



NBC NEWS

Critical race theory battle invades school boards — with help from conservative groups

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June 15, 2021

A booby-trapped billboard. A list of demands. A conservative media frenzy.

Jeff Porter, superintendent of a wealthy suburban school district in Maine, had no idea that his community was about to become part of a national battle when in the summer of 2020 a father began accusing the district of trying to “indoctrinate” his children by teaching critical race theory.

To Porter, the issue was straightforward: The district had denounced white supremacy in the wake of George Floyd’s murder by police, but did not teach critical race theory, the academic study of racism’s pervasive impact.

But the parent, Shawn McBreairty, grew increasingly disgruntled and soon connected with No Left Turn in Education, a rapidly growing national group that supports parents as they fight against lessons on systemic racism. That action turned a heated conflict with the school board into one that soon drew national attention, mobilized by a new, increasingly coordinated movement with the backing of major conservative organizations and media outlets.

It’s a movement that has amped up grassroots parental organizing around the country, bringing the lens and stakes of national politics — along with the playbook of seasoned GOP activists — to school boards.

“I was very naïve at the beginning of the year,” Porter said. “I thought it was a concerned parent who had taken it a little too far. I didn’t understand this until recently, but these were tactics from national organizations to discredit the entire district.”

McBreairty became Maine’s chapter leader for No Left Turn last summer. He has since put up a billboard-size sign of a school board member’s face on his lawn and said it was surrounded by rat traps to prevent theft. “This is a war with the left,” McBreairty said in an email to NBC News,

“and in war, tactics and strategy can become blurry.” The fight has only escalated, and it shows no sign of slowing.

Conflicts like this are playing out in cities and towns across the country, amid the rise of at least 165 local and national groups that aim to disrupt lessons on race and gender, according to an NBC News analysis of media reports and organizations’ promotional materials. Reinforced by conservative think tanks, law firms and activist parents, these groups have found allies in families frustrated over Covid-19 restrictions in schools and have weaponized the right’s opposition to critical race theory, turning it into a political rallying point.

While the efforts vary, they share strategies of disruption, publicity and mobilization. The groups swarm school board meetings, inundate districts with time-consuming public records requests and file lawsuits and federal complaints alleging discrimination against white students. They have become media darlings in conservative circles and made the debate over critical race theory a national issue.

Virtually all school districts insist they are not teaching critical race theory, but many activists and parents have begun using it as a catch-all term to refer to what schools often call equity programs, teaching about racism or LGBTQ-inclusive policies.

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Now, conservative activists are setting their sights on ousting as many school board members as they can, and local Republican Parties have vowed to help, viewing the revolt against critical race theory as akin to the tea party wave from a decade ago.

Activists and parents have launched 50 recall efforts this year aimed at unseating 126 school board members, according to a new report from Ballotpedia, a website that tracks U.S. politics and elections. Most of those recalls — which already surpass the record for a single year — started as objections to Covid-19 restrictions, but five of the most recently launched campaigns, including a particularly contentious fight in Loudoun County, Virginia, include concerns about critical race theory.

And, in a new development this year, rather than targeting a single member, these efforts often target multiple members or entire school boards, according to Abbey Smith, a researcher at Ballotpedia.

This data, which is limited to the 39 states that allow for recall of local elected officials, suggests that political discord at the local school level is at an all-time high. At least 50 other school districts from Washington to Florida have been the scenes of local unrest over the idea of critical race theory, according to an NBC News analysis of media reports.

Prominent Republican political figures are rushing in to support the parent activists, hoping that these local battles will mobilize conservative voters in next year’s midterms and beyond. The push comes as President Joe Biden and Democrats have benefited from popular economic

legislation but show some vulnerability on culturally divisive issues. As former Trump adviser Steve Bannon put it on his podcast in May: “The path to save the nation is very simple — it’s going to go through the school boards.”

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, said this month that he will get the “political apparatus involved so we can make sure there’s not a single school board member who supports critical race theory.” Political action committees have been set up dedicated to the cause.

