

The Culture War on Public Education

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It seems like ages since so many of us suddenly had to take a crash course in critical race theory (CRT). Then, seemingly five minutes later, just as [Christopher Rufo](#), a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, had promised, the CRT panic broadened into the “culture wars,” fought on a dozen different fronts by educators: “Don’t say gay” laws, “anti-woke” legislation, calls to ban books, gag laws for teachers, and private rights of action, so that parents could sue schools any time they felt a line had been crossed.

Culture wars continue to flare, but we should be discussing their true victims.

This widespread uprising is framed by conservatives as a tug of war between parents and “government schools.” It’s a potent argument because that tug of war has always been part of education. Parents are crucial partners in public education—and yet that partnership can sometimes break down.

There are certainly some over-earnest educators who are a bit too eager to substitute their own judgment for that of certain parents. My mother still tells the story of the administrator who explained that “since you’re just a mom, you might not understand.” At the same time, a non-zero number of parents are not interested in or capable of safeguarding their children. I’ve sat in parent conferences where a parent berated her “stupid” child. Every teacher has these stories—the student whose mother was jailed for trying to run the child down with a car; the student whose father threw him out after they fought over sharing drugs.

Schools must balance the needs and concerns of all of their many stakeholders. Parents absolutely have rights when it comes to public schools, but so do non-parent taxpayers and other community stakeholders. It’s up to the school district to balance all of these concerns, while also depending on the professional judgment of its trained personnel.

It is a tricky balance to maintain, requiring nuance and sensitivity. It is correct to argue that “schoolchildren are not mere creatures of the state.” But framing the issue as parents versus schools has served some folks with a very specific agenda.

Every debate, every accusation, every school board screaming match, every point on Parents Defending Education’s “[indoctrination map](#)” represents a local argument, but in combination, they also help drive a sales point for those who want to dismantle public education: Public schools cannot be trusted.

In August 2022, Jay Greene (no relation) of the Heritage Foundation asked, “Who will raise children? Their parents or the bureaucratic experts?” Greene framed public education as a place plagued by a “revolving door of failed educational fads,” where parents are told they “just need to get on board.” He warned about the “subversion of parental authority” by dangerous experts.

“In this ‘expert’ model of child-rearing,” Greene wrote, “parents may give birth to children, but the methods and values with which those children are raised are determined by professionals equipped with superior access to reason and science.”

Greene’s argument reinforces a narrative that we have heard over and over from groups like Moms for Liberty and conservative leaders like Betsy DeVos—that the pandemic ripped the lid off this vast conspiracy because parents could now see the subversive actions of teachers more clearly, and so the time for revolt is now.

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Similarly, in April, Rufo spoke at Hillsdale College and said choice advocates should “lay siege” to public education, be “ruthless and brutal,” and remember that “to get universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.”

The libertarian Cato Institute has gone even further, declaring that public schools by their very nature breed discord and conflict. Now, every new outbreak in the culture wars reinforces the framing that public schools cannot be trusted, and maybe everyone should just get out of there.

That framing has shown some success. According to results of a survey conducted by EdChoice (previously the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice), nonparents are far more likely to believe that K-12 education is headed in the wrong direction. In other words, those who get their information about schools from sources other than direct contact with a school increasingly believe that “kids these days” are ill-served by public schools (and ironically swallow the line that parents are deeply unsatisfied with schools, even though data from less biased and more trustworthy sources tells us that’s not true).

Through all of this, one set of voices is conspicuously absent—those of people against whom the culture wars are really being fought.

Groups like Moms for Liberty argue that “our children do not belong to the government” or schools. This is absolutely correct. However, the implication that students actually belong to their parents is not true, either. These real, live, young human beings do not belong to anyone.

Yet we still see pieces like an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* by Philip Hamburger, head of the New Civil Liberties Alliance, a Koch-funded law firm, that argued that a parent’s First Amendment rights include controlling whatever speech their child might hear (and therefore anything a school might say). It is a bold argument that sees a child’s rights being “owned” by their parents.

The work of banning books and gagging teachers is really about taking rights from students. Every time access to a book is restricted, the rights of students to read that work are stripped. Every “schools shouldn’t be teaching this or even mentioning it” rule is restricting the rights of students to learn.

For some conservatives, the goal is a country in which they don’t have to pay taxes to provide an education for “those people’s” children.

Some of this is fueled by a fear as old as parenthood—the fear that comes with turning over your beloved flesh and blood to someone who is not you. Some of it may be fueled by darker motives.

On Twitter, *Salon*’s Amanda Marcotte suggests that the rise of fascism is powered by “people who ran off their kids by being overbearing bigots, and now are casting around for a way to force their kids to talk to them again.” And there is no question that one culture war goal is to energize the base, drown out the post-Roe backlash against conservatives, and pull out a victory for MAGA beyond this year’s midterms.

Using the culture wars to undermine public education threatens students’ right to a free, quality education. Dismantling public education to replace it with the “educational freedom” avored by powerful groups like ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council) means creating a system in which education is a commodity that every family must purchase on their own, armed with nothing but their own resources and a small voucher from a government that will otherwise have no responsibility to help them educate their child.

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These denials of student rights are far-reaching. As Jonna Perrillo, a professor of English education at the University of Texas at El Paso, points out, the right is now targeting not just students’ right to read works assigned for class, but even books that they would choose to read on their own. And while groups like PEN America are tracking formal bans, it is impossible to know how many districts are quietly instructing their teachers to simply avoid anything that might draw unwanted trouble and attention, thereby depriving students of more elements of a full education.

Across the country, many students are noticing that their rights are being restricted and their voices are being ignored. In many districts, students have staged protests and walkouts. Banned book clubs are popping up in communities, even taking on the distribution of certain “forbidden” texts.

In Boise, Idaho, eighteen-year-old student activist Shiva Rajbhandari decided to take on the rightwing campaign against learning and ran for school board against a conservative incumbent. He won on a platform of opposing the restriction of students’ rights to read and be fully educated. “It’s on us to fight,” he told *The Guardian*. And while he may be right, this shouldn’t be up to students.

Of course, some parents get to actually wage the culture wars, deciding what everyone's children are allowed to read or learn, even where they can pee. Call it parental rights, but only for the "right people."

And only the "right people's" children. This came across most vividly when a speaker in support of an Arkansas school board's anti-trans policy said that LGBTQ+ people deserve death. He was speaking about students.

The culture wars are not mere political smokescreens or low-hanging fruit—they are a dangerous tool with real impact on the communities in which we live, including our schools. And even when dressed up in book bans and gag rules, the push for school vouchers and privatized education is more of the same: good schools for those who can afford them, and for the rest, whatever you can get in an unregulated marketplace in which support systems, educational opportunities, and basic rights are shredded.