



## Progressives keep losing in education — they need school choice

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A new UCLA study estimates that over 17 million students in nearly 900 different school districts have been impacted by battles over “critical race theory” (CRT) between September 2020 and August 2021. That is nearly 35 percent of all K-12 students. Similarly, states and districts nationwide have been gripped by conflicts over policies and reading assignments dealing with LGBTQ issues. And it has all been happening as Americans have fought, often bitterly, over masking in schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, progressives have been losing these fights.

Headlines such as “Republicans Are Once Again Heating Up the Culture Wars” and “How did Republicans turn critical race theory into a winning electoral issue?” showcase the development of culture war into a powerful weapon for Republicans. Fourteen states, including South Dakota, Florida, and Texas, have already passed restrictions, typically vague, on teaching “divisive concepts” in public schools. Seventeen other states are currently considering similar legislation. Meanwhile, “bans” on books delving into racial and LGBTQ+ issues have reached a fever pitch. And, of course, there was [Glenn Youngkin](#)’s gubernatorial victory in Virginia, where his first major act was to “end the use of inherently divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory” in public schools.

For progressives, this is likely frustrating, even frightening. As Kentucky state Rep. Attica Scott (D) said about “divisive concepts” legislation in Kentucky, “I’m worried that it is an attempt to erase our history. Our history of struggle, of civil rights of rising up and resisting and creating policy that takes care of people.”

How can progressives protect themselves from this onslaught? Rather than relying on winning political warfare with conservatives, which basically guarantees endless battles over what public schools will teach, they should embrace school choice. They should do so both because it would be a much more stable way to access progressive education — no need for endless political combat to get it or keep it — and because it is simply the right way to deliver education for a free and equal society. No one should have to defeat their neighbors to have their basic values respected in the raising of their children.

A reflexive objection for progressives might be that in recent decades school choice has typically been associated with Republicans. Perhaps this is because conservatives have more often felt marginalized by public schools. Or maybe they simply have believed more in freedom in education.

Whatever the reason, there is no compelling reason progressives should not support choice. Indeed, there was a time, not that long ago, when prominent progressives embraced school choice as a way to empower the politically dispossessed, especially minorities. Yale law professor James Forman Jr. has, in fact, proclaimed that when it has come to school choice progressives “got there first.”

There is much truth to that. In 1968, Harvard Graduate School of Education Dean TedSizer released a “Proposal for a Poor Children’s Bill of Rights” supporting choice for the poor who had too little political power to make public schools work for them. Civil rights leader Cesar Chavez supported alternatives to public schools, understanding that all families and children have diverse needs and desires. Polly Williams, an African American Democratic state representative, was a major force behind the nation’s first voucher program, created in Milwaukee in 1990.

All families desire an education consistent, or at least not starkly at odds, with their core values and identities. But as the UCLA study rightly understands, “Students’ own rights to learn about these issues will now be dependent on the local systems they are in... and in some places, on who wins school board elections.” In other words, whether students get what they need will be decided by who wields political power.

It should not be this way. For their own sake, progressives should start demanding school choice. But even more important, they should do it for the sake of free and open society.

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