

Democracy and Education

What School Board Candidates Need to Know About: **The Extremist Threat to Public Schools**

Overview

Many extremist organizations are working to deliberately undermine confidence in public schools in order to dismantle them and privatize education. Although they don't always state this, it is not at all a secret.

The intellectual roots for their work can be traced to Milton Friedman's advocacy of "competition." Friedman argued that there is no such thing as a "public" good independent of private interest, and urged that parents purchase their children's education on the open market. Today's right-wingers advocate for vouchers for private, parochial, and "micro" schools, which are unaccredited tiny schools run for profit.

This is in exact contrast to the ideal most Americans hold: that children in a community should go to school together so that they can become educated citizens of a democracy.

One tactic the right-wing outrage machine employs to undermine confidence in schools is to hector and threaten school officials about critical race theory, transgender children, and social-emotional learning. But they are also working to recruit, train, and elect school board members. To that end, they are working to require school board candidates state their party affiliations, despite the fact that traditionally school boards have been non-partisan.

Although each may have a slightly different emphasis, across the organizations is a common message: "They" are coming for our schools and our children. "They" are indoctrinating our children with Marxist ideas disguised as "equity" and "social-emotional" support of children and "race essentialism." "They" are teaching children that white people are oppressors and Black and Hispanic children victims incapable of overcoming oppression. "They" are deliberately blurring the lines of male and female in order to undermine the traditional family and are "grooming" children to be sexually preyed upon. Somewhat to a lesser extent, "they" are using COVID to subjugate our children with masks and vaccines.

For the most part, this is sheer scaremongering. A few scattered examples of teachers veering from good teaching practices provide grist for this scaremongering, and school board candidates may face questions about specific training or materials used in their district. But there is no totalitarian mob taking over the nation's schools. If you doubt that, talk with teachers, principals, and students.

What to Look for in Your School District

- [1776 Project PAC](#) is a political action committee dedicated to electing school board members nationwide who “want to reform our public education system by promoting patriotism and pride.”
- [Citizens for Renewing America](#) is a 501c4 organization with a “toolkit” for parents and legislators and advice about running for school board.
- [Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism](#) has chapters around the country getting involved in school board races, and argues against any attempt to explore systems and practices within schools that might create disparities.
- [Heritage Action](#), connected to the Heritage Foundation, advises [how to run for school board](#).
- The [Leadership Institute](#) provides [school board candidate training](#).
- [Moms for Liberty](#) began in Florida and claims chapters all around the country. It has been behind some of the most vocal and highly publicized protests at school board members. It funnels its members to the Leadership Institute training listed above.
- [Noah Webster Educational Foundation](#), provides some of the content for the Leadership Institute and has [its own](#) courses as well.
- [No Left Turn in Education](#) is one of the self-styled grassroots partners of Parents Defending Education, but like them has not said where it gets its money from. Right now it is focused on ridding schools of what it calls “woke” curricula and harassing school board members.
- [The Policy Circle](#) claims hundreds of “circles” all around the country that inform and encourage “ladies” to be civically engaged. They have played a role in some school board elections.
- [Parents Defending Education](#) has a [“starter guide”](#) with information about how to run for school board, with the main issue of concern being critical race theory.

Possible Messages to Voters

If we allow a small number of people to censor the history our children learn and the literature they read and to create distrust and fear of our schools, we will have lost a precious inheritance. School board members should be problem-solvers, not ideologues who use children as pawns in their national political battles.

For More Information:

- The site www.assistdemocracy.org has links to news stories about the right-wing assault on public schools.
- In [The Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door](#) Jennifer Berkshire and Jack Schneider describe the efforts to dismantle public schools, a topic they explore also in their podcast, [Have You Heard?](#)
- [Know Your Enemy](#) is a podcast by Matthew Sittman and Sam Adler-Bell that explores the intellectual roots of the current right-wing efforts to destroy democratic institutions.
- [The Long Con](#) is a podcast by New Trier High School parent and actor Paul Traynor exploring the organizations and people who mounted a campaign against the school’s “seminar day” focused on civil rights and equity.
- Many books explore the history of right-wing activism and the money fueling it, including [Evil Geniuses](#) by Kurt Anderson; [The Road to Unfreedom](#) by Timothy Snyder, and [Dark Money](#) by Jane Mayer.

Please Note: This is a living document that may be edited and changed from time to time.