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Can there be a winner in the school culture wars?

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In a typical back-to-school season, markers and poster board might be on a classroom supply list. This year, they're also hot items for protesters attending their local school board meetings.

Mask mandates, critical race theory, "you name the issue and people want to speak out," says Heath Miller, a high school band director in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who considers this the most stressful period of his 20 years teaching.

In recent weeks, individuals in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, lit masks on fire outside a school board meeting. Pro-mask protesters in Fort Worth, Texas, staged a mock funeral outside the school board president's home in August. The critical race theory debate continues to burn after erupting last spring, with new laws passed in eight states banning teachers from covering "divisive topics" and multiple other states considering restrictive measures. Loudoun County, Virginia, saw contentious clashes over the district's expansion of transgender student rights.

The latest fights are raging in part because they touch on differing views of social values and what it means to be an American, experts say, and are driven by desires to win local victories and to change national narratives. Yet despite the long history of culture wars in education in the United States, the question of whether these wars are really winnable is one that's rarely asked, says Adam Laats, a historian at Binghamton University in New York who studies cultural battles in education.

"I think there's a bunch of seeming paradoxes when it comes to winnability," Dr. Laats says. "If there is a winner, whoever the winner is will not claim it as a victory but instead try and rally the troops under the threat of whatever it is next."

Conflict over the idea of what America stands for often intensifies during periods of change, says Andrew Hartman, an Illinois State University professor of history who studies culture wars.

"It does seem that we're in another period of mass reflection on this larger question of what it means to be an American. This stems from the rapid changes in how we think about gender identity, certainly the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement," he says. "The current culture wars in schools, particularly with regards to race, critical race theory, sex education, and gender, are stemming from these changes that are taking place not just politically, but in people's consciousness."

Demonstrators gather outside a Williamson County Schools school board meeting in Franklin, Tennessee, to show support for the district's diversity and equity initiatives on May 17, 2021. The event was organized by One WillCo, a racial equity group co-founded by Revida Rahman.

Polling shows some of the divides. In August, a survey by The Associated Press and NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 58% of American adults favor mask mandates for students attending K-12 schools in person, with about 30% of Republicans supporting mask mandates compared with about 80% of Democrats. (Support rose to 65% of Americans supporting mask mandates for students in an early September poll by USA Today/Ipsos; results were not broken down by political party.)

A Morning Consult-Politico survey in June found that less than a majority of Americans knew about critical race theory, a decades-old idea targeted by conservative activists that considers the ways race and racism influence American politics, culture, and law. Among those Americans who are aware of it, Republicans are more likely to view it unfavorably.

Cultural wars around education happen in part because of the role schools play in the parent-child relationship, says Dr. Hartman. “By sending your kid to a public school you’re conceding in part the raising of your kid to the state, at least in theory or principle. You can see why conflicts would develop over schools for that reason.”

“Not above the fray”

Disputes over education in America are as common as reading, writing, and arithmetic – from the 1920s Scopes Monkey Trial that dealt with the teaching of evolution to the 1962 Engel v. Vitale Supreme Court case that ruled school prayer unconstitutional, to 1990s battles over proposed national history standards.

Long-term trends in culture wars tend to favor progressive causes, says Dr. Laats of Binghamton University. But conservatives can claim victory over the fact that education still follows a traditional format in most places and that local activists have succeeded at changing curricula, he says.

“The sense I get is it’s more about exerting political influence and illustrating or demonstrating that your group is highly motivated on this issue and therefore a force to be reckoned with,” rather than changing others’ minds, says Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington.

The system is working the way it’s supposed to, with local control of education and mechanisms to voice concerns through school board meetings and elections, says Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow who studies K-12 education at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-of-center think tank in Washington. “Education is not above the fray, it is the fray,” he says. “It should surprise no one that in a diverse and divided country, people are going to bring those divisions to their schools in the forms of these heated debates.”

Deputies remove Chris Mink from an emergency meeting of the School Board for Seminole County Public Schools in Sanford, Florida, Sept. 2, 2021. Mr. Mink, the parent of a Bear Lake Elementary School student, opposes a call for mask mandates and was escorted out for shouting.

“A long process”

When Revida Rahman attends school board meetings in Williamson County, Tennessee, she's on the side with people holding posters reading "Racism hurts us all." Brett Craig typically sits with people holding up signs like "My Child. My Choice."

Both local parents say they're turning out to urge school leaders to do what's best for kids, but they differ in their ideas about what it means to win.

"Winning for us isn't like a football game win, where you make the play and it's over. This is a long process," says Ms. Rahman, co-founder of One WillCo, a group that advocates for racial equity in schools.

"A win to me would be to 'live and let live.' That's the American bargain. You're free to have absolute convictions about whatever you want, but you're not free to impose convictions on me," says Mr. Craig, a public relations volunteer with the local chapter of the conservative group Moms for Liberty. He favors parent choice on masks and removing curricula he sees as politically motivated.

A recent NBC News analysis of school districts where disputes are flaring over critical race theory found that many of the districts are in locations where demographics are diversifying. In Loudoun County, Virginia, the share of students of color in the average white student's school has increased by 29.5 percentage points since 1994, above the overall national rise of 11.2 percentage points.

Patti Hidalgo Menders, president of the Loudoun County Republican Women's Club and mother of a high school junior, pushes back on the implication that disputes stem from changing demographics. She's a daughter of immigrants from Cuba, and she says her parents taught her to assimilate and be proud Americans.

Ms. Menders organized recent "Education, Not Indoctrination" rallies and is involved with an effort to recall six members of the Loudoun County school board. Among other things, she's upset the district has limited what she calls the "freedoms" of parents and students, such as choices around masks and vaccinations. She feels like her side has "not won anything."

Many grassroots activists hope they will win policies advancing their causes, at least on the local level, by attending school board meetings and organizing to elect school board members that represent their values, says Dr. Hartman, the education historian. Some politicians, lobbyists, and members of the media intentionally stir up cultural battles to gain votes, fundraising, or ratings, he says.

"Some people profit and benefit and enjoy fighting these culture wars and some see it as more existential and think they can win," says Dr. Hartman.

Ms. Rahman in Tennessee started working to improve her children's schools after she and her husband chaperoned their sons on field trips to a plantation about five years ago and were dismayed by the lack of information about slavery and the lack of compassion shown by others on the trip.

"They were showing empathy for the 12-, 13-year-old [Confederate] soldiers who were fighting, but the same empathy wasn't shown to the slaves that were on the plantation," says Ms. Rahman, who identifies as Black. Ms. Rahman says her two sons and their classmates of color continue to face incidents such as white children using racial slurs on the school bus.

She and other parents went to the district with their concerns and have succeeded in some of their goals, such as having the district start a cultural competency council. She views the latest disputes in Williamson County as less about “culture wars” and more about long-standing racism in America. She thinks it would be a win for people to continue the reckoning with racism that was started after the death of George Floyd rather than “everyone retreating to their corners,” as she’s seeing now.

Ms. Menders is also trying to get people to come together. She recently gathered friends and acquaintances from a range of political and racial backgrounds to discuss their different positions.

“I would love to have more dialogue like that,” she says, even though one person in the group decided they didn’t want to participate in the future. “Our goal was to help each other understand the other people’s point of view.”