) offered in these disciplines with very little economic impact because there are already so few jobs that require degrees in these fields compared to the number of degrees in these disciplines.

Also, as federal funds go down, institutions increasingly turn towards more private funding sources, increasing the dependence of educational institutions on corporations, so they can better shape the kind of curriculum and training they want.

The administration is also pressuring states to open up their K-12 school voucher programs to Christian Nationalist schools, which will provide state funding to attend these private schools and continuously drain the public education budget. These voucher programs are often taken advantage of by wealthy, Christian families who don't even need the financial assistance. Voucher programs like this have already been passed in Texas and 14 other Republican-led states, and others have similar legislation underway.

In addition, the federal government is increasingly using the oversupply of education as an opportunity to increase recruitment into the military, which is at historic lows. Their recruitment ads have targeted the oversupply of higher education and characterize joining the military as the more practical and financially lucrative choice. A traditional college education is contrasted to joining the military, where you will be paid to go to school, and end up with a guaranteed job that pays well – so their marketing says. And their recruitment has increased in the last two years.

The Trump administration is well aware of the general situation and is using every opportunity to leverage its agenda.

Education Cuts at the State Level

The federal attack on education is taking place on top of a steady attack at the state level. It has been state policies, equally from Democrats and Republicans, that have helped make higher education so unaffordable, slashing education funding, forcing tuitions to increase, and forcing more and more students into debt.

In the 2000s, higher education funding went through major cuts, which drastically pushed tuition up, about doubling on average. At the time, the oversupply in higher education graduates was less developed as it is today. But then the 2008 crisis led to huge job losses and a big dip in hiring, and thus many people turned to college hoping it would make them a more competitive job applicant. For some it worked, but for many, it just meant greater debt and with no improved job prospects.

And since then, we've seen ongoing cuts to education happening at state levels, exacerbated by lower enrollment. The calculus from states actually parallels some of the thinking of the Trump administration: education needs to be more productive, with degrees in what corporations want, and when cuts are necessary, administrations look first to cut programs and courses that lead to low employment, most often in the humanities and social sciences. There has been a 24% decline in humanities and social science programs and bachelor's degrees from 2012 to 2022. Between 2020 and 2023, more than 40% of departments in history, anthropology, and foreign languages reported a decrease in tenure-track faculty.

As enrollment continues to decline at most of the non-elite universities, funding levels decline as well since university funds are linked to enrollment (both from state funds and tuition). So, universities are facing budgetary crises across the country. Some are closing entirely, with a record number of private colleges closing – a 300% increase in college closures since a decade ago. Since 2023, smaller private colleges have closed or merged at a rate of about one per week, with more closures anticipated due to the even lower enrollments of recent years.

And public colleges, if they are not closing, are reducing their course offerings, merging departments, and firing teachers to balance their budgets to meet the declining funding. The California State University (CSU) stands out as a clear example of how this crisis is unfolding. Over the past few years, various CSU administrations have imposed enormous layoffs of faculty, the cancellation of entire programs and degrees, and mergers of departments – hundreds of faculty positions have been eliminated at most CSUs during this time. University systems across the country are going through the same cuts due to declining enrollment.

And what is happening at the university level has been happening at the community college level too, which has faced even worse enrollment declines, although these declines may be slowing.

What we see from college administrations everywhere is the same language of budgetary crises that can only be addressed by deeper and deeper cuts.

K-12 Cuts are Not Slowing Down

K-12 funding is also tied to enrollment numbers, so extremely underfunded schools are getting less funding due to declining enrollment.

And many states have passed laws to push the burden of funding teacher pensions away from the state and onto local districts. Public teacher pensions have historically been a large chunk of state budgets, about 15%. But what many states did was reduce the contribution to pensions provided by the state and increase the portion provided by the local school district.

For example, in 2014, California passed a law (AB 1469) changing the funding formula of teachers' pensions, the California State Teachers Retirement System (CalSTRS). The state made districts increase their portion from 8% in 2013 to 19% by 2020, more than doubling. Since 2010, about 40 states have passed similar laws, which typically applied to universities and community college districts as well.

These changes have only exacerbated the funding shortages, and guaranteed they would get worse. On top of funding cuts from the state and funding losses from declining enrollment, now districts and administrations are having to redirect much of their shrinking budgets to teachers' pensions contributions – something the state should be covering.

So by design, as the wealthiest get richer, districts and schools have been saddled with a permanent budgetary crisis, which is the continued excuse for ongoing understaffing and low wages. At the K-12 level, this means major budget fights recur every few years when contracts are renegotiated, as administrations shrug their shoulders and say they just don't have the funds to provide wage increases, hiring, etc. Local districts have tried to mitigate these losses by taxing local populations more, which disproportionately impact working class families. But these additional funds have not come close to solving the problem.

The logical outcome of all of this is more school closures, more layoffs, and more cuts to education, especially in working class school districts.

Online Education

In higher education, online education has skyrocketed, more than doubling in just the last ten years. This means that colleges within states – and even across the country – compete for the same pool of shrinking students, as students can often take online courses anywhere in the state, which is hitting community colleges and state universities the hardest.

