



Grassroots or ‘astroturf’ movement?

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MEQUON, Wis. — A loose network of conservative groups with ties to major Republican donors and party-aligned think tanks is quietly lending firepower to local activists engaged in culture war fights in schools across the country.

While they are drawn by the anger of parents opposed to school policies on racial history or COVID-19 protocols like mask mandates, the groups often are run by political operatives and lawyers standing ready to amplify local disputes.

In a wealthy Milwaukee suburb, a law firm heavily financed by a conservative foundation that has fought climate change mitigation and that has ties to former President Donald Trump’s efforts to overturn the 2020 election helped parents seeking to recall Mequon-Thiensville school board members, chiefly over the board’s hiring of a diversity consultant. A new national advocacy group, Parents Defending Education, promoted the Wisconsin parents’ tactics as a model.

In Loudoun County, Va., a Justice Department spokesperson in the Trump administration rallied parents in a recall effort sparked by opposition to a district racial equity program. In Brownsburg, Ind., a leader of a national network of parents opposed to anti-racist school programs helped a mother obtain a lawyer when the district’s superintendent blocked her from following his Twitter account.

This growing support network highlights the energy and resources being poured into the cauldron of political debate in the nation's schools. Republicans hope the efforts lay the groundwork for a comeback in congressional elections next year. Some see the burst of local organizing on the right as reminiscent of a movement that helped power the GOP takeover of the House 10 years ago.

“It seems very tea party-ish to me,” said Dan Lennington, a lawyer with the conservative Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, which has offered free legal advice to several parent groups pursuing or weighing school board recalls, including the one in Mequon. “These are ingredients for having an impact on future elections.”

Lennington's group is funded in part by the Bradley Foundation, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit that supports conservative causes. The foundation's secretary, GOP lawyer Cleta Mitchell, advised Trump as he sought to overturn the 2020 election results and has since worked to push for tighter state voting laws.

Like the tea party movement, the groups have been labeled “astroturf” by some opponents — activism manufactured by powerful interests to look like grassroots organizing.

“Outsiders are tapping into some genuine concerns, but the framing of the issues are largely regularized by national groups,” said Jeffrey Henig, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, who has written on the nationalization of education.

But the advocates and their outside backup argue they're harnessing real outrage and working to counter the disproportionate influence of liberal groups in schools.

“There's a misconception out there that this is part of some national right-wing agenda,” said Amber Schroeder, a 39-year-old parent of four who is helping lead the Mequon recall. “We're the ones pushing back on our own here against an extreme liberal agenda by the teachers union.”

The political tracking website Ballotpedia counts about 30 active school board recall efforts nationwide. Some are focused chiefly on disputes over anti-racism training and education in

schools, often labeled critical race theory. Others were prompted by debates over school policies on transgender students and pandemic public health measures.

Local parent activists are quick to claim credit for that work, and the outside groups offering legal help, research, organizing tools and media training are often reluctant to discuss their role.

Among those is Parents Defending Education, an Arlington, Va.-based group formed in January and dedicated to “fighting indoctrination in the classroom.” It provides templates for requesting public records, a guide to parent rights, organizing strategies and talking points.

“We created Parents Defending Education because we believe our children deserve to learn how to think at school — not what to think,” its president, Nicole Neily, wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Neily stated the group is “not involved in any recall efforts, in Mequon or elsewhere.” But the group’s website does promote the Mequon activists’ campaign. As part of its national database of parent “incident reports,” the group highlights Mequon’s case by posting, as a guide for others, the Freedom of Information Act request that parents filed.

Neily declined to name Parents Defending Education’s funding sources. As a tax-exempt organization, the group is not required to make its donors public. Neily has worked in senior positions for conservative groups including the Independent Women’s Forum and Cato Institute, according to the group’s website.

Another newly influential group is No Left Turn in Education, an organization that has ballooned to 78 chapters in more than 25 states since it was founded last year by Elana Fishbein.

Since December, Fishbein has secured free legal representation for parents fighting curriculum battles with school districts. Most of those lawyers are affiliated with firms similar to Lennington’s, including the Liberty Justice Center and Pacific Legal Foundation, which also receive funding from the Bradley Foundation, as well as prominent GOP donor Dick Uihlein, a shipping supply billionaire.

A Uihlein spokesperson declined to comment. Messages left with the Bradley Foundation weren't returned.

Fishbein says the journey from local mom to nationally recognized conservative activist was swift.

"A year ago, I had a handful of moms in my suburban Philadelphia living room," Fishbein said. "Three weeks later, I was on Tucker Carlson, and within a week, I had more than a million visitors to my Facebook page."

Fishbein and leaders of similar groups say they believe conservative activism in schools has exploded as parents have taken a closer look at their children's schoolwork during remote learning.

"Now this whole problem of radical indoctrination is adding to their agenda," Fishbein said. "This is a very big fight."

It's a fight likely to help Republicans in congressional elections next year, said Ian Prior, a former Justice Department official who is now the executive director of a conservative organization called Fight for Schools, which is working to recall board members in Loudoun County.

"You're going to need a team. You're going to need a command staff. You're going to need what I call the army of moms," he said at a conservative conference in Texas in July.

That could include Schroeder, who describes her previous political activity beyond voting as "zero."

Frustrated chiefly by the district's \$42,000 contract last year with Milwaukee diversity consultant Blaquesmith, Schroeder got in touch with Scarlett Johnson, a 46-year-old fellow Mequon mother who had researched strategies for challenging school boards on No Left Turn's website.

“All the critical race theory buzzwords were present,” Johnson noted, referring to the online Blaquesmith seminars she watched. “I think it would be bad to backslide into a more race-conscious, race-focused society.”

When Mequon police asked parents collecting signatures at the city park to remove their sign, Schroeder reached out to Lennington, who wrote a letter to the city arguing for the group’s right to assemble.

The letter, offered at no charge, was a small service but allowed parents to return to the park.

It also provided an opening for Lennington, who lobbies at the state Capitol, to invite Johnson and Schroeder to testify at a legislative hearing in Madison for legislation to require school districts to make all curriculum public.