



PARENTS DEFENDING EDUCATION

February 8, 2024

State Superintendent of Education Tony Sanders
The Illinois State Board of Education
101 N. 1st St.
Springfield, IL 62777

Re: The People's Republic of China's Ongoing Cybersecurity Threats and Implications for Illinois Schools

Dear Superintendent Sanders:

The Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recently held a hearing to address China's repeated, hostile cybersecurity attacks targeting American servicemembers, critical infrastructure, businesses, and other vital U.S. institutions:

- Ranking Member Raja Krishnamoorthi, an Illinois Democrat, reported that CCP hackers accessed computer systems of two dozen critical infrastructure entities in the United States. The hackers attempted to access an electric grid in Texas to install malware that could “disrupt or damage the infrastructure.”¹
- The Chinese government has successfully hacked and collected data on American businesses and the military. FBI Director Christopher Wray, who testified at the hearing, noted that China's hacking operation is bigger than that of every other country in the world combined.²
- The FBI recently thwarted Chinese hackers who targeted critical infrastructure, including “our communications, energy, transportation, and water sectors,” with malware embedded into internet routers, Wray said during his testimony.

The Chinese government's infiltration of American infrastructure and institutions extends to education. More than 140 school districts in the United States fostered relationships with the

¹ Hearing Notice: The CCP cybersecurity threat to the American homeland and national security. Select Committee on the CCP. January 31, 2024.

<https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/hearing-notice-ccp-cyber-threat-american-homeland-and-national-security>

² Ibid.

People’s Republic of China and CCP-affiliated entities, according to a report we released last summer called *Little Red Classrooms*.³ Our report includes school districts in your state.

One of the most alarming incidents noted in the report came from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Virginia—the nation’s top high school. A nonprofit entity operating out of the school received more than \$1 million from CCP-affiliated entities and gave Chinese diplomats access to laboratory equipment. With the information gleaned as part of this partnership, the Chinese government established a string of schools in China built on Thomas Jefferson’s model, called “Thomas Schools.”⁴

In light of this hearing, and the increased awareness of the Chinese Communist Party’s infiltration into American schools, Parents Defending Education formally requests the Illinois State Board of Education to probe school districts’ servers for potential signs of malware, hacking, security breaches, or data collection at the hands of the Chinese government.

Americans deserve to know if hackers, acting at the behest of the Chinese government, have embedded malware into school computers, servers, or internet routers. Parents deserve to know if an adversarial foreign nation has access to their child’s school data. It is vital for your department to take immediate action to ensure that your schools, your students, and their families are safe.

As Representative Krishnamoorthi rightly noted in the hearing, China’s cybersecurity threats are intended “to potentially harm us in a time of conflict.” Leaders at the state and federal level must step up to protect American citizens—including American schoolchildren—from the persistent cybersecurity threats posed by the Chinese government.

Let’s make one thing clear: China’s interest in the American education system is not for the benefit of the American children. Rather, it’s part of the communist regime’s long-term strategy to soften American and global sentiments toward its own political goals.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance to you in this matter. We appreciate your consideration and hope you will take this opportunity to do what you can to protect students in Illinois.

Respectfully,

Alex Nester
Investigative Fellow
Parents Defending Education

³ *Little Red Classrooms*. Parents Defending Education. July 27, 2023.

<https://defendinged.org/investigations/little-red-classrooms-china-infiltration-of-american-k-12-schools/>

⁴ The Thomas Schools of China. Home - Thomas International Schools. <http://m.thomasschools.com/>