

WORLD

Woke school systems face pushback from PACs

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Tim Rosenau, 50, is running for the school board in Bentonville, Ark., where his daughter teaches. If elected, Rosenau wants to work toward raising the percentage of students who can read at grade level and ensure that teacher wages reflect the higher cost of living in the area. He also has concerns about critical race theory.

“We don’t have a full-fledged problem here by any means, and you have a lot of people that would debate right now on whether or not we see CRT in our curriculum,” Rosenau said. “But I think I’ve got enough evidence to suggest there is some level of that making its way in. These things never come in as a tidal wave on you—they kind of creep in.”

Two weeks ago, Rosenau received an endorsement from the 1776 Project political action committee, a national group that focuses on school board campaigns.

In the wake of increased polarization in education, more conservatives are focusing on school board elections. Some organizations are endorsing school board candidates, while others are training parents how to run for school board positions.

The 1776 Project PAC endorsed 49 candidates in Florida’s August school board elections. According to the PAC’s head of coalitions and candidate recruitment, Aiden Buzzetti, 26 endorsed candidates won outright, while eight more will face run-off elections in November. Fifteen endorsed candidates lost their elections. After the Florida school board elections, the PAC received 300 requests for endorsement from outside of Florida.

Buzzetti interviews each candidate. “The focus of the PAC is to get rid of critical race theory from schools,” he said. “That is nonnegotiable for us.” To that end, Buzzetti asks candidates what their goals are if they’re elected. Many, he said, name removing books with explicit content from school libraries or tightening library policies.

The group doesn’t donate directly to campaigns but sends out mailers or text messages in support of candidates they endorse. Buzzetti said the group does not coordinate its plans with candidates.

Patriot Mobile Action, a Texas PAC, endorsed 11 candidates in four school districts this spring, spending almost \$400,000 on the campaign. All 11 candidates won.

“These kids in these public schools are the future leaders of this country,” said Leigh Wambsganss, vice president of public affairs for the wireless provider, Patriot Mobile, and executive director of Patriot Mobile Action. The group focuses on political campaigns in Tarrant County, an area of 2 million residents that includes part of the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex.

Wambsganss is concerned about schools that focus on equity over equality and curriculum content, adding that school boards are also often springboards for political careers: “It really is where people who are interested in public office sort of cut their teeth on politics.”

Patriot Mobile Action researches candidates by looking at their voting records, social media, and contribution records. Wambsganss added that the group doesn’t communicate with candidates or alert them if they send out mailers supporting them.

Kimberly Fletcher founded Moms for America after running unsuccessfully for a Virginia school board position in 2003 while homeschooling six of her seven children (her oldest attended public school).

In the wake of COVID-19 remote learning, Moms for America staffers compiled their school board resources under a new initiative, now called Empower Moms. Fletcher wants parents to have the information they need to make the best decision for their family, whether that’s switching to private school or homeschool, communicating with their district school board, or running for a seat on the board.

“The most powerful elected body is not Congress, it’s school boards,” she said, adding that all citizens have a responsibility to local schools because of the role they play in shaping communities. “That’s the future of our country.”

Other groups also look to guide parent interest in school boards. The Leadership Institute launched online and in-person school board campaign training in August 2021. Bridget Ziegler, the institute’s national director of school board programs, said that over 4,500 people have participated in the online training in the last year.

But some experts caution that increased school board participation won’t always mean progress. Neal McCluskey, director for the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, said attempts to reform school systems through school board action may lead to more disunity. “I don’t like the idea that we have an education system that is ultimately governed by political combat, where whoever happens to have the most political power in a district gets to decide ... what a school’s policies will be,” he said. “I think if we want harmony, we don’t want to have a system where you have to get political power to get what you want for your kids.”

McCluskey thinks parents should be working for school choice and putting their kids in private schools or charter schools rather than expending so much energy to change school board policies. “But if you’re stuck with school boards, I suppose it’s better if more people are involved,” he said. He expressed concern about national groups getting involved in local communities but added that conservative organizations may simply be balancing out effects from liberal groups or teachers unions.

In Bentonville, Tim Rosenau said he has mostly seen a positive response to the 1776 Project PAC’s endorsement of his campaign. He added that some voters who already did not support him questioned why he would want a national endorsement for a local race.

Rosenau will find out Nov. 8 whether the 1776 Project's endorsement helped him or hurt him. He said he hasn't yet decided his plans for election night: "We'll probably do something here with family, friends, supporters, and watch the results on election night to see how [the votes] come in."