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## Democrats' teachable moment

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President Joe Biden and Gov. Ralph Northam both decisively won Virginia in their last elections by about 10 percentage points. Yet with Election Day approaching, polling shows former Democratic Gov. Terry McAuliffe and Republican candidate Glenn Youngkin neck and neck in the race to succeed Northam.

What accounts for the shift? Put plainly, Democrats are getting schooled in the importance of educational freedom.

One of the silver linings of the coronavirus pandemic is that the public school system's inadequate version of remote instruction provided an unprecedented level of curriculum transparency. Millions of families were finally given the opportunity to see what was going on in their children's classrooms — once the children were allowed back in classrooms, that is. And many parents weren't happy about it. "Zoom school" access showed parents that in-person learning in government institutions had plenty of problems, too.

Families started to push back across the country, and Virginia's Loudoun County quickly became the epicenter of these contentious debates. In fact, the National School Boards Association cited an incident in Loudoun County in its controversial Sept. 29 letter to the Biden administration calling for federal involvement and suggesting that some protesting parents should be considered domestic terrorists. One week later, the Virginia School Boards Association sent a letter distancing itself from the National School Boards Association, and on Oct. 15, a Virginia school board member who upset local parents with political activism announced her resignation .

The more the facts came out about what was going on in and around these schools, the more organized and effective parents became in pushing for some measure of accountability —

especially in Virginia, where a father protesting policies he held responsible for his daughter's rape in a school bathroom was dragged away by police and held up as the face of a threatening vanguard of unhinged parents.

The concerns that have mobilized families to show up at school board meetings are likely to bring them out to the ballot box, too.

A Monmouth University poll released on Oct. 20 found a shift among registered voters from a 5-point McAuliffe lead to a tie. "Youngkin's improved position," according to Monmouth, "comes from a widening partisan gap in voter engagement and a shift in voters' issue priorities, particularly around schools and the pandemic." In September, 14% of registered voters ranked education and schools as their top issue. In the October poll, that number jumped to 21%.

Nor is Monmouth an outlier. A CBS News poll from early October found that 62% of likely Virginia voters reported that "school curriculums on race and history" were a "major factor" in their vote for governor. That percentage was higher than the amount reported for abortion (58%), masking (54%), and even taxes (60%). The same survey found that these curriculum concerns were substantially more likely to mobilize conservatives than liberals, with 77% of conservatives and 51% of liberals indicating curriculum was a major factor.

This mobilization around curriculum battles might partially explain why the same CBS News poll, and surveys by Christopher Newport University and Roanoke College, found that Republicans were more enthusiastic to vote than Democrats.

In this context, McAuliffe's biggest blunder came up during the final gubernatorial debate. Youngkin brought up the fact that families had been voicing opposition to sexually explicit books in school libraries. McAuliffe responded, "I'm not going to let parents come into schools and actually take books out and make their own decision. ... I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach."

The Youngkin team immediately turned that comment into a campaign ad, which read, "Are you a parent who wants to have a say in your child's education? Too bad. Terry McAuliffe says you have to sit down and shut up." Youngkin also pointed out on Twitter that during the same debate, he sided with families, saying, "I believe parents should be in charge of their kids' education."

Several recent polls suggest Youngkin was wise to capitalize on McAuliffe's comments. A mid-October poll conducted by the Trafalgar Group found that 54% of likely voters disagreed with McAuliffe's statement, while only 37% agreed. The same survey found that respondents were more than twice as likely to "strongly disagree" than they were to "strongly agree" with McAuliffe's statement. In fact, the recent Monmouth poll found that Youngkin now leads

McAuliffe on education, although he was behind the Democrat by 4-5 percentage points in August and September.

And the Monmouth poll found that the drop in trust voters showed toward McAuliffe on education has cost him trust on other issues: “The Republican now holds a small trust advantage on jobs and the economy — 39% to 34% who trust McAuliffe more. The Virginia electorate was more evenly split on this issue in prior polls (36% Youngkin to 35% McAuliffe in September and 35% to 33% in August). Youngkin has also widened his advantage on handling taxes (40% to 30%) and has drawn even with McAuliffe on handling the abortion issue (33% Youngkin to 35% McAuliffe).”

