



Our Pugilistic Public School Year

Neal McCluskey

December 28, 2021

It seemed like you could not turn on the nightly news, or open a newspaper, in 2021 without seeing a school board meeting collapse into enraged shouting and even arrests. Indeed, just a few days ago in Oregon, a meeting about changing a school mascot ended with a board member punched in the face. It felt almost de rigueur in a year that featured the National School Boards Association begging the FBI to investigate possible “domestic terrorism” behind protests, a Virginia gubernatorial election that turned on frustrated parents, and a national wave of “book banning.”

If 2021 has felt like the angriest education year you can remember, that is probably because it has been. But while the temperature has been especially feverish, the root problem is old: public schooling, which forces diverse people to fund, and de facto attend, government-controlled schools.

Since the 2005-06 school year, the Cato Institute has cataloged values- and identity-based conflicts in public schools, though with consistent, standardized collection not starting until

2012. These battles tend to be the most searing, involving deeply held moral values, personal identities such as race or gender, and basic rights such as freedom of expression.

How much worse has 2021 been than other years?

Collection for 2021 was not quite complete as of this writing, but the 2021 number hit 304 by mid-December, and was on pace for about 320 by the end of the year. The previous record, set in 2018, was 249.

But maybe it is not a big deal. There are about 13,500 school districts in the United States. 320 would be just roughly 2 percent of the total.

No doubt, what we see in the news does not represent all, or maybe even most, districts. But 320 gives just a minimal sense of how many Americans were surrounded by conflict.

First, 90 of the catalogued battles were state-level, such as efforts in Florida, Texas, Tennessee, and elsewhere to ban the teaching of “divisive concepts,” and prohibit transgender girls from participating in girls’ sports. All people in such states were forced onto public schooling battlegrounds.

Second, cataloged conflicts, almost all pulled from media reports, tend to come from larger districts, which are more likely to receive media attention. In 2021, six came from New York City, which has about 1 million public school students. One was in Los Angeles, the nation’s second largest district with roughly 440,000 students. Two were in Chicago, enrolling almost 341,000 students.

Finally, battles in small districts may never have gotten the attention of reporters, or may have hit low-profile outlets.

320 may seem small, but it represents hundreds of millions of people forced into political arenas to fight over what all kids will learn.

Why has 2021 been so fraught?

It has been a stew of many ingredients, but the two largest are likely COVID-19 and the 2020 murder of George Floyd by white police officer Derek Chauvin.

While pandemic discontent has not been primarily about moral values or personal identity, it has created broad parental frustration with public schools, first when many districts fought returning to in-person education, then when many opened with mandatory masking.

George Floyd's murder appeared to catalyze many district leaders to put an emphasis on "equity," which can take forms ranging from directing more resources to minority students, to ending gifted and talented programs. The goal is to ameliorate inequalities stemming from past and present racism, including decades of racist housing policies directly impacting wealth and school access. But to many people, such racially motivated policies are themselves racist, and maybe even intended to make white children feel guilty just for being white.

Of course, tensions over race were building before Floyd's murder, with many other high-profile police shootings and publication of the *New York Times*' "1619 Project," which posited that the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in America was the "true founding" of the United States.

Similarly, over the last several months we have seen a wave of battles over books such as “Gender Queer,” which some view as affirming gay and transgender kids, but others decry for sometimes *literally graphic* — “Gender Queer” is a graphic novel — sex scenes. But such conflict has been building for years, with battles over who can access which bathrooms and locker rooms peaking with the 2016 North Carolina “bathroom bill” that barred public buildings, including schools, from allowing people born one biological sex to use a bathroom of the other.

But these are just the origins of immediate debates. Public schooling has forced social conflict since day one, though a primary intent of its champions has been to unify diverse people. Unfortunately, conflict is unavoidable from its basic design, which requires that diverse people pay for a single system of government schools.

If you believe your children need something at odds with what your neighbor requires, you must fight them for control.

Such battles began in the earliest days of “common schooling,” with conservative and progressive Protestants battling to determine which, if any, specific dogma the schools would teach. With major Roman Catholic immigration, bigger battles raged over whose version of the Bible would be used in the schools, and how Catholics would be portrayed. Indeed, the Philadelphia Bible Riots of 1844 were two waves of actual combat sparked by whose version of the Bible — Protestant, Catholic, or none — would be used in the public schools. By the time the battles had ended, tens of people had been killed, hundreds wounded, and numerous buildings — including churches — lay in ruins.

When it has come to race, in large swaths of the country public schools either long legally excluded African Americans from education or segregated them. Since being allowed in, African Americans have often felt marginalized in curricula and been tracked into lower-level classes.

Sex has also long been a battleground, and in the 1990s public schooling saw national upheaval over the book “Heather Has Two Mommies.” “And Tango Makes Three,” about two male penguins raising a chick, was a frequent flashpoint in the mid-2000s.

2021 has been an especially strife-torn year in public schooling. But it is not an aberration. It is a symptom of an education system that makes wrenching conflict inevitable.

Neal McCluskey directs the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom and runs Cato’s Public Schooling Battle Map.