



What's behind the right-wing book-ban frenzy? Big money, and a long-term plan

The campaign to get LGBTQ-friendly books and authors of color off the shelves isn't "grassroots" or spontaneous

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Until very recently, "book bans" seemed like a term out of the past, or a phenomenon that erupted sporadically in a small school or library district in the most conservative areas of the country. But over the last several years, parents' groups aggrieved by the left's alleged influence K-12 education have been working tirelessly to bring them back. All kinds of books have been exiled from library shelves or school curricula in the latest book-ban frenzy, although there's no question that books about slavery, racism and the civil rights movement, along with books about growing up LGBTQ and that community's struggle for equality, are center stage.

This phenomenon has largely been perceived, and framed in media accounts, as a grassroots movement, with local groups of parents or school-board officials leading the brigade in their own towns or neighborhoods. But that may not be the real story. New reporting suggests that certain elements of this broad-based advocacy have been coordinated by some of the country's most influential deep-pockets conservatives, who stand much to gain from fanning the flames of the culture war, even at the most granular levels.

Last week, The Guardian reported that a number of ostensible grassroots groups on the frontlines of the "parental rights" movement have connections to right-wing politicians and donor networks who are highly skilled at "astroturfing" local conflicts on a national scale.

Notable among these groups is Moms for Liberty, a 70,000-member nonprofit with 165 chapters throughout the country. The group is operated by Tina Descovich and Tiffany Justice, two former school board members. But according to its articles of incorporation, Moms for Liberty was originally co-founded and co-directed by Bridget Ziegler, the wife of Christian Ziegler, vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party, as Media Matters noted. Marie Rogerson, a former campaign consultant who now serves as the group's director of development, formerly worked

for Republican state Rep. Randy Fine, according to Treasure Coast Newspapers. Fine himself has been a central figure in Florida Republicans' crusade against "critical race theory."

While Moms for Liberty is perhaps the most high-visibility advocacy groups of its kind, there are many others in the mix. Groups like Parents Defending Education and No Left Turn in Education also operate in the same ecosystem and, like Moms for Liberty, have connections to big players in right-wing politics.

Parents Defending Education — a self-described "grassroots organization" promoting "the restoration of a healthy, non-political education for our kids" — is led by Nicole Neily, whose résumé is littered with connections to the Koch brothers. Neily was the president and founder of the pro-free speech group Speech First, which according to The Nation, runs "a highly professional astro-turfing campaign, with a board of former Bush administration lawyers and longtime affiliates of the Koch family." Neily has also served in leadership capacities at the Independent Women's Forum and the Cato Institute, both of which are direct recipients of Koch cash.

At present, nonprofit law does not require nonprofit organizations such as Moms for Liberty to disclose their donors. But in an interview with Salon, Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice denied speculation that the group is funded by big-money benefactors, claiming it is mostly financed through memberships, small donations, and t-shirt sales.

"If somebody wants to write me a check to get masks off of kids' faces and to make sure that kids in schools are not being indoctrinated," Justice said, "absolutely, I'm going to take that check."

No Left Turn's funding is, likewise, something a mystery. The group, which had 30 chapters in 23 states as of last June, lists among its supporters numerous high-profile right-wingers, including David Clarke, the pro-Trump former sheriff of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, who often speaks at GOP events and has taken money from the National Rifle Association. Clarke formerly served on the board of the Steve Bannon-backed group that was later implicated in a border wall fundraising racket. Other board members include Sharon Slater, president of Family Watch International, an evangelical lobbying nonprofit famous for spreading anti-LGBTQ pseudoscience; and CEO Elana Yaron Fishbein, who reportedly attended a private briefing held by the Heritage Foundation last May with state lawmakers looking to remove "critical race theory" from classrooms, according to NBC News.

No Left Turn and Parents Defending Education did not respond to Salon's inquiries.

In organizing terms, Moms for Liberty, Parents Defending Education and No Left Turn all adhere to a similar formula, as the Guardian noted. In most cases, a parent ostensibly flags a local school for doing something they consider beyond the pale, such as incorporating "controversial" books about gender or sexuality into the curricula. That parent and their allies reach out to one of the aforementioned groups, whose leaders weave the incident into their broader national narrative.

To smoothen this process, some groups provide detailed walkthroughs for parents about how to file open records requests, create press releases, file civil rights complaints and petition school

boards. One template provided by No Left Turn, for example, offers "a letter written by a parent of a child whose teacher assigned the reading of 'Front Desk' by Kelly Yang," a children's book about a young Chinese immigrant that parents in a small Long Island district described as "extremely divisive and controversial" and characterized as "a recommended CRT novel." (There is no such thing as a "CRT novel," recommended or otherwise, and Yang's book has never otherwise been described in those terms.)

Taken together, parents' rights groups appear to have a relatively narrow focus: to eradicate what they see as left-wing ideology from public schools. But Dr. Maurice T. Cunningham, a political science professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the author of "Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization," argues that their real goals are far more ambitious.

"There is absolutely no doubt in my mind — zero — that what groups like Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education are doing is structural and aimed at the destruction and ultimate privatization of America's public school system," Cunningham, wrote by email. "These groups are communications operations and highly networked into The Daily Caller, Breitbart [and] Fox News. They have gotten educators fired and attacked online. They want to create chaos," he concluded, "to destroy trust in public education and draw funding away."

As Truthout reported last week, Erika Sanzi, Parents Defending Education's director of outreach, serves as a fellow at the right-wing Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an ardent backer of charter schools. Likewise, education fellows Kim Richey and Aimee Viana both worked for the U.S. Department of Education under Donald Trump's education secretary, Betsy DeVos, who aggressively advocated for defunding and undercutting public schools with charters and private alternatives. DeVos has sponsored the Independent Women's Forum (formerly run by Neily) and was granted an annual award by the organization back in 2019. The women's forum itself has received more than \$1 million from the Bradley Foundation, which has a history of promoting charter schools.

Asked for her opinion on education privatization, Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice, told Salon, "I don't think that abandoning the public education system is what's best for America."

"Moms for Liberty fights to reform public education," Justice said. "One of the ways that I feel is most important that we do that is getting parents back into classrooms, reengaged with their children's education."

Over the past several months, parents rights' groups have turned their attention from poorly-defined academic concepts like "critical race theory" to removing books they deem objectionable. More often than not, these turn out to be written by authors of color and LGBTQ+ authors, or to deal directly with themes of race, sex and gender.

In Texas, this book-banning fever has now reached the state legislature, which is now considering a bill that would require school districts to disclose how many copies they hold of 850 books that "might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex." Bookriot found that the list most

frequently cites the work of Julie Anne Peters, known for writing lesbian-oriented YA novels, and Takako Shimura, the author of "Wandering Son," a Japanese manga series that features a trans main character.

A number of well-known Black authors, from the late Nobel laureate Toni Morrison ("Beloved") to Jerry Craft ("New Kid"), Tiffany D. Jackson ("Monday's Not Coming") and Ibram X. Kendi ("How to Be an Antiracist") have seen their books targeted for removal in Texas, Virginia and Missouri. In the single most infamous example to date, a Tennessee school board voted 10-0 to remove Art Spiegelman's "Maus" — a Pulitzer-winning graphic novel about the Holocaust — from its eighth-grade curriculum.

Going by the numbers, parents' rights groups have shown no signs of letting up. According to the American Library Association, the U.S. saw 156 attempts to censor books from schools in the entire year 2020. During the last quarter of 2021 alone, the ALA recorded 330 such attempts. Meanwhile, students are already protesting against the bans and numerous youth-led activist groups have begun distributing banned books for free.

Jonathan Friedman, the director of free expression and education at PEN America, told Salon that these restrictions will have untold negative consequences on kids, especially in the case of works that provide a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives.

"It's impossible to deny that this will have a long-term detrimental effect on the ways in which students encounter diverse stories" and "learn to empathize across difference," Friedman said in an interview.

The issue, he added, goes well beyond angry parents and school boards. "We now also have a political campaign to pass bills barring the discussion of certain topics in schools," he said, "and there's a new wave of bills that is increasingly targeting all kinds of curricular materials or materials in school libraries."

Indeed, over the past several years, state-level Republicans have led a broader effort to control or restrict certain ways and means of teaching about American history, LGBTQ+ rights, sex education and related topics. To this point, 36 states have proposed bills or otherwise moved to restrict "critical race theory" or the instruction of racism and sexism in the classrooms, according to Education Week. Fourteen states have successfully enacted such laws. (In actual academic practice, critical race theory is largely limited to law school, and not used at all in K-12 education.)

In December, Oklahoma GOP legislators introduced a bill that would bar school libraries from "maintain[ing] in its inventory or promot[ing] books that make as their primary subject the study of sex, sexual preferences, sexual activity, sexual perversion, sex-based classifications, sexual identity or gender identity." The measure, critics fear, could ostensibly erase kids' access to stories about the LGBTQ experience from the entire state.

Just last week, Texas Gov. Rick Abbott introduced a "Parental Bill of Rights" that would ban "pornographic" material in school libraries. During the measure's unveiling, Abbott made

references to Maia Kobabe's "Gender Queer: A Memoir" and Carmen Maria Machado's "In the Dream House," an adult-oriented memoir about an abusive lesbian relationship.

Friedman said these measures won't just impact how kids build their worldviews, but how also they define themselves. "If students don't encounter a book in school," he explained, "they are being deprived of the opportunity to think about alternative identities, or even to find themselves. They're being deprived of the opportunity to feel like they belong."