The clashes at school board meetings and online are partly anchored in “real differences” in parents’ opinions on Covid-19, race and America’s future, said Jeffrey Henig, director of the politics and education program at Columbia University’s Teachers College.

“But it’s being exploited by actors at the national level,” he said, “who see it as an opportunity to reshuffle the politics of the standard educational reform debate.”

A movement is launched

The origin of one of the largest groups targeting school boards can be traced back to last June, when many educators began looking for ways to teach students about the protests following George Floyd’s murder, and reposition how American history is taught.

When the Gladwyne Elementary School in the suburbs of Philadelphia decided to teach students about the concepts of racism, privilege and justice during the last week of classes, Elana Yaron Fishbein, a mother of two students in the school, sprang into action.

Fishbein, a former social worker, sent a letter to the superintendent calling the lessons a “plan to indoctrinate the children into the ‘woke’ culture.” She said the superintendent never responded, though the district later said that the lesson plans were age-appropriate and did not shame students and that parents were allowed to opt out. Fishbein said other white parents in the district attacked her on Facebook when she shared her letter.

So Fishbein moved her children to private school and started a group to advocate against anti-racist teaching. She called it No Left Turn in Education.

“The schools have been hijacked,” she said in an interview. “Our kids are captive audiences. And they think they can do whatever they want with our kids.”

Fishbein’s endeavor received a significant boost in September, when she appeared on Tucker Carlson’s prime-time Fox News show. By the next day, No Left Turn’s Facebook page had shot up from fewer than 200 followers to over 30,000. The group now has 30 chapters in 23 states, a rapid expansion Fishbein credits to Carlson’s show.

“He launched our movements — he doesn’t know it, but he did,” Fishbein said.

She said her nonprofit group, which is volunteer-driven and relies on small donations to cover promotional materials and legal fees, now fields requests from groups of parents, ranging from 50 people to more than 1,000, asking to get involved under No Left Turn's umbrella. These local chapters are the "boots on the ground," she said, confronting school administrators at board meetings and through records requests.

"We want to know, what are you teaching? What are you doing?" Fishbein said. "And it's exactly what I got: a lack of transparency. They don't want to answer."

Among the many people who reached out to Fishbein after her Tucker Carlson appearance were Jonathan O'Brien, a personal injury lawyer in New York who wanted to help, and Gabrielle Clark, a mother in Las Vegas who was upset that her biracial son had received a D-minus after refusing to participate in a mandatory sociology class where the teacher labeled certain identities as "oppressive."

Fishbein connected them, and with O'Brien's representation, Clark sued her son's charter school in December, arguing it was a violation of her son's privacy and free speech rights that the sociology teacher had asked students to disclose any disabilities, as well as their religious and sexual identities.

The charter school conceded in court filings that it did not let Clark's son drop the class, but said no one had to disclose their identities and that his poor grade was due to his refusal to complete assignments. After the suit was filed, administrators agreed to expunge his grade for the class. The charter school's CEO called the suit an "ill-intentioned" attack by activists on "any conversation about racism or slavery that paints aspects of our country's past in a negative light." The litigation is ongoing, and the district has asked that it be dismissed.

"Some people are treating it like a gold rush."

The case garnered media attention on the right, and slowly, O'Brien said, more conservative advocacy groups became interested in these cases. He started SchoolhouseRights.org as a project of the International Organization for the Family, a conservative nonprofit group, to raise funds to take on more cases like Clark's.

"Some people are treating it like a gold rush," O'Brien said. "This is a new area where people think they can either become famous or make money on the issue, and they're probably right."

O'Brien later joined a coalition of attorneys focused on this cause, organized by Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank.

Rufo, who said he was in touch with then-President Donald Trump's staff before he issued an executive order last September banning critical race theory's use by federal agencies, promised in a March tweet to make critical race theory "toxic" in the public imagination. Rufo declined an interview request.

“The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory,’” he wrote. “We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”

Shared connections, shared strategies

The growth of school board-focused groups has coincided with a broader conservative effort to make critical race theory a national referendum on the discussion of race in America.

Throughout the winter, organizations like the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, and the American Legislative Exchange Council, which produces model bills on Republican causes, held webinars that warned about the threat of teaching critical race theory.

Fishbein said she took part in a private briefing hosted by the Heritage Foundation in May that featured lawmakers from Idaho, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Texas and other states to discuss model legislation to block critical race theory. Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, Oklahoma and Tennessee have already advanced some form of a restriction, and 15 states have legislation pending. The Heritage Foundation declined to comment.

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As lawmakers proposed legislation targeting critical race theory this spring, more activist organizations similar to No Left Turn sprouted up, their memberships ballooning with exposure on conservative TV and streaming programs. Each group followed a similar pattern of providing toolkits for activism, teaching people how to file open-records requests and offering to help parents publicize what's happening in their school districts.

“Maybe they don't know how to get it in the right hands, but we do,” Nicole Neily, president of Parents Defending Education, said in March. “We know a lot of reporters, and we're happy to share those things.”

Neily, who lives in the Washington metro area, started Parents Defending Education as a nonprofit group at the beginning of the year. She also runs Speech First, a nonprofit group that has sued universities over systems to combat racism that the group believes violate free speech rights, and she had previously worked at conservative groups such as the Cato Institute and FreedomWorks.

Texas town elects candidates opposed to school diversity plan

Parents Defending Education aims to teach parents how to become activists, Neily has said, but the group is also playing an active role. It has filed civil rights complaints against schools in Massachusetts for creating an affinity space for students of color after a string of attacks on Asians, and against districts in Minnesota, Missouri and Ohio where administrators pledged to dismantle racism in their schools. She said during a webinar last month that she wants school administrators who take these steps to “know there will be consequences.”

Neily did not answer emailed requests for comment and hung up when reached by phone.

Though the political action committees and nonprofit groups will eventually disclose financial information, in most cases this hasn't happened yet, so it's unclear how much money this fight has drawn. Southlake Families PAC, organized around a school board battle in a wealthy Dallas-Fort Worth suburb, raised more than \$215,000 as of April 21, according to finance reports filed with the Texas Ethics Commission. That doesn't include more than \$100,000 raised by two PAC-backed school board candidates who successfully ran on a platform of stopping the district's Cultural Competence Action Plan.

There's no shortage of free publicity for the cause. The conservative focus on critical race theory is pervading right-wing news publications, like Fox News and Breitbart, which covered the issue in as many as 750 articles per week in May, according to Dominik Stecuła, a political science professor at Colorado State University.

The topic is also the focus of "consistent discussion" in local GOP Facebook groups, where 2 percent of all Facebook posts from local parties mentioned critical race theory in May, climbing to 3.6 percent so far in June, according to Kevin Reuning, an assistant professor of political science at Miami University, who tracks political Facebook posts. That's about the same as the share of posts mentioning antifa in the groups following the U.S. Capitol riot, when conservative groups were falsely blaming the far-left collection of orchestrating the Jan. 6 attack.

Activists swarm school board meetings

As a result of this movement, school boards are now facing an influx of lawsuits and records requests that can cost money and time that are in short supply, as well as public meetings that have become a sounding board for a variety of far-right causes.

"The thing that disturbs me the most about politicizing school boards is there is no mention of kids. It's not community centered, it's centered on political thought and theory and things that don't connect to education," said Sonja McKenzie, a member of the board of directors of the National School Boards Action Center, which advocates for public education. "The things that have been politicized — reopening schools, mask wearing, critical race theory — a lot of these are above and beyond the purview of what you do as school boards."

In Nevada, Washoe County's school board halted in-person meetings in April, after residents filled a large auditorium and lobbed insults and threats of violence during the public comment portion. Meetings opened to the public again in May, in a small office where only a few speakers can be present at a time.

Undeterred, hundreds of conservative activists and local residents, many without children in the district, according to their public testimony, waited in the Reno sun until their names were called

to speak out against critical race theory and the board's recent adoption of a student-led anti-discrimination resolution.

“This is an opportunity for what I feel like I've been screaming from the rooftops about,” said Karen England, executive director for Nevada Family Alliance, a conservative nonprofit group known for its efforts to end Drag Queen Story Hour at local libraries. The group recently proposed placing body cameras on teachers to ensure they aren't teaching critical race theory.

During the most recent meeting, which lasted 11 hours, speakers railed at school board members, calling them Marxists, racists, Nazis and child abusers, among other epithets.

Explaining the controversy behind critical race theory

Kristen De Haan, the mother of a senior in a district high school, said she attends the meetings in support of an expanded social justice curriculum and LGBTQ-inclusive sex education.

“I don't always agree with the board by any stretch of the imagination,” De Haan, who is white, said. “But listening to the anger, and what truly feels like hatred, and Martin Luther King being taken out of context over and over again, it's really hard. I definitely get glares when I go up and speak. It's uncomfortable, but I feel it's important to be out there.”

Other school boards face less explosive — but in some ways just as disruptive — pushback by parents.

In South Kingstown, Rhode Island, the parent of an incoming kindergartener submitted over 200 public records requests in two months, seeking copies of middle and high school curricula, lists of all books related to gender available in the library and 10 years worth of harassment complaints and emails. The district said it would take 300 hours to compile all of the records requested.

Timothy Ryan, executive director of the Rhode Island School Superintendents' Association, called the onslaught of records requests an effort “to shut the system down.”

“I believe their intent is really to have the public lose confidence in public education,” he said. “There was the ‘war on Christmas,’ and now everybody is teaching critical race theory. I think you'd be hard pressed to find five people in the state who could even define that.”

'Just the tip of the iceberg'

Back in Cumberland, Maine, the situation has escalated. After McBreairty became even more certain the school was pushing critical race theory, he filed a public records request that revealed the school had paid over \$12,000 to a nonprofit called Community Change Inc. for diversity and equity training for the school's staff.

McBreairty then filed at least 53 more records requests, according to the school district's superintendent, and said on a GoFundMe page that Maine's freedom of information law is "your most powerful weapon." Fishbein said No Left Turn paid for some of McBreairty's court costs and records requests.

On May 26, McBreairty sent an email to Porter, the superintendent, and the school board with links to coverage of his crusade, plus a list of demands, including that Porter publicly apologize for a letter denouncing white supremacy sent by the equity committee a year ago. McBreairty copied a producer for Fox News and two Daily Wire reporters.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg on media coming your way and national support aligned with our cause to fight CRT," he wrote. The next day, McBreairty appeared on Fox News' "Tucker Carlson Tonight."

A representative for Fox News declined to comment.

But McBreairty's efforts have run into problems with authorities. Last week, McBreairty was charged by the local police department with "improper influence," after he allegedly threatened to release a recording between himself and the deceased father of school board chair Tyler McGinley if McGinley didn't resign.

"My hope is that this summons is a reality check on his behavior," said McGinley, who is unclear if the recording truly exists. "I wanted to make sure that if the harassment was going to continue to happen, it wouldn't happen to other people."

When asked about the recording that led to the charge, McBreairty didn't deny that he'd threatened to release it. He said in a text message that he had "more info on Tyler [McGinley] that would provide a lot of context as to why MSAD51 is teaching Critical Race Theory doctrines." The charge is pending with the district attorney.

Ann Maksymowicz, the school board member whose face appeared on McBreairty's booby-trapped billboard, said the media attention has been overwhelming. The critical race theory debate became a central issue of last week's school board race, with Maksymowicz facing calls to resign. Instead, she won re-election.

Porter said he was "surprised by how much hate can be generated by a small group of people in the community" who he says have equated equity initiatives with critical race theory.

"For people who are not in agreement, they're using the word 'equity' and saying, 'There you are, you're teaching CRT!' And then equity becomes a horrible thing that we're doing," Porter said.

“I feel like the district in some ways has gotten used — almost held hostage — by this national ideology or national movement, that says we're all teaching CRT, and we're all trying to indoctrinate kids.”

Porter said the battle is far from over. It “is kind of a black cloud hanging over the district,” he said.