

# THE DISINFO PLAYBOOK TARGETING OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND ELECTIONS

# 2022

**A Guide to the  
Anti-Public School  
Front Groups--  
like IWF and  
Moms for Liberty--  
and Their Dark  
Money-Funded  
Efforts to Censor  
Books, Disrupt  
Equality, and  
Impede Fact-Based  
Learning by Kids**



People Throw Kids' Books in a Bonfire, Nashville (Feb. 2022). Photo by Tyler Salinas.

**A**s the 2022 mid-term elections unfold, we are seeing expanded efforts by right-wing front groups to deploy the tactics they used in Virginia last fall to inflame voters and spread disinformation that assails public schools and attacks equality for America's kids.

This guide provides information about the dark money-funded groups leading these campaigns – such as those calling themselves the “Independent Women’s Voice” and “Moms for Liberty” – and their tactics.

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This report is co-authored by Alyssa Bowen, Ansev Demirhan, and Lisa Graves, with research and support by Evan Vorpahl and Caitlin Mahoney of True North Research, a watchdog group.

*If you see examples of anti-public school disinformation in your neighborhood please DM @itstruenorth on Twitter.*

*If you would like assistance countering these groups or debunking their claims, please contact us [here](#).*

**Introduction.** Public schools were likely the deciding issue in the success of Trump-endorsed GOP candidate Glenn Youngkin over Democrat Terry McAuliffe in the Virginia governor’s race last fall.

Ongoing stress about the pandemic and its disruption of public education and people’s lives has been exploited by right-wing groups to advance their political agenda. These groups have increasingly targeted school boards in diverse suburban districts across the country.

Though dressed up as “issue” campaigns, these PR blitzes are ultimately about elections and privatizing public schools. Such campaigns use disinformation tactics that take advantage of parents’ natural concern for their kids’ well-being.

These groups have put schools at the center of their culture wars by drumming up outrage over “Critical Race Theory,” or “CRT,” and more. Right-wing agitators repurposed that term as a catch-all for assailing LGBTQ- and race-inclusive policies, as well as truths about U.S. history, that they seek to censor.

The Virginia election allowed national dark money groups hostile to public schools to test the potency of their attacks to influence voters, and they prevailed. As they expand their efforts in 2022, here’s what parents and the press need to know.

## How Dark Money Groups Target Public Schools

✓ They Use “Parental Rights” Rhetoric to Promote GOP Candidates, including in School Board Races and More

✓ They Give the False Impression that They Represent the Majority’s Sentiment while Exclusively Amplifying Right-Wing Claims

✓ They Hide Their Ties & Won’t Disclose Their Biggest Funders

✓ They Spread Disinformation that Inflames and Fuels Hate:

🤬 Spreading Debunked Lies about “Critical Race Theory”

🤬 Targeting Lessons & Books about Black and Queer History

🤬 Pushing Anti-Trans Bigotry

# A GUIDE to the Dark Money Anti-Public School Infrastructure

The dark money infrastructure attacking public schools was built over decades, before [the current manufactured outrage](#) was directed at centers of public learning.

Billionaires like Charles Koch, Richard Uihlein, Betsy DeVos and the Waltons have used millions from their vast fortunes to undermine public schools. They use their family foundations to underwrite tax-exempt 501(c) non-profit groups to advance their efforts to weaken support for universal public education and push alternatives that redirect public tax dollars into private hands. Evidence suggests some may also use corporate or personal bank accounts to aid such groups too.

These groups do not disclose the amounts they receive from individual billionaires or corporations, keeping such contributions secret from the public. Only the family foundations are required to disclose their grants, and that is only disclosed long after elections are over.

**The bottom-line is that there is *no* real-time transparency about who is secretly funding the groups attacking public schools and school boards.**

## Recommendation: Follow the Money

\* When these groups appear at a school board, PR event, or reach out to the press, they should be asked to name who their biggest funders are.

\* If a person is amplifying the claims of these groups, they should be asked if they have an employment or volunteer relationship with one of these groups.

\* Publicly ask if they know who is secretly bankrolling the claims they are repeating.

In 2021, existing dark money groups and new ones created by experienced operatives channeled their resources toward attacks on suburban schools in Virginia during its off-year election cycle. NBC News conducted an investigation that [identified 165 groups](#) focused on school boards and wedge issues.

The most dominating groups include:

- \* **Independent Women’s Voice (I WV)** and its related arms with similar names,
- \* **Parents Defending Education,**
- \* **Moms for Liberty,** and
- \* **Fight for Schools.**

It is possible that additional or disposable brand names could be deployed too, like I WV’s “[toxicschools.org](#)” landing page.

## Sidebar: A Case Study on I WV’s Tactics in Virginia

In October 2021, with less than two weeks before the election, the “Independent Women’s Voice” (I WV) launched a site called ToxicSchools.org. That website used misleading text and graphics to claim that Virginia’s public schools were giving students access to pornographic materials. It also amplified Youngkin’s campaign claim that McAuliffe believed parents should not be allowed to have any say in such content. (More on this smear is detailed later in this report.)

The same day that I WV launched its ad campaign for ToxicSchools.org, I WF President Carrie Lukas wrote a piece for FOX where she described herself as a parent against McAuliffe because he reiterated what Virginia’s Constitution expressly provides: that by law, school boards—not individual parents—select textbooks. (Virginia has more than 1.3 million public school students, and the results would be chaotic if unelected parents could impose their personal views to censor what other children can learn.)

In that election, Youngkin downplayed his Trump ties and seized on this and other manufactured controversies over schools as the centerpoint of his campaign to become governor. And, he won.

## What Are IWV and IWF?

IWV and its related 501(c)(3) group, the “Independent Women’s Forum” (IWF), are pay-to-play groups that use their “independent” branding to promote GOP politicians and the legislative wish lists of its known and unknown funders.

For example, IWF [repeatedly](#) told mothers not to worry about their teens [vaping](#), despite the [serious health concerns](#) being raised, while failing to tell its audience that it was funded by [Juul](#), the largest retailer of vaping products in the U.S. IWF has also told parents not to worry about [BPA](#) or phthalates in baby bottles, with promos like “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Plastic,” without telling readers about its ties to the plastics industry.

