



## Education has been a key issue in recent elections, but that might change next year

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AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Republican Glenn Youngkin will be the next governor of Virginia. Education in public schools was what he drilled on in the closing days of the race, but voters' concerns about what happens inside classrooms often reflect their worries about what happens outside of schools. So to help us understand the role of education this year and how it might play out in the voting booths in 2022, we're joined by NPR White House correspondