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How Florida Gov. DeSantis is trying to destroy public education

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Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) has been fighting with the Walt Disney Co. for weeks now since it angered him by criticizing a law he championed that limits discussions of gender issues in public school classrooms. But his attacks on public school districts began just as soon as he took office in 2019.

DeSantis had been governor barely a month when he offered a new definition of public education that eliminated the traditional division between public and private schools. To DeSantis and his allies, “public education” includes any school — including religious ones — that receives public funding through voucher and similar programs. “Look, if it’s public dollars, it’s public education,” he said in February 2019. “In Florida, public education is going to have a meaning that is directed by the parents, where the parents are the drivers because they know what’s best for their kids.”

That was the start of what has evolved into the most aggressive anti-public education battle waged by any governor in the country. In the past year — and especially in recent months — as he has worked to amass more than \$100 million for his 2022 reelection campaign, and possibly for a 2024 Republican presidential run, he has quickened the pace of his attacks.

He has, among other things: limited what teachers can say in classrooms about race, gender and other topics and appointed anti-public education figures to his administration, including a QAnon supporter, and, as education commissioner, an employee of a charter school management organization. He has also legally empowered parents to sue school districts as part of his “parental rights” initiative and micromanaged and limited the power of local school districts.

In what his critics say is a revealing move about their educational intentions, DeSantis and Florida legislators routinely exempt charter and private/religious schools from many of the restrictions and actions they take against public school districts. For example, the law that restricts classroom discussions on gender and sex education — known as the Parental Rights in Education law — applies to a state statute dealing with school board powers, according to the Tampa Bay Times. The Florida Department of Education did not respond to a query about this.

DeSantis and his like-minded compatriots make no secret about wanting to privatize public education — arguably the country’s most important civic institution. Their “school choice” movement means expanding alternatives to public school district. They include charter schools — which are publicly funded but privately managed — as well as voucher and similar programs that use taxpayer money to pay for tuition and other costs at private and religious schools. These schools can legally discriminate against LGBTQ and other students and adults.

To these activists, public schools are not the mainstay of America’s democratic system of government that tries to instill civic values to students from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Rather, as the libertarian Cato Institute [says on its website](#): “Government schooling often forces citizens into political combat. Different families have different priorities on topics ranging from academics and the arts to questions of morality and religion. No single school can possibly reflect the wide range of mutually exclusive views on these fundamental subjects.”

Critics say this mind-set rejects the notion that America is a melting pot that flourishes by the coming together of people from different places, backgrounds, races and religions. They also say that school “choice” efforts to use public funding for private and privately run education take vital resources away from the public districts that enroll the vast majority of the country’s schoolchildren.

They point out that the public has no way to hold private and many charter schools accountable, because their operations are not transparent. There is irony, they say, in the fact that the people pushing the “parental rights” movement seeking transparency in public school districts don’t demand it of nonpublic schools that they want funded with public funds.

Last year, DeSantis visited a Catholic school in Hialeah to sign a bill that greatly expanded voucher programs while reducing public oversight. Originally intended for students from low-income families, DeSantis’s administration now also allows vouchers to go to a family of four earning nearly \$100,000.

He has also played a leading role in the right-wing movement to restrict what teachers can and can’t say in the classroom about subjects including race, racism, gender and sex education. On April 22, he signed into law the “Stop WOKE Act,” which limits how race-related topics can be discussed in public school classrooms and workplace training, while essentially accusing public school teachers of trying to indoctrinate students.

About three weeks earlier, on March 28, he signed what critics dubbed the “don’t say gay” bill that limits teachers from discussing sexual orientation or gender identity. While numerous similar bills have been considered in legislatures in years past, it was DeSantis who pushed through the first one to become law.

On April 15, his administration [announced that](#) it had rejected publisher-submitted [math textbooks](#) books for including passages his administration doesn’t like, including those it says are about critical race theory and social-emotional learning.

DeSantis's appointments to his administration reveal his attitude about public education. On April 21, he nominated state Sen. Manny Diaz (R) — who works at an affiliate of Academica, a for-profit Miami-based charter school management firm — as the state's new education commissioner. Diaz will almost certainly be approved by the Florida Board of Education.

Diaz — who is chief operating officer of Doral College, a private college owned by Academica — has been instrumental in the legislature in expanding charter school growth. Florida, where charter schools have virtually no oversight, has seen a raft of financial scandals related to the industry.

Ten days before appointing Diaz, DeSantis's administration appointed Esther Byrd, an office manager at her husband's law firm, to the Board of Education. Byrd has on social media expressed sympathy with QAnon beliefs and offered a defense of those “peacefully protesting” the confirmation of the 2020 presidential election on Jan. 6, 2021, when the U.S. Capitol was overrun by a pro-Trump mob. She has alluded to “coming civil wars.” According to the Florida Times-Union, she and her husband, state Rep. Cord Byrd (R), flew a QAnon flag on their boat.

DeSantis also appointed to the Board of Education radiologist Grazie Pozo Christie, a senior fellow for the Catholic Association who wrote an article a few years ago saying the best thing parents can do for their children is to take them out of public schools.

Last October, while discussing “parental rights” in education and touting mask-optional policies at a news conference, DeSantis invited Quisha King, a leader of the right-wing Moms for Liberty group, to join him. King has called for “a mass exodus from the public school system.”

During the pandemic, DeSantis became a leader among governors of the anti-mask movement when he issued a ban on mask mandates in public schools — and then proceeded to penalize districts that required masks in compliance with federal government recommendations. His administration withheld the salaries of some superintendents and school board members that defied him — prompting the Biden administration to promise to make up for the deficit. He has also backed a plan to withhold a total of \$200 million in different funding from districts that angered him.

His wrath at local school boards that don't do his bidding has blown apart the Republican Party's traditional stance that local education is the business of local issues. In March, one of the bills he signed into law included a provision that limits local school board terms to 12 years — without asking local voters if that's what they wanted.

He also established a charter school commissioner office inside the Florida Department of Education, which has the power to approve or reject applications for charter schools without local school district input. Even the National Association of Charter School Authorizers thought it was a bad idea, writing on its website:

“Once a school is approved, the Commission would have no other authorizing responsibilities and the local district would be required to do all other authorizing duties. This goes against

national best practice. ... This is a bad idea since research shows that an authorizer's commitment and capacity are essential to strong charter schools.”

Last June, the DeSantis administration intervened in a local decision by the Hillsborough County School Board, which met to discuss a dozen proposals to open charter schools or extend the operating agreements on others. After it voted to close four existing charters, it received a letter from the Florida Department of Education saying that unless it kept those schools open, it would lose millions of dollars in state funding.

Finally, whatever the governor's reason, Florida was the last state to tell the U.S. Education Department how it intended to use \$2.3 billion in federal American Rescue Plan funds, which had been approved by Congress to help public schools recover from the pandemic. The deadline for states to apply for the money was in June 2021. Months later, on Oct. 4, Ian Rosenblum, then deputy assistant secretary for policy and programs in the U.S. Education Department, sent a letter to the DeSantis administration noting that Florida's delay in applying for the funding was creating “unnecessary uncertainty” for school districts that needed the cash. Florida filed it a few days later.

DeSantis's star power in the school “choice” movement is such that one of its longtime leading figures, former education secretary Betsy DeVos — who has called public education a “dead end” — solicited DeSantis's help to promote a petition in her home state of Michigan to establish a voucherlike program. She and her family have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to DeSantis.