



The Klan Attack on Schools

October 27, 2022

In June of 2021, someone slipped Ku Klux Klan fliers referencing local school board meetings into bags weighted down with birdseed and dropped them outside homes in Northern Virginia's Loudoun County. The domestic terrorist group distributed similar fliers threatening school board members in nearby Fairfax and Prince William counties.

This renewed Klan activity targeting public education in the South comes as school board meetings have become the site of conservative protests in recent years, with confrontations involving issues like COVID-19 protections, LGBTQ visibility, and how race should be incorporated into curricula. Even though a 2021 Gallup poll found that 73% of parents of K-12 students are satisfied with the quality of education their children are receiving, the atmosphere at board meetings has gotten so heated that last September the National School Boards Association Biden asking for help, and Attorney General Merrick Garland soon efforts to counter the threats.

The current right-wing anger over public education is being fanned by conservative outfits more mainstream than the Klan. These include Turning Point USA, a nonprofit headquartered in Arizona that last year launched School Board Watchlist to publish the names and photos of school board members who've supported mask mandates or anti-racist curricula. Another prominent organization behind school board protests over race and LGBTQ rights has been Moms for Liberty, a Florida-based political nonprofit with close ties to that state's Republican Party. Also involved are the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, a conservative think tank; Citizens Renewing America, which was founded by President Trump's former budget director; and Parents Defending Education, whose president previously worked at the libertarian Cato Institute.

This isn't the first time the Klan has involved itself in fights over schools. After the group reconstituted itself in 1915 at Stone Mountain, Georgia, it sought to carry out its racist agenda not only through physical brutality but also through policy — including on education.

In the 1920s, the Klan saw public education as a tool for spreading its nativist values and sought to take over local school boards. Where it gained control, it fired Catholic teachers, enforced strict racial segregation, and pushed textbooks promoting a white-supremacist version of American history, as Binghamton University education professor Adam Laats discussed earlier this year in the Washington Post. The Klan worked with more mainstream conservative groups to try to ban Catholic schools in Oregon through a ballot measure, but the U.S. Supreme Court rejected the law in the landmark 1925 case *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, which helped turn public opinion against the Klan and sent it into decline.

The more decentralized Klan that emerged in the 1950s again directed its attention to public schools in the era of desegregation. Following the reopening of integrated public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1959, bombings targeting public officials rocked the city. The investigation determined the attacks had been planned at a local Klan meeting, and among those arrested was J.D. Sims, a Klan member who pleaded guilty. The Little Rock bombings were part of a longer anti-integration campaign by the Klan involving attacks on homes and churches and leaders in communities across the South.

While the Klan was carrying out this campaign of violence, it was also working in unison with the White Citizens' Councils, white-supremacist organizations that rejected terrorist violence but also fought school integration and sponsored so-called "segregation academies" — private whites-only schools.

By the early 1980s, the ongoing right-wing backlash against school integration and other gains of the civil rights movement were fueling Ronald Reagan's conservative revolution — and Klan groups were once again agitating on school issues.

When Mab Segrest, a longtime LGBTQ rights and antiracist activist, wrote this story for *Southern Exposure* in 1984, the Carolina Knights of the Ku Klux Klan had just demanded that the North Carolina attorney general establish a "citizen's militia" to protect white school children from assaults by Black classmates — or else, the Klan promised, they would do so themselves. Segrest, then a member of North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence (NCARRV), analyzed the Klan's actions in the context of that year's U.S. Senate race, in which moderate Democrat Jim Hunt challenged far-right Republican incumbent Sen. Jesse Helms, a civil rights movement foe who campaigned against busing to achieve school integration.

Segrest's work with NCARRV is credited with helping to largely dismantle the Klan in North Carolina. Holding a doctorate in English literature from Duke University, she went on to teach gender and women's studies at Connecticut College and to write several books including "Memoir of a Race Traitor," which was named Outstanding Book on Human Rights in North America by the Gustavus Myers Center on Human Rights. Now retired from teaching, Segrest lives in North Carolina and continues to write and organize. Her most recent book is "Administrations of Lunacy: Racism and the Haunting of American Psychiatry at the Milledgeville Asylum." Read more about Segrest, including a recent interview, [here](#). — Sue Sturgis