

Oklahoma governor threatens to withhold high school diplomas

Harvey Simpkins
6 January 2025

Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt has recently been promoting his “Classrooms to Careers” initiative, purportedly to turn “classrooms into career launchpads” and prepare “every student for success in the workforce,” according to a December 27 social media post.

But the type of “success” Stitt envisions has been quickly revealed. Stitt told a local Fox affiliate on December 30 that he might make it a high school graduation requirement that “you’ve got to either be accepted to college or you have to be accepted into a career tech or you have to be going into the army, you have to have some kind of plan post-graduation to go get a great job.”

In other words, Stitt wants working-class young people forced into a “choice” between in-demand production jobs (after self-financing the training) or fighting in American imperialism’s ever-expanding wars for global hegemony.

A tsunami of angry opposition from parents, teachers, students and community members has ensued.

“How about letting students and their families decide what is best for them,” said one Facebook commentator. Another wrote, “This sounds like ‘Mandatory Military Service Straight Outta Highschool for the Poor’ but with flowery language.” A third stated, “Mandatory military service for the poor. We see what you’re doing, Stitt. This isn’t helping kids. This is disgusting.”

In a TikTok video that promptly went viral, an Oklahoma teacher explained that the governor’s idea makes no allowance for young people with special needs or those who cannot afford higher education. She says it “smells like institutionalization and forced labor to me... choice, parental rights, all that’s a myth to earn your vote. They lied to you.” She noted, “it’s all off the

table unless you’re a one percenter.” Her TikTok has 20,000 comments to date, the vast majority scathingly denouncing the proposal.

Temara Jean posted, “So, they are basically initiating the draft without saying it’s a draft”—which was liked by over 108,000 people. PowBamfKAK said, “Most people can’t afford college.” The teacher responded, “Many children can’t even afford the application process. Either way, this cuts off high school graduation for the poorest students.”

Governor Stitt’s suggestion of a military requirement for those unable or uninterested in attending college or trade school points to the ruling class’s profound concern over a severe military recruitment shortfall.

The far-right Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025 details this downward trend in enlistment. Writing in Project 2025, former Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller (who played a crucial role in facilitating Trump’s coup attempt by initially preventing D.C. National Guard troops from assisting Capitol Police to protect Congress) laments that military “recruiting was the worst in 2022 that it has been in two generations and is expected to be even worse in 2023.” As a remedy for this, Miller suggests: “Improve military recruiters’ access to secondary schools and require completion of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB)—the military entrance examination—by all students in schools that receive federal funding.”

Miller also calls on “Members of Congress to provide time to military recruiters during each townhall session in their congressional districts.” Capitalist politicians from both parties have already received this message, including, revealingly, Democratic Socialist of America member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In March of 2023, Representative Ocasio-Cortez, who supports the proxy

U.S. war against Russia in Ukraine, sponsored a student fair at a New York City high school to recruit young people into the military.

That same year, Thomas Spoehr, the director of the Center for National Defense, described the recruitment crisis as “the worst since the institution of the all-volunteer force in 1973.”

As to Stitt’s claims that his program will prepare young people for Oklahoma’s “great jobs” and that “there’s so many great jobs out there,” these are belied by a look at some of the state’s largest employers. As of 2023, according to the Oklahoma Commerce Department, the largest employers in the state include Walmart (second); Amazon (third), Hobby Lobby Stores (fifth), Braum’s ice cream chain (14th), Dollar General (19th), Lowe’s Home Centers (21st) and UPS (26th). Dovetailing with Stitt’s desire to create a school-to-military pipeline, Oklahoma’s largest employer is the Department of Defense.

Most of the jobs at such employers are paid far less than a living wage. According to the MIT Living Wage Calculator, in Oklahoma, a single adult would need to make at least \$19.33 an hour, with full-time hours, and for a family of four with two adults and two children, each adult would need to make, on average, at least \$23.33 an hour with full-time hours. Zip Recruiter reports that the average sales associate at an Oklahoma Walmart is paid \$16.23 an hour, and the average hourly wage for a fulfillment associate at Amazon is \$13.78.

As for UPS, thanks to a sell-out agreement that the Teamsters negotiated last year, part-time workers, who make up a majority of the workforce, are receiving only \$21 an hour. Such workers routinely must work two or three jobs to make ends meet, with UPS often scheduling only three- or four-hour shifts.

Oklahoma’s minimum wage also remains at the abysmally low national minimum of \$7.25 an hour, as it has since 2009. According to the US Census data, during the period 2019-2023, Oklahoma’s median household income was \$63,603 (in 2023 dollars). The state also has the sixth highest poverty rate in the country, with 15.9 percent of the population below the official poverty line. For children, 20.8 percent live in households below the federal poverty level.

Stitt’s policies, meanwhile, are aimed at destroying public education and funneling tax dollars to the wealthy. In 2023, he supported and passed a school

privatization bill providing publicly funded tax credits of between \$5,000 and \$7,500 for parents sending their children to private schools. This is part of an accelerating trend nationwide of school privatization schemes to undermine public education. Another “accomplishment” for Stitt was a 2024 law that eliminated a world language requirement for high school graduation and allowed school systems to grant high school credit for work experience.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact