

# The WASHINGTON SPECTATOR

## Religious Right Fuels National Attack On School Boards, Exploiting Parental Frustration Over Covid Restraints

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November 23, 2021

One of the few questions that Democrats and Republicans can agree upon is the school board controversy's outsized role in the Republican victory in Virginia's recent gubernatorial election. Although much of the press coverage suggested that the protests involved a "grassroots" movement, they have actually included an elaborately orchestrated operation to exploit parents who are stressed by school disruption and Covid-19 fatigue. Virginia may have served as the laboratory for the project, but similar efforts it will be visible all over the electoral map in the period leading up to the 2022 midterms.

For many, the project first came to light last April, when a parent named Asra Nomani published a scathing critique of her child's school, the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County, Virginia. The article was published in *The Federalist* (a right-wing platform that has been suspended from Twitter in the past for publishing harmful Covid disinformation). Nomani, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, directed her rage at a classroom screening of Ava du Vernay's award-winning Netflix documentary, *13th*, and the lesson's caution, "Racism is not a concept of the past." Two days later, Nomani's story made Fox News, where the reporter added that the Jefferson students were being "indoctrinated with critical race theory."

The situation quickly mushroomed. In June, a Jefferson parent (name withheld for security concerns), told the *Spectator*, "Our PTA is collapsing under pressure of having two internal, highly political groups trying to do a hostile takeover." The parents association in their formerly polite suburb was unprepared for the tactics employed by the two linked educational "advocacy" groups, Coalition for TJ, a group of Thomas Jefferson parents, and DefendingEd, a group with a

national presence. “They call parents’ employers and harass the employers and parents. There are incidents where people who seem to have been radicalized are doing bizarre things.” In suburban Virginia, these actions include the vandalization of people’s homes and property.

But the activism of agitated parents has transcended the PTA boardroom. On November 5, Asra Nomani, billed as the “vice president of strategy and investigations” for DefendingEd, took credit in the *Fairfax Times* for her organization’s role in Republican Glenn Youngkin’s victory in the Virginia governor’s race. “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.”

This may have been an exaggeration—but given the 64,000-vote margin in the race, the PTA and school board battles in the Washington suburbs made a difference. Fairfax, with over a million residents, is the most populous county in Virginia, while adjacent Loudoun County, at 420,000, is the fourth-most populous. Not coincidentally, they are also the homes of many of the conservative political strategists and operatives involved in leveraging the campaign.

PTA and school board protests have erupted across the country. In Jefferson County, Colorado, longtime school board members are suddenly being called Nazis and child abusers. An Illinois school board member resigned after receiving death threats and deposits of dead rodents on her doorstep. The local events are publicized as protests against mask requirements and school curricula. But they also have a clear political agenda: They are playing an expanding role in electoral politics, leading into next year’s crucial midterm elections.

The website for DefendingEd (shorthand for Parents Defending Education) states, “Through network and coalition building, investigative reporting, litigation, and engagement on local, state, and national policies, we are fighting indoctrination in the classroom.” Despite DefendingEd’s self-description as a “national grassroots organization,” it is more accurately described as an astroturf operation, orchestrated and coordinated through a web of donors and strategists, many of them partners, via the religious right, in the Council for National Policy (see Nelson,  *Holding Democracy in the U. S. Hostage*) and associated operations of the Koch brothers’ empire.

These efforts have been woven through the right-wing ecosphere. As noted, Asra Nomani generated the *Federalist* and Fox News stories, as well as the story claiming credit for the Youngkin victory. DefendingEd’s founding president, Nicole Neily, came to her office with a long career in Koch-funded operations, including the Cato Institute, the Independent Women’s Forum, Speech First, and the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity.

Many parents and educators have tried in vain to contest the premise of these attacks by pointing out that critical race theory—a core complaint of the movement—doesn’t even exist at the grade-school level; it has been used as a framework for discussions about structural racism in law school over the past four decades. But the attacks are often rooted in a time-worn playbook that the radical right has used to generate useful controversies for decades. The technique involves identifying—and in some cases, inventing—an inflammatory term that touches a nerve among the target population, and provoking conflict through coordinated local organizing with media amplification.

The anti-abortion campaign offers one example of this. Abortion was not a particularly fraught topic among American Protestants in the 1970s, but a network of religious right organizations connected to the CNP discovered that coining and promoting misleading terms about abortion could activate their intended audiences. “Partial-birth abortion” and “birth-day abortion on demand” were manufactured terms that had no meaning in medicine or in law but became successful “brands” for persuasion and mobilization.

As they absorbed the loss of the 2020 elections, the leadership of the religious right saw signs they had begun to exhaust the available supply of new conservative evangelical voters in critical districts. Polls also indicated that a crucial bloc of swing voters, college-educated white suburban women, were increasingly disaffected with Trump and were often unmoved by the anti-abortion message. But polling also showed that as the Covid-19 epidemic wore on, these voters were increasingly anxious about their children, their public schools, and conflicting public health policies.

It was time for a new initiative. The question was, what triggering concept or term could channel these anxieties into a political response?

Parents Defending Education (or DefendingEd) was incorporated in Virginia on January 21, 2021. Unusual for a grassroots organization, it was born fully equipped with a Twitter account (December 2020) and a Facebook account (January 2020) and rapidly acquired a public relations firm and a polling firm.

Around the same time, a new offensive around critical race theory started to gain traction. On March 15, Christopher Rufo, a young political operative with the conservative Manhattan Institute, posted two tweets aligned with previous initiatives that explained the strategy to harness new votes through misleading terminology. Asra Nomani’s *Federalist* and Fox News “exposés” followed a month later.

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Christopher F. Rufo  @realchrisrufo

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We have successfully frozen their brand—“critical race theory”—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.

Christopher F. Rufo  @realchrisrufo

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Replying to @realchrisrufo @ConceptualJames

The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think “critical race theory.” We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.

12:17 PM – 15 Mar 2021

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By midsummer, the combined critical race theory and school board campaigns were not only underway, they were embraced by multiple leaders and media platforms throughout the CNP network. A June 15 investigation by NBC News described state-level school board initiatives, quoting Karen England, a member of the CNP’s board of governors.

“This is an opportunity for what I feel like I’ve been screaming from the rooftops about,” England told NBC, speaking as executive director for Nevada Family Alliance, known for its efforts to end Drag Queen Story Hour at local libraries; the group recently proposed placing body cameras on teachers suspected of teaching critical race theory.

On June 24, Pat Robertson, a past president of the CNP, followed suit on his Christian Broadcasting Network’s 700 Club, describing critical race theory as “a monstrous evil” used by “Communists” to “destroy children.”

The short-term impact of these initiatives was easy to discern. They attacked the school boards, disrupting a foundation of local democratic practice, and they derailed educators' efforts to address issues of inequality and racism that gained prominence in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.

But they also served to organize parents into a new political cohort, as evidenced on June 29 with the staging of a "boot camp" to train parents for school board takeovers, held by Family Research Council Action. The program was led by FRC president Tony Perkins, a standard-bearer of the religious right and longtime president of the CNP. The training session featured Elizabeth Schultz—a "senior fellow" for DefendingEd from Fairfax County who worked under Betsy DeVos, the former secretary of education in the Trump administration.

On June 30, the FRC website posted:

*Yesterday, FRC Action hosted a very successful School Board Boot Camp. In response to the repeated requests of partners across the country, the four-hour training session provided information on what you need to know about running for school board or supporting people who answer the call to public service. At the end of the day, we learned that 97 percent of participants said they would definitely or probably recommend this event to others, and 66 percent said they would definitely be interested in one specifically for their state.*

Links between the school board campaign and GOP party politics became clearer by the week. August 6 brought a mass email from the Leadership Institute, run by Morton Blackwell, a co-founder and executive committee member of the CNP. (His group claims to have trained and networked over 200,000 conservative candidates and election workers in the use of data and political communications. The Institute's senior director Bob Arnakis has claimed credit for popularizing the term "partial-birth abortion.")

The Leadership Institute's email blast promoted a series of new training sessions, stating, "Conservatives are preparing a school board takeover and you can get involved. . . . The best way to fight critical race theory and leftist indoctrination in America's schools is to elect more school boards across the country."

The institute's website added telling details:

*Critical Race Theory really is the road to Hell. . . . Rising numbers of Americans now realize the danger posed by this cultural revolution.*

*On August 9th, the Leadership Institute launched an 11-hour training program to prepare conservatives to run for local school board seats against the entrenched [fill in]*

*My team has put together a comprehensive program for these aspiring school board candidates. That includes nearly 11 hours-worth of highly-tailored campaign strategy lessons.*

*With the online trainings in full swing, my team will then offer this school in the traditional in-person format. Starting here in LI's Arlington, Virginia headquarters, then advancing to more locations around the country.*

*At these trainings, conservatives learn how to:*

- *Plan a winning campaign.*
- *Design and run a successful Get Out the Vote operation.*
- *Build a volunteer force.*
- *Craft a compelling message.*
- *Handle scrutiny from your opponent and the media.*
- *And much more.*

*Contending against the vast resources of the teachers' unions and special interests who pump the Critical Race Theory poison into our schools won't be easy.*

*So much money and influence is being poured into undermining America's most basic institutions. It's tragic. And it doesn't make sense, does it? But I know you and I must fight back every way we can.*

*Armed with Leadership Institute training and inspiration, these conservative school board candidates will score powerful victories all over the country.*

*This has the makings of the biggest grassroots movement since the Tea Party.*

Other CNP affiliates stepped in. In October, Judicial Watch, headed by Tom Fitton, another member of the CNP executive committee, posted an attack against a Rhode Island school district's teacher training materials. Judicial Watch objected to teaching the concepts of "anti-racism" and "equity" (while acknowledging that critical race theory doesn't appear in grade-school curricula).

*As explained a gazillion times, you will not find a third-grade book called Critical Race Theory. Instead, you find the race-focused principles of CRT under other names, such as "antiracism," "equity," and "culturally responsive learning."*

- *The training course claims that there are "unfortunate truths" about the history of Rhode Island and the United States.*

(Editor's note: Rhode Island was a major center of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and dispatched some 2,000 voyages to enslave Africans.)

Yet another partner in the campaign is Turning Point USA, headed by CNP member Charlie Kirk. In partnership with the Leadership Institute, TPUSA has created a "School Board Watchlist," a companion site to its McCarthyite "Professor Watchlist." There it posts critiques of school boards linked to their support for LGBT-friendly policies and requirements for vaccines and masking. Notably, TPUSA posts the names and pictures of school board members in districts where threats and harassment are mounting. Fairfax County is prominently listed; so are Norman, Oklahoma; Lincoln, Nebraska; and scores of other communities. Like the Leadership Institute and the Family Research Council initiatives, TPUSA's school board campaign includes a fundraising function on its website.

Hardwired into the school board campaigns are the standard elements of the strategy: money, media, and a secret hub to coordinate efforts to disrupt American politics on both a national and a local level. To be sure, Parents Defending Education is only one of several major organizations in the field, and the CNP is only one of the coordinating bodies. Defining the broader field won't be easy; given the role of dark money and the snail's pace of tax and federal election filings, the threads connecting their financing, data, and political engagement will take months, if not years, to trace. But all indications are that these efforts are directed at the 2022 midterms, and they are well underway now.