This enormous shift away from in-person classes means states can recalculate the number of physical buildings needed. This creates new opportunities for even further funding cuts, allowing states to shrink their education spending, and redirect those funds to the private sector, or offer tax breaks for the rich.

The AI Race Changes Everything

It is with this complicated backdrop of federal funding cuts, authoritarian attacks on education from the Trump administration, nationwide declining enrollment, and state budgetary cuts that has created a golden opportunity to integrate AI into education to radically and rapidly restructure education like never before.

There are several simultaneous goals and opportunities being sought through the integration of AI and education.

First, because of the intensity of the global AI race, there is an immediate need to train a new generation of workers to be AI proficient, similar to the need for computer literacy from decades ago. This requires an immediate integration of AI into all levels of education. This is being reflected in executive orders, state policies, university administration policies, community college boards, and even teacher's unions.

In April, the Trump administration signed Executive Order 14277, "Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth." This is the central policy for AI in education, making explicit the general trajectory of normalizing AI integration into education. The order establishes the White House Task Force on AI Education to coordinate federal efforts and implement policies at every level. It reprioritizes federal grant funding and Education Department funding towards AI research and teacher training and professional development around AI integration. And it lays out pathways for broader public-private partnerships to quickly integrate AI education into K-12 schools and colleges.

There have been several other executive orders to bolster the rapid integration of AI and education. Most recently, in December 2025, the Trump administration signed Executive Order, "Ensuring a National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence." This order attempts to block states from enforcing their own AI regulations by creating potential litigation and funding restrictions, all aimed at fast tracking this shift.

This transition to AI education integration is not limited to the U.S., and has already been implemented in China, India, South Korea, and many countries in Europe and beyond.

But the push for AI integration is not just happening at the federal level. States are pushing for the same sorts of policies, along with universities and even K-12 districts. Professional development days are filled with trainings on AI integration. In California, for example, the CSU system has signed a \$17 million deal with tech giants to rapidly integrate AI into the entire university system. The Board of California Community Colleges (CCC) are also aggressively pushing for AI integration to become standardized at all community colleges in the state, and to link AI proficiency to degree requirements, and even teaching requirements. Other states are passing similar laws or initiatives across the country. Leading online course companies, like Coursera, are rapidly partnering with AI companies to integrate AI course design and AI language models into their marketed course packages in an increasing range of subjects and disciplines, including, ironically, courses on AI proficiency training for teachers.

At the same time, AI integration with education could allow for the fastest and most widespread policing of curricula imaginable. For years, we have seen efforts at book banning and curriculum control accelerate, even before the Trump administration. AI integration would allow for a rapid homogenization of curricula reflective of dominant ideologies, and could by default or by design ignore critical perspectives and deny access

to critical materials. If an authoritarian regime, like the Trump administration, wanted to control and police curriculum, there would be no better way to do it than to integrate AI into education.

Even the largest national teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education of Teachers (NEA), which collectively represent the majority of unionized educators at all levels of education nationwide, have announced partnerships with tech companies to rapidly integrate AI into teacher training and literacy.

It is hard to predict how quickly these changes will start to take effect, but the wheels are already in motion. At the very minimum, the aims of this integration are to rapidly achieve AI normalization and literacy, to reduce the state and federal costs of education, to require fewer employees, and to tie curriculum more directly to what corporations want. But it also opens the door for a very draconian education system, with fewer teachers, who are trained not in education, or even in their subject matter, but in how to facilitate classroom environments that maximize learning with AI. Right now, AI is being framed as an effective supplement to the normal classroom. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. What AI offers to an education system already prone towards efficiency, productivity, low costs, and curriculum control, is a complete reorganization of education along much more authoritarian lines, directly linked to the demands of the capitalist system – a dystopic system of social reproduction in education like never before.

Conclusion

This enormous restructuring of education that is already underway requires a massive resistance to slow it down and stop it. Under capitalism, fights for equal, quality education that foster critical inquiry into human history, society and the world have always been an element of the class struggle. A major component of workers' struggles of the 1930s and the Civil Rights movement was a struggle for quality education. It can be again.

But as long as teachers and students are trapped fighting only at the local level against their administration and district, the kind of fightback that is necessary cannot be mounted. Of course, fights against college administrations, or local school districts in K-12 – as we have recently seen nationwide – are all necessary, and each have the potential to expand into much broader fights in the community and beyond. But when they stay at the local level, often these fights can't go beyond negotiating over the crumbs.

Much broader unified fights are needed, which unite educators, staff, and students at every level of education – which are all under threat – at city, state, and the national level. These fights can't be framed as coming from anti-technology luddites, which they are not. They have to be centered around fighting for quality education and education jobs for all, in resistance to this draconian restructuring of education.

And in this atmosphere of a generalized assault on the population, a fightback in education could spread beyond education. In education, at every level, it is the students, staff, and teachers and their family members that are being targeted by ICE. It is the faculty that are

being targeted by curriculum control and attacks on academic freedom. It is the schools and colleges and departments that are being threatened with closure or downsizing. In this enormous multi-pronged attack, there exists an opportunity to mount a unified, multi-pronged defense of not just education, but of our lives and our future.

If this doesn't happen, there is no telling what rapid transformations the capitalist system of education will go through.