A mid-October Fox News poll indicated that likely voters were more likely to agree than to disagree with the idea that parents should “be telling schools what to teach.” Again, Youngkin supporters were substantially more mobilized around this topic than McAuliffe supporters, with 79% of Youngkin supporters agreeing and 61% of McAuliffe supporters disagreeing. At the same time, Youngkin supporters were over five times as likely to agree than to disagree with parents telling schools what to teach, while McAuliffe supporters were less than 2 1/2 times as likely to disagree than to agree with the same concept.

An early October survey conducted by Emerson College similarly found that likely Virginia voters were over 1 1/2 times as likely to say that parents should have more of an influence over school curriculum than school boards as opposed to the other way around.

As Fox News correspondent Dagen McDowell noted, his tone-deaf debate comment “might be the ‘basket of deplorables’ moment for Terry McAuliffe.”

McAuliffe has been in damage-control mode of late. Three weeks after the debate blunder, and just two weeks before Election Day, McAuliffe’s team responded with an ad claiming that Youngkin took McAuliffe’s words “out of context.” As CNN reporter Chris Cillizza wrote on Twitter, “This strategic decision suggests the Youngkin ads on education are hurting Terry.” Talk radio host Larry O’Connor similarly pointed out that Terry’s response ad was “major damage control” and “several weeks late.”

On the same day, Team Youngkin responded with an ad showing McAuliffe reiterating his anti-parent remarks in multiple interviews after the debate.

McAuliffe exclusively attended private schools and sent all five of his children to private schools. He obviously had a say in his children’s educations. But as Virginia’s former governor, he vetoed nine school choice bills that made their way to his desk, three in 2016 and six in 2017, blocking access to educational options for less advantaged families.

His stance against educational freedom hasn't changed, either. On CNN in mid-October, when mentioning Youngkin's support of private school choice programs, McAuliffe said, "I will never allow that as governor."

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the McAuliffes seeking out the best educational opportunities for their children. But why does he fight against school choice for others?

The answer is politics. The teachers unions are some of McAuliffe's biggest donors, and they fight tooth and nail against allowing families to take their children's education dollars to nonunion private and charter school competition. The American Federation of Teachers, the nation's second-largest teachers union, launched an ad in support of McAuliffe in mid-October.

This "school choice for me, but not for thee" doesn't sit well with voters, which is bad news for McAuliffe. In fact, a nationwide poll conducted by RealClear Opinion Research found that 62% of registered voters would be less likely to vote for candidates who send their own children to private school while opposing school choice for other families. This rejection of school choice hypocrisy is held across party lines as well, with 66% of Republicans, 65% of independents, and 56% of Democrats saying they would be less likely to vote for such a candidate.

This spotlight on McAuliffe's opposition to educational freedom is especially problematic for his campaign given the recent surge in support for school choice nationwide. The reality is that this past year's intense battles around school reopenings, mask mandates, and curriculum disagreements are all symptoms of the larger problem that is the one-size-fits-all government-run school system. Thankfully, policymakers and citizens are figuring out that the only way forward without imposing uniform mandates on other people's children is by funding students directly and empowering families.

The teachers unions overplayed their hand by holding children's educations hostage over the past 18 months and inadvertently did a great deal to advance the concept of school choice. Now, polling conducted by Morning Consult in 2021 indicates that 68% of Virginia adults overall, and 79% of Virginia parents, support allowing families to take their children's taxpayer-funded education dollars to the education providers of their choosing.

COVID-19 didn't break the public school system. In a lot of ways, it was already broken. But parents have finally woken up to the reality that the monopolistic system isn't designed to meet their needs — and these parents aren't going away anytime soon. Virginia is evidence that these families will continue fighting for the right to educate their children as they see fit. That's an important lesson for both parties.

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