💰 **Dark Money.** Then there are their secret funders. IWF and IWV have received millions from secret funders whose money was passed to them through [DonorsTrust](#) and the [Freedom and Opportunity Fund](#), a component of the dark money network orchestrated by right-wing lawyer [Leonard Leo](#). He’s most famous for packing the U.S. Supreme Court with the judges who overturned [Roe v. Wade](#). The press recently [reported](#) that an anti-choice billionaire named [Barre Seid](#) put his friend Leo in charge of a \$1.6 billion dollar trust. *Is Seid one of IWF/V’s underwriters?*

It would be newsworthy if a major funder of groups that call themselves the “Independent Women’s Voice” or Forum were throwing a man’s voice, but it would not be surprising, given their history.

### 💰 **Known Funders: Women’s “Voice” Received Most Funding from Rich Men.**

In 2010, when [Scott Brown](#) and [Elizabeth Warren](#) were vying for a U.S. Senate seat for Massachusetts, campaign finance disclosures [revealed](#) that most (89%) of IWV’s funders were rich men, like Wyoming half-billionaire [Foster Friess](#). Another IRS filing revealed that a major IWF funder was [Rush Limbaugh](#), the disparaging [right-wing talk show host](#).

IWV also [ran robo-calls to aid candidates who said horrifying things](#) about [rape](#):

- It spent \$67,242 to aid Missouri U.S. Senate candidate [Todd Akin](#) after Akin claimed that rape victims couldn’t get pregnant because “if it’s [legitimate rape](#), the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.”
- It spent \$176,991 on a “Romney wants Mourdock” ad after Indiana U.S. Senate candidate [Richard Mourdock](#) asserted that when a woman is raped, she carries a “gift from God” and that a [pregnancy from rape](#) “is something that God intended to happen.”

It is also notable that the main strategist for IWF and IWV is the political operative [Heather Higgins](#). She is the heir to the [Vicks Vapo-Rub](#) fortune from the same family company that was the sole U.S. and Canadian distributor of [Thalidomide](#), which caused severe birth defects.

Higgins has taken credit for [Brett Kavanaugh](#)’s confirmation, by touting IWF talking points she said were used by Sen. [Susan Collins](#) (R-ME) and FOX to support his controversial confirmation. Under her leadership, IWF/V also claimed their messaging about [courts](#) that targeted independent women voters in Wisconsin delivered the state to [Donald Trump](#) and [Ron Johnson](#) in 2016.

## IWF’s Deep Ties to Ultra-Wealthy School Privatizers

IWF has long ties to the [Center for Education Reform](#), the [American Federation for Children](#), and the [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC), all of which push for [school privatization](#). It also has long financial ties to ultra-wealthy people who have spent millions trying to help dismantle the public schools in the U.S.

💰 **Koch Money.** IWF’s ties to oil billionaire [Charles Koch](#) run deep. For example, IWF was led for years by Nancy Pfothauer, who had been Koch

Industries' top lobbyist in DC and led both IWF and the Kochs' Citizens for a Sound Economy/Americans for Prosperity in shared offices in DC. It has also received substantial [funding](#) from a variety of Koch-funded groups, including ... Koch's Americans for Prosperity.

Koch has long had antipathy for public schools. As True North's Lisa Graves has [documented](#), his very first non-profit enterprise, the Center for Independent Education, was devoted to pushing for purely private schools with no public oversight. For decades, he has funded groups that attack public education.

In 2019, the Koch network funded two new [initiatives](#) that undermine K-12 public schools. One of them is called [Yes, every kid](#). That group pushes for [private school vouchers](#) and [charter schools](#).

That group was launched in conjunction with a \$5 million pledge to a second group called "[4.0](#)," which describes itself as supporting "education entrepreneurs in incubating, testing and launching innovative approaches to education." The Waltons (of Wal-Mart) also gave \$5 million to 4.0.


The Koch-funded **ALEC** is a corporate-funded bill mill that brings together lobbyists and state lawmakers to vote in secret and as equals on so-called "model" legislation. ALEC is a vehicle for

Charles Koch to operationalize his ideological agenda and make it binding law. Among decades of its bills to weaken public schools and attack [public sector unions](#), ALEC pushed for the [Charter Schools Act](#), which allows for the creation of charter schools that do not have to adhere to the same laws and regulations as public schools, despite these charter schools being funded on a per-pupil basis just like public schools.

Another funder of ALEC, the **Center for Education Reform** (CER), is a school privatization group focused on expanding [charters](#) and [vouchers](#). CER has [had a seat and a vote on](#) ALEC's Education and Workforce Development Task Force.


Prior to working for IWF, Inez Stepman worked on research for CER and went on to work with privatizers as the staffer for ALEC's Education and Workforce Development Task Force.

She is also a fellow at the **Claremont Institute**, which is affiliated with **John Eastman**, who composed the discredited memo to Trump making outlandish claims [to nullify the 2020 presidential election](#).

 **Bradley Dollars**. The Milwaukee-based **Bradley Foundation** is a major funder of IWF. It helped fund its attacks on the [Affordable Care Act](#) and other family-friendly policies like [paid sick leave](#) that help American families thrive. It

has given IWF hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past several years.

It has spent tens of millions of dollars on education [privatization](#), according to the non-profit progressive group [One Wisconsin Now](#). The Bradley Foundation, which is drawn from the fortune of anti-union industrialists, has long sought to divert public school funding for private school [vouchers](#). It is one of the biggest funders of [charter school](#) proponents. Bradley's [money and influence](#) helped establish Milwaukee's school voucher program in 1991, the first in the nation, and later funded lawsuits to expand using public tax dollars to subsidize religious indoctrination through school funding.

 **DeVos Cash**. The **American Federation for Children** (AFC) is a core [group](#) of Betsy DeVos that promotes school privatization through ALEC. AFC is the 501(c)(4) arm of the DeVos Family's **Alliance for School Choice**.

As Trump's Secretary of the Department of Education (DOE), DeVos sought to cut funding for truly public schools while creating the first nationwide federal private [school voucher](#) program.

When questioned by a House committee, DeVos refused to say whether the Department of Education would protect students from [discrimination](#) at private schools that received federal funds.

IWF staffer Ginny Gentles is also a “senior advisor” of DeVos’ AFC. She hosts a vlog she calls “**Escaping Your Government Assigned School**” on IWF/V’s new Independent Women’s Network and started a **school privatization** consulting firm in 2017.

In 2019, IWF/V awarded Betsy DeVos a made-up award they call the “Woman of Valor” for her leading role in pushing an anti-public school agenda. (IWF/V gave the same award to former board member **Kellyanne Conway** after she helped Trump win in 2016 and became notorious for calling his lies as “alternative facts.”)


**More Trump Ties.** IWF also brought on controversial former Trump appointees:

- Angela Morabito, who was DeVos’ DOE Press Secretary;
- Mandy Gunasekara, the ex-EPA Chief of Staff who peddles climate denial policy;
- Maya Noronha, who worked at Health and Human Services. She previously worked for voter fraud peddler [Hans von Spakovsky](#);
- and May Davis-Mailman, who aided **Stephen Miller**’s family separation policy at the border.

## What Is Parents Defending Education?

Another dark money group with GOP ties targeting public schools calls itself “**Parents Defending Education**” (PDE). It also played an instrumental role in getting Youngkin elected through contrived attacks on Virginia’s public schools.

PDE is a Virginia-based dark money-funded group, but its aims are national.

 **Because PDE is so new, there are no IRS filings revealing its revenue or sources of revenue. It is totally dark.**

This 501(c)(4) was created in March 2021 by **Nicole Neily**. She worked for such [Koch-funded groups](#) as **FreedomWorks**, the **Competitive Enterprise Institute**, and **IWF**, which she previously led.

PDE says its mission is to “educate” parents on their children’s rights in the classroom and document “abuses.” It also trains parents to grab media attention. PDE opposes the factual teaching of the history of **racial discrimination** in the U.S. in K-12 schools. It attacks **unions**. It has also supported **censoring books** from school libraries, opposed Covid safety measures like **masking**, and opposed discussing **sexuality** and **gender identity** in schools.

## PDE’s Privatization Ties

**Erika Sanzi**, PDE’s Director of Outreach, made over \$400,000 working for the **school privatization** industry between 2015 and 2018, according to political scientist [Maurice Cunningham](#).

PDE’s board member, **Ian Lindquist**, is a fellow at the dark money Ethics & Public Policy Center focusing on “**charter school**” innovation and expansion.”

## PDE’s Trump Ties

Like IWF, PDE has brought on people with strong ties to Trump:

- Kim Richey, a PDE fellow, worked with DeVos as [Deputy Assistant Secretary](#) and the [Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights](#);
- Aimee Viana worked for DeVos at DOE, was Executive Director of the Trump White House’s Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, and previously was a principal in a private Catholic school.
- Kenneth Marcus, a PDE director, worked with DeVos in the Office for Civil Rights. He was [forced to step down](#) after complaints by nine civil rights groups accused Marcus of using his position to push through cases that furthered his personal politics, like pressuring staff to investigate a **trans athlete** in Connecticut despite it being outside of his office’s purview.

## Sidebar: A Case Study on Local Tactics in Virginia

In 2020, [Asra Nomani](#) (who later became PDE's Vice President and then an IWV fellow) helped launch the right-wing group at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology called "Coalition for TJ" (CTJ). The group attacked TJ's new admission policy, which incorporated a more holistic evaluation process to increase racial diversity in the student body. Others later tied to [PDE](#) helped launch CTJ, such as Harry Jackson.

What started off as a right-wing push to pit minority groups against each other through claims of "anti-Asian racism" ended up helping the GOP candidate for governor get elected.

After PDE was formed, it platformed a lot of the messaging facilitated by CTJ, including attacking Atif Qarni, [Virginia's Secretary of Education](#), who had organized a task force to address the lack of diversity at Thomas Jefferson and 18 other magnet schools. PDE accused CRT activist groups, including former TJ alumni leaders, of pressuring the school to teach Critical Race Theory, even though that is an elective course offered in law schools.

In early 2021, GOP candidate Youngkin met with CTJ and endorsed their efforts.

He capitalized on the malcontent of right-wing parents, like those in CTJ, and his campaign used "[parental rights](#)" as a catchall to enlist voters who oppose the accurate teaching of U.S. history, mask mandates, and transgender rights.

Nomani later took personal credit for Youngkin's victory, crowing: "Little did Youngkin know but the groundwork for his victory was actually laid on June 7, 2020, months before he even decided to run for office, with a mother who would become one of the many 'hopping mad' parents in a mama and papa bear movement that would bring him to office." In 2021, IWF bestowed its made-up "Resilience Award" on Nomani, then PDE's Vice President. IWF later brought her on to its team.

### PDE and Racial Diversity

In addition to its ties to CTJ, PDE has attacked other programs that try to increase [racial diversity](#). It filed a brief in support of "Student for Fair Admissions" in cases against Harvard University and UNC-Chapel Hill. One of its new directors is **Edward Blum**, who is known for trying to [kill affirmative action](#) in higher education. Despite not being a student at either university, Blum is now a plaintiff in [two Supreme Court cases](#), one accusing Harvard of discriminating against Asian students and the other accusing University of North Carolina of discriminating against White students in

their respective admissions processes. In March 2021, the [Pacific Legal Foundation](#), a right-wing legal group with deep Koch ties, filed a lawsuit against the Fairfax County school board, taking up CTJ's argument. That case is now pending before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit.

### What Is Fight For Schools?

"**Fight For Schools**" (FFS) is a political action committee or PAC.

FFS says it was founded to support "common sense" candidates who oppose critical race theory in schools. In the weeks leading up to the 2021 Virginia election, FFS spent over [\\$46,000 on mailers](#) and [\\$7,000 on texting](#).

FFS is run by **Ian Prior**, who worked in the Department of Justice in the Trump administration. He was also the top communications official for the **National Republican Congressional Committee** during the 2016 election cycle.

Prior is also senior counsel and a spokesperson for "**Unsilenced Majority**," a right-wing group that has ties to [neo-Nazi collaborator](#) and "[Pizza-gate](#)" promoter **Jack Posobeic** and **Turning Point USA's Charlie Kirk**, who has [bragged](#) about how many he brought to

the rally before [the insurrection incited by Trump at the Capitol on January 6](#).

Under Prior, FFS played a major role in drumming up outrage over CRT supposedly being taught in public schools in Loudoun County, Virginia and elsewhere.

[Media Matters](#) reported that FOX platformed Prior at least 15 times to discuss “critical race theory,” without mentioning his career as a GOP political operative, and instead often presenting him simply as a “parent.” (He has also been platformed countless times on other far-right outlets.)

💰 Because FFS is a PAC that can campaign directly to urge people to vote for specific candidates it is required to report its contributors. Those disclosures reveal that FFS raised more than [\\$400,000](#) from April 2021 to June 2022.

Disclosures also show that FFS has received \$10,000 from [Ben Carson's 1776 Action](#), another group attacking CRT.

FFS also received more than \$700 in contributions from **Danielle Doane**, a director of the Koch-funded **Heritage Foundation**. FFS has coordinated anti-Virginia public school events with Heritage.

In addition to FFS, Prior is listed as an organizer of the Loudoun County based group, “**Parents Against Critical Theory**,” which was founded by [Scott Mineo](#). Mineo has posted **Islamophobic** and racist comments on Facebook and has insinuated, absurdly, that the **white supremacist march in Charlottesville** was a left-wing operation.

Prior is also a senior advisor for [America First Legal](#), which was launched by former senior Trump White House official **Stephen Miller**. America First Legal’s board consists of former Trump administration officials, including White House Chief of Staff **Mark Meadows**.

## What Is Moms for Liberty?

“**Moms for Liberty**” is a dark money group founded in January 2021 by two former Florida school board members, **Tina Descovitch** and **Tiffany Justice**, along with **Bridget Ziegler**, a now-Sarasota County school board member-elect who is also the “Director of School Board Programs” at the Koch-funded **Leadership Institute**.

Ziegler is married to Florida Republican Party Vice Chairman **Christian Ziegler**.

MFL claims to have 100,000 members, but *Media Matters* has cast [doubt](#) on that figure.

MFL has received significant media attention for its extremism, including [book bans](#) and [attacks on liberal and left-leaning school board members](#). It has been locked out of Twitter for using **transphobic language**. A local Arkansas leader was [banned from school grounds](#) for **threatening to gun down a librarian**.

MFL has called for a “[mass exodus](#)” from public schools. It has repeatedly promoted **homeschooling** and **school privatization** as a way to counter the supposed “critical race theory” in schools.

Descovich has played coy when asked if her organization has received **Koch** funding, claiming to be funded by T-shirt sales and not major donors. But the Koch-funded **Heritage Foundation** bestowed its 2022 Salvatori Prize on MFL. It is not clear how much funding comes along with the prize or who is the original source of the funds, but in 2011 the prize was described as \$25,000.

Notably, MFL’s 2022 conference was [sponsored](#) by many Koch-funded groups, such as **Heritage**, the **Leadership Institute**, and **Turning Point USA**.

Per a [report by Media Matters](#), MFL has also boasted several GOP-affiliated donors, including Florida state Sen. **Debbie Mayfield** and Florida House Reps. **Randy Fine** and **Tyler Sirois**.

**Marie Rogerson**, MFL’s Treasurer, also has ties to the Florida Republican Party.



MFL's press is being handled by [Calvary Strategies](#) whose CEO is a former campaign manager of Sen. Rick Scott.

Billionaire **Betsy DeVos** [said](#) “the Department of Education should not exist” at an MFL summit where Ron and Casey DeSantis were also speakers. MFL even promoted his electoral campaign’s “Moms for DeSantis” initiative.

Notably, DeSantis [backed](#) **Bridget Ziegler**, an MFL co-founder, as well as [28 other right-wing candidates](#) for school board. (It is unusual for governors to make school board endorsements.)

In March, DeSantis appointed [an MFL member who has made statements supportive of Jan. 6 insurrectionists](#), **Ester Byrd**, to the Florida Board of Education.

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## TACTICS: How These Dark Money Groups Flame the Culture Wars in Schools

**What is the “Culture War?”** The culture war is shorthand for what the right-wing claims the left-wing is engaged in when progressives seek to secure the Constitution’s promise of “equal protection” of the law.

The term is frequently deployed by right-wing operatives to attack the **honest teaching of American history**.

They have also targeted teaching approaches, like Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), which are designed to help classrooms be **inclusive** for students from all backgrounds and to be supportive of youth struggling to be themselves and thrive in our schools. They have also sought to rebrand **book-banning** in public schools and libraries as “parental rights.”

In the words of IWF staffer **Inez Stepman**, “the culture war is the big tent” and a way to assure political victories for Republicans in the mid-terms and beyond.

IWF fellow **Emily Jashinsky**, who is an editor at the [far-right \*Federalist\*](#), echoed this claim, arguing that the culture war was both a moral battleground and politically advantageous for Republicans.

MFL has falsely suggested that teachers are “groomers” simply because they respect transgender students and acknowledge their humanity.

PDE uses a myriad of cultural war tactics, including “IndocriNation,” a tracker for “incidents” such as history being accurately taught or teachers acknowledging LGBTQ students.

## ✓ They Use “Parental Rights” Rhetoric to Promote GOP Candidates for School Boards

IWF/V and its allies have advocated for what they describe as “parental rights” to control public education generally, tying this exclusively to right-wing politicians.

There are parallels between this effort to rebrand the GOP agenda as a [“parents’ party”](#) and the “Tea Party” rebranding game that GOP operatives played in 2009, when Koch helped fuel protests that blamed President Obama for tax rates he had no effect on since he had only been inaugurated three months earlier.

After Trump lost in 2020, right-wing operatives searched for new ways to appeal to suburban voters and began focusing on schools. The first test of this strategy were Virginia’s 2021 elections. One of IWF's main tactics was to claim that public education failed students during the Covid-19 crisis, despite schools prioritizing the health of students and staff during a deadly pandemic. This also served its [school privatization](#) agenda.

Notably, IWF launched its “Education Freedom Center” (EFC) to advance school privatization under the guise of “empowering parents.” DeVos virtually attended EFC’s launch. EFC also helped launch her book.

## Recommendation: Raise Policies that Support Parents

Right-wing groups are using “parental rights” rhetoric to capitalize on pandemic-induced parental frustrations, but they oppose popular, family-friendly policies that would help parents and kids thrive. They should be asked about these issues:

\* **Paid Family and Medical Leave** if you, your child, your spouse, or your parent becomes ill, like the FAMILY Act.

\* **Child care-subsidies** to help support access to child care when kids are not in school but parents have to work outside the home, such as key provisions of Biden’s Build Back Better proposal.

\* Access to Affordable Care Act benefits, such as mandatory coverage of **pre-existing medical conditions**.

\* Access to **Free or Reduced Cost school lunches** for kids in school, as well as subsidies for **child nutrition**.

\* And Student **Debt Forgiveness**.

Some of these groups have also opposed masks that the CDC had recommended to limit the spread of Covid-19. Some, like MFL, have also spread lies about safe immunization and celebrated anti-vaxxers.

## Where to Look in 2022

Attacks on public school teaching curricula can serve many purposes, including activating right-wing voters, undermining teachers, softening the ground for school privatization, and dog whistling to Trump’s base.

According to the National Education Association, in 2021, right-wing groups [tried to recall 225 school board members nationwide](#), in addition to their efforts to propel the GOP candidate, Youngkin, to become VA’s governor. A billionaire right-winger, [Richard Uihlein](#), funded some of those failed recall efforts.

After Youngkin’s victory, IWF’s Janney asserted that “After the shellacking they [Democrats] took in Virginia, they’ve figured out they have a new and more determined opponent than ever before, and it’s not just the Republicans or the Independents or the Libertarians ... it’s the PARENTS.” IWF’s Sheffield also predicted a nationwide parental backlash across the country in the year to come, insisting bluntly that in the 2022 election: “It’s the schools, Stupid!”

Building on their tactics in Virginia, far-right “parents groups” and the GOP appear to have a common objective: bolstering the campaigns of right-wing school board candidates in 2022. GOP

politicians have increasingly platformed these dark money “parents” groups, allowing them to brag about their influence and thus attract more donors. Meanwhile, these groups help get voters to the polls by inflaming the GOP base and promoting school board candidates running on a “parents’ rights” platform.

## Florida.

Florida has been a major target of dark money anti-education groups since the Virginia election, especially for Moms for Liberty. MFL staffers have appeared at several of Gov. DeSantis’ press conferences, and the group has promoted him and his policies at every turn.

MFL’s Florida PAC – which is [underwritten](#) almost exclusively by Publix heiress and Jan. 6 event-funder Julie Fancelli – funded 56 school board candidate campaigns in the state’s August primaries. Some of those won outright.

DeSantis’ PAC also maxed out on many of the same candidates, and there was overlap between endorsements from the right-wing 1776 Project PAC and the candidates supported by MFL. [Dozens of PACs](#) with ties to the Florida GOP also donated to these right-wing candidates.

After the primaries, MFL bragged it helped elect 43 candidates outright and helped advance 14 to the 2022 general election.

Similarly, FreedomWorks (a group that grew out of Koch's Citizens for a Sound Economy along with his Americans for Prosperity) claimed that five of the candidates they trained won their seats. Six others will advance to the November general election. It calls this training program "BEST," which stands for Building Education for Students Together.

Likewise, the 1776 Project PAC, which is also focused on CRT and promised to "[campaign] on behalf of school board candidates," saw 16 of the school board candidates it endorsed win outright and 7 advance to the general election.

## Tennessee.

The Volunteer State has long been a hotbed of fights over schools, dating back to the [Scopes monkey trial](#) on the teaching of evolution. Earlier this year, a Tennessee school district [banned Maus](#), an acclaimed novel about the Holocaust, citing swear words.

Taking a page from the [new, extreme law in Florida](#) barring schools and businesses from any teaching that makes anyone feel "discomfort" about race, MFL's Williamson County chapter chair, Robin Steenman, filed a [complaint](#) to the state Department of Education about local public schools teaching about civil rights, because she said it made students "[feel discomfort](#)" about being White.

She also [started a GoFundMe](#), asking for \$5,000 for a family whose 7-year-old supposedly is suffering from OCD as a result of learning about the civil rights movement in class.

She also runs the [Williamson Families PAC](#), which helps train, platform, and fundraise for local far-right electoral candidates. Her MFL chapter is also developing a nascent network of homeschools as an alternative to public schools in Williamson County, which includes Nashville and its suburbs.

Tennessee is also home to other right-wing groups targeting elections over the issue of public schools. For example, the city of Franklin in Williamson County is the headquarters of a group that calls itself **Preaching Justice to Nations**, which attacks CRT and spreads claims that schools are indoctrinating kids. Its leader, Laurie Cardoza-Moore, ran on this issue and recently [lost her bid](#) to become the GOP candidate for the state House.

Another exurb of Nashville is also the HQ of [Greg Locke and the Global Vision Bible Church](#), which was visited by Trump operatives **Roger Stone** and **Charlie Kirk** before the 2020 election. Earlier this year, Locke held an event to [burn children's books, like Harry Potter](#), which he deems threats to his views about freedom. ([A photo from that Feb. 2022 book-burning illustrates the cover of this report.](#)\*)

## Swing States.

Dark money anti-public education groups are targeting swing states in 2022.

For example, IWF's Gentles announced that IWF's new project the "Independent Women's Network" (IWN) will be opening several state chapters with MFL's support to assist parents with efforts to gain control over public school curriculum. IWF's new chapters include states that could be decisive in the mid-term election –Virginia, Wisconsin, and Arizona—but the true size of these operations is unknown.

IWF also announced a new hire to direct these chapters: Angel Fimbres Barceló, who has previously worked for Charles Koch's **Americans for Prosperity** and the Koch-funded **Heritage Foundation** and **Leadership Institute**.

Meanwhile, MFL claims to have [endorsed](#) 200 candidates across the country and appears to be [working in tandem with the GOP](#) to [gain control](#) over public education [via school board elections](#) nationwide.

## Arizona.

Amy Carney, Deputy Director at FreedomWorks' BEST program, is running for school board in Arizona's Scottsdale Unified school district. Carney is a member of the Maricopa County (AZ) MFL facebook group.

MFL chapter leader, Nicole Eidson, decided to run for one of two seats available on the Chandler Unified school board and was overseen by an Arizona GOP official. Eidson ultimately did not turn in the signatures needed to run because “[she] did not file because they did not want to split the vote with like-minded candidates, clearing a path for those with opposing views from getting elected.”

Two of the five candidates still in contention for the board seats – Charlotte Golla and Kurt Rohrs – are also listed as members of the MFL Maricopa County Facebook group. Golla is also on the board of Chandler Republican Women.

## Pennsylvania.

Based on MFL’s claims on its website and 2021 IRS filings, the group may have active chapters in as many as 23 out of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties.

Lois Kaneshiki directs MFL’s state chapters. She has been a local political operative for more than 20 years. She created the Blair County Tea Party in 2009, and was the chair of the Republican Liberty Caucus’ Pennsylvania chapter. In 2015, Kaneshiki was elected to a volunteer position on the Hollidaysburg Area School Board. In that role, she refused to approve books that accurately depicted U.S. history and the science around climate change. Before working

with MFL, Kaneshiki worked with right-wing group “No Left Turn in Education” on training local candidates.

In 2021, she founded the PAC “Take Back Our Schools” to elect right-wing school board candidates in Cumberland County, “who will fight CRT/SEL [Social-Emotional Learning] in our schools.” She is recruiting school board candidates to run for all nine districts in Cumberland County next year.

## North Carolina.

Based on the MFL website, North Carolina has 13 active chapters. MFL’s chapter head in Wake County, the state’s most populous county, has been at the forefront of the book censorship campaign in public schools.

All nine seats on Wake County’s School Board are up for election this year. An MFL Wake County member, Becky Lew-Hobbs, is one of the candidates. MFL Wake County promoted an event featuring not only Lew-Hobbs, but also school board candidate Cheryl Caulfield, who supports NC’s anti-LGBTQ House Bill 755. That measure could potentially out LGBTQ students to their parents before they are ready to come out.

Additionally, Sloan Rachmuth, the head of the “Education First Alliance” (a far-right “parents group”) has endorsed another school board candidate, Michele Morrow.

## Virginia.

Members of both PDE (Harry Jackson) and IWN (Stephanie Lundquist-Arora) announced that they would run for seats on the school board in Fairfax County. That election will take place in 2023. Both of these candidates later dropped out of the race after facing [major criticism from other parents](#) after they were seen [laughing at a neurodivergent child](#) who sang the national anthem at a school board meeting.

In June 2022, Fight for Schools rebranded as “Fight for Schools and Families” with the IRS. Staci Goede, longtime former CFO of the Republican State Leadership Committee, is listed as Treasurer of the PAC using an email address from the Crosby-Ottenhoff Group. That Group was [founded](#) by former GOP administration employees who have run numerous super PACs for Republican candidates.

## Federally.

There are also federal “concerned parents” PACs, like the three MFL PACs that have yet to report contributions. The treasurer listed on these PACs is Chris Marston, the General Counsel for the Republican Party of Virginia. The 1776 Project PAC will also likely endorse other school board candidates and spend big to influence races, as they did in FL to the tune of \$400,000, according to [Axios](#).

## ✓ They Organize PR Events that Create a False Impression that They Represent the Majority's Sentiment while Exclusively Amplifying Right-Wing Voices

These right-wing groups often organize lavish PR events designed to seem grassroots, even if the majority of their speakers are GOP politicians or staffers from other dark money organizations.

For example, on November 16th, 2021, IWF/V held an event called "Government is NOT a co-parent" at the Capitol with speakers from Moms for Liberty, Parents Defending Education, and Fight for Schools. One speaker thanked the Tea Party Patriots, a fringe right-wing group that helped to organize the January 6th rally that incited the insurrection at the Capitol, for helping to organize the event.

Although few people actually attended this IWF event, it was covered by FOX and other right-wing outlets.

Similarly, in September 2021, FFS hosted a fundraiser and "rally" for Youngkin. According to the [Associated Press](#), "his campaign has at times asked Prior's group for help building crowds for the Republican's campaign events. The rally it helped sponsor...drew about 100 people in front of the Loudoun County

Supervisors Building in the leafy town of Leesburg to protest 'divisive educational programs being advanced in our very own backyards.'"

IWF/V President Carrie Lukas explained in a video for her group's IWN project: "I feel like getting involved in schools is almost a good training ground for getting involved in politics."

She also said that "increasingly, schools are political" without acknowledging how her organization has been at the forefront of politicizing them, as with IWF's demands that public schools reopen in May 2020, when the pandemic was beginning to grow much more deadly.

## ✓ They Hide Their Ties + Won't Disclose Their Biggest Funders

As noted earlier, [Media Matters for America](#) has documented how several of the "concerned parents" that have been platformed by FOX are political operatives. Some of them are employed by dark money groups that do not disclose their donors.

That tactic has apparently been deployed by operatives like PDE's **Elizabeth Schultz** (who was later put on Virginia's Board of Education by Youngkin), IWF's **Carrie Lukas**, and FFS's **Ian Prior**.

Each of them has spoken at school board meetings or in the press identified as parents without affirmatively disclosing their ties to groups devoted to attacking public schools in all of their appearances.

Similarly, following the 2021 Virginia governor's race, [the far-right Uihlein-funded rag called the Federalist](#) produced a "documentary" on how "moms and dads of Loudoun County took back Virginia."

One of the "dads" featured in this propaganda video was FFS's Prior. IWF's Jashinsky narrated it and interviewed the parents highlighted in this "documentary."

## ✓ They Spread Disinformation that Inflames and Fuels Hate

School is a place where a big part of childhood happens. In America, it is a place where kids from different places and races can learn to understand the present and prepare for the future.

Most people agree that we need to make sure our public schools are places where every child belongs and can thrive. America should be a country where we respect and support each other across our differences.

As the National Education Association (NEA) has [noted](#): some of "the same

politicians who have denied our students resources and demanded sacrifices of our teachers. They are now stoking fears about our schools, trying to dictate what teachers teach and keep kids from learning our shared stories of confronting injustice to build a more perfect union. Their motive is clear: they are pushing these bills to cover up for their failures and now they want teachers to push inaccurate lessons about our history to students.”

**“No matter our color, background, or zip code, most Americans want our children to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what’s right.”**  
–Becky Pringle, NEA President

Right-wing groups like MFL want to dictate what kids learn in class, such as excluding important figures like **Rosa Parks** and the **Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.**, from history lessons because they stood up to racism, claiming lessons about them are “anti-American” and “anti-white.” (A complaint by MFL to censor civil rights teachings about King and Parks based on a new anti-CRT law in Tennessee [was rejected](#) last year.) As We Make the Future has noted, **“while educators work to deliver our children**

**accurate and honest education, some politicians are trying to turn us against schools so they can censor the lessons taught in our classrooms, deny certain children resources and write people who look like them out of our history books.”**

Anti-public school agitators want to whitewash parts of our history and the present reality of American lives so that they can control a political narrative. From backing censorship to pushing laws that increase the threat of teachers being sued, right-wing groups are trying to block efforts that [support kids' learning in a safe environment](#). They are making teaching kids much more difficult. It is no wonder there is a [growing teacher shortage](#).

### **Spreading Debunked Lies about “Critical Race Theory”**

**“Critical Race Theory”** or “CRT” is an elective course about how racism was codified in numerous U.S. laws which is taught in some law schools. But IWF/V and other right-wing groups and politicians have helped manufacture outrage about CRT in public schools. CRT is not taught to primary and secondary school students, but right-wing operatives are using that term to attack teachers. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has responded by setting

up a legal defense fund for educators who are attacked for teaching honest history.

**“Teaching the truth is not radical or wrong. Distorting history and threatening educators for teaching the truth is what is truly radical and wrong. It crosses a dangerous line when legislators attempt to erase history. And it hurts our efforts to make schools safe and welcoming for all our children.”**

– Randi Weingarten, AFT President

The right-wing rhetoric is incendiary. IWF staffer Julie Gunlock claimed “activist teachers are using their classrooms, not to teach, but to push politics on young children.” She also podcasted about “fighting back against the woke mob.” IWF’s Stepman similarly claimed public schools were “graduating rank after rank of woke cultural revolutionaries into every institution in the nation...”

When mainstream news outlets, like NPR and POLITICO, started reporting that CRT was in fact not a part of the K-12 school curriculum, IWF staffer Kelsey Bolar called that reporting a “lie,” referencing claims by **Christopher Rufo**, the person responsible for hyping CRT and trying to get it applied to anything the right hates.

## Who Is Christopher Rufo?



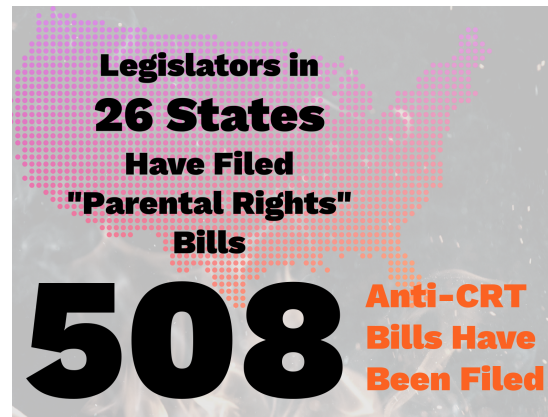
Christopher Rufo has been credited with [inventing the conflict](#) over CRT. He works at the Manhattan Institute, which has been funded by Charles Koch and secret donors. Koch has long opposed public schools, including attacking compulsory education in a book he underwrote called “The Twelve-Year Sentence.”

Rufo uses inflammatory rhetoric, like claiming the government is “forcing” kids to go to school and “undergo a deep ideological indoctrination.” He describes CRT as “the perfect villain,” saying his “goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think [‘CRT’].”

Another Trump ally, [Russell Vought](#), of “Citizens for Renewing America” and its infamous school toolkit, made a similar claim that it does not really matter if a teaching really is CRT to use the term.

Dark money funding for these right-wing groups and their PR campaigns has led to a surge in “parental rights” and “anti-CRT” legislation across the country.

According to one [tally](#), 84 bills in 26 states had been pre-filed or filed to increase parental control over public schools—with laws passed in Florida, Arizona, Georgia, and Louisiana. UCLA Law School counted [508 federal, state, or local anti-CRT bills](#) that were proposed. They [passed in 9 states](#): Arizona, Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.



### 🚫 Targeting Lessons + Books about Black and Queer History

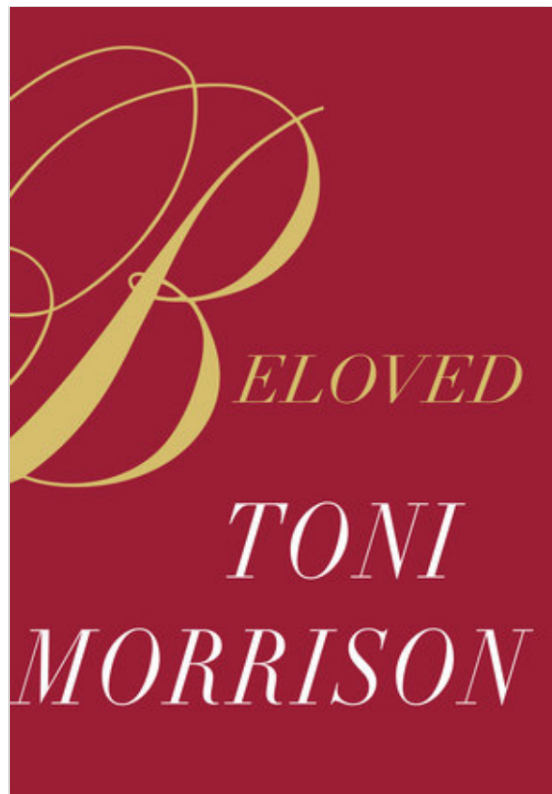
Despite the smearing of CRT, the reality is that students do need ways to understand the role racism and discrimination has played in our society, and one of those ways is through literature. Yet, right-wing groups have a pattern of targeting content

written by Black and Queer authors who represent marginalized communities. Such censorship can have the effect of denying past and present violence and oppression such communities experience.

For example, in 2021, IWV ran [Facebook ads](#) attacking Democratic candidate Terry McAuliffe that featured a *Washington Post* headline that McAuliffe “[vetoe\[d\] a bill permitting parents to block sexually explicit books in school.](#)” But the content of that story, which IWV left out, explains that Virginia would have been the first state in the country to allow parents to censor books like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* because of a single sexual scene despite the book’s overall educational value.

Under Virginia’s Constitution, school boards are tasked with choosing textbooks, not individual parents. It would be chaotic if individual unelected parents could impose their personal views to censor what other children can learn. McAuliffe had noted that school boards work “to ensure that our students are exposed to those appropriate literary and artistic works that will expand students’ horizons and enrich their learning.”

His comments were in response to an effort by the Virginia GOP to push a censorship bill, based on one parent’s complaint about assigning *Beloved*, which won acclaim for aiding “understanding of racism and human diversity.”



PULITZER PRIZE WINNER “An unflinchingly look into the abyss of slavery, from the acclaimed Nobel Prize winner. This spellbinding novel transforms history into a story as powerful as Exodus and as intimate as a lullaby.” –Penguin  
\* “A masterwork. . . . Wonderful. . . . I can’t imagine American literature without it.” —John Leonard, *Los Angeles Times*

\* “Heart-wrenching . . . mesmerizing.”  
—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

\* “Dazzling. . . . Magical. . . . An extraordinary work.” —*The New York Times*

Since the 2021 election in Virginia, dark money groups have ramped up their attack on books and school librarians.

Children deserve an honest and accurate education that enables them to learn from the mistakes of our past to help create a better future.

Yet, IWF’s leader has attacked efforts by schools to teach about America’s history, penning an op-ed published on Fox claiming that her kids “endure race-obsessed classes” and have been forced to watch “misleading videos” about Christopher Columbus. Meanwhile, under her leadership, [IWF has targeted parents and children with demonstrably false claims about Columbus](#).

Meanwhile, groups like PDE use their reach to tell their followers [how to](#) create anonymous social media accounts to document “woke indoctrination” in schools. It also has a tip line for anonymous reports about teachers.

[MFL](#) and “County Citizens Defending Freedom” (CCDF), a dark money group that appears regularly on far-right outlets, have encouraged book banning.

One MFL chapter in New Hampshire even [offered a “bounty”](#) for tips about teachers who discussed systemic racism. (See screenshot of their tweet.)



CCDF and MFL members have also reported books that talked about sex and/or LGBTQ identity to local sheriffs’ offices, seemingly in the hopes that school librarians or other officials would be charged with a crime.

### Pushing Anti-Trans Bigotry

IWF/V has also been at the forefront of anti-trans scaremongering. For example, they have raised the specter of “boys in girl’s bathrooms” to demonize trans-inclusive public school policies and McAuliffe’s support for these protocols.

In October 2021, right-wing media and dark money groups amplified a story about a “transgender” student in Loudon County, Virginia, who sexually assaulted a fellow student in a school bathroom. After he was allowed to transfer, he pleaded no contest to assaulting another student at his new school. This troubling story was used to elevate transphobic fears about “men in women’s bathrooms,” including by IWF’s Gunlock who referred to him as “a boy in a skirt,” even though the student in question turned out [not to be transgender](#).



The week *after* the election, IWF's Lukas appeared on PBS *To the Contrary* and admitted those assaults had been ["framed as a transgender issue."](#) She did not apologize for IWF/V's role in reinforcing framing that turned out to be false.

This is not the first time that IWF/V have used transphobia to aid right-wing causes. It has also run an anti-trans campaign claiming public schools are actively trying to make kids transgender, although that is not happening or how gender works. IWF also promoted a recent "docu-series" on transgender children and parental rights.

It pushes anti-trans public policies, including its newest legislative invention, the [Women's Bill of Rights](#), which omits provisions to secure equality, while using the rhetoric of rights to erase protections for transgender and non-binary people. MFL and PDE have pushed the bill widely on social media. MFL has also strongly [defended](#) the DeSantis "Don't Say Gay" law which bars public school teachers from responding to elementary school kids questions about sexual orientation or gender identity and limits what older students can be told about these matters.

Additionally, in an [interview](#) with an MSNBC reporter alongside the Miami chapter president of MFL, one of the group's members argued that classroom discussions around being LGBTQ "should not be an open thing" and maintained they

should be segregated in "separate classrooms" like students with Autism or Down's Syndrome. As discussed in the report above, MFL's Twitter account was also temporarily blocked after calling gender dysphoria a "mental disorder that is being normalized by predators" in the USA. The language of "predator" and "groomer" has been used to spread hate and fear of LGBTQ people.

### RECOMMENDATION: HIGHLIGHT THE HARMS TO YOUTH

Efforts to vilify LGBTQ individuals create a climate of fear and repression that can have devastating consequences to youth.

LGBTQ youth are *four times* more likely to attempt suicide than straight peers. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among LGBTQ youth, ages 10-24. The Trevor Project recently found that 45% of LGBTQ youth "seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year, **including more than half of the transgender and non-binary youth.**"

These statistics are unsurprising given the deluge of anti-LGBTQ legislation introduced in the past 18 months.

It is not that LGBTQ youth are prone to higher suicide rates because of their identity rather than in response to pain due to maltreatment and stigmatization.

## What You Can Do

Dark money right wing groups focus on "parental rights" or "freedom for parents," but what most people want is freedom for their kids to thrive and be happy at school.

**Here are some excerpts adapted from [We Make the Future](#) about how to talk about issues facing our public schools.**

**Most Americans "believe all children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams, so we must equip every school with the resources to deliver quality education that prepares every child for the future, no matter their color, background or zip code."**

The reality is that [parents want an honest and accurate curriculum](#) that does not distort facts or science. They want to make sure their kids learn critical thinking skills, including the truth about our history, in lessons appropriate for their ages.

**"We need to teach kids the truth of our history so they can reckon with our mistakes and make our future more just.... To prepare children for the future, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so that they better understand the lives, cultures and experiences of different people."**

**Most parents strongly oppose bullying kids about their appearance or other aspects of their identity, including their gender, and do not want schools to be hostile environments where teens and children are harassed for being themselves or being different.** And most parents want classrooms that support equal opportunity for all children and where they can feel comfortable being themselves and are given the respect that each human being deserves.

But, right-wing groups are targeting parents for political gain regardless of the consequences to the well-being of kids and teachers—who have worked so hard to help kids during the pandemic.

The reality is that these groups and the politicians they favor “try to turn us against schools and teachers, or point the finger at parents, to keep us from coming together to demand that every public school gets the resources needed to provide every child a quality education, not just the children of the wealthy few.”

In challenging these hostile groups, we need to make sure the public and the press understand their real agendas. They often celebrate the same politicians

who have opposed efforts to limit the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus that has killed more than a million Americans. Such groups also oppose—or have not supported—policies that would actually help kids and their parents thrive. But, “most Americans want to make sure that children in families struggling to make ends meet can get the same good education as children in wealthy families.”

Some of these “parental rights” groups actually oppose public schools. That is consistent with the long-term agenda of some of these groups, like IWF, which seeks to privatize public schools. Some actively want to force the public to subsidize private or religious education.

In sum, most of these groups have positions that are far outside the mainstream, but the spectacles they create can get covered as news as if they represent the majority. They do not.

As We Make the Future stated: **Together, we can demand that every child have the same quality education, grounded in respect for each person, that we want for our own families and support the educators and support staff who help our children and teens learn by--**

- **speaking up at meetings,**
- **contacting our elected leaders,**
- **and voting in every election from school board to Senate.**

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

You can find the “**Freedom to Learn: Demanding Accurate, Honest, and Fully Funded Public Education**” messaging guide by Lake Research Partners, ASO Communications, and We Make The Future [here](#). They have also created a [digital toolkit](#). Their polling material is available [here](#).

ASO Communications and We Make the Future also have a message guide about “**Honesty in Education.**”

Hart Research Associates conducted a poll for AFT about parents’ views about honest teaching of history, available [here](#).

You can also plug into local efforts to help counter right-wing attacks on schools led by [HEAL Together](#) and [Accountable.US](#).

Red, Wine, & Blue’s “[Parent Playbook](#)” offers a step-by-step guide for moms and other parents on countering right-wing extremism in our schools.

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*If you have tips or are seeking more information on these groups or how to counter them, please contact Alyssa at [alyssa@truenorthresearch.org](mailto:alyssa@truenorthresearch.org) or Ansev at [ansev@truenorthresearch.org](mailto:ansev@truenorthresearch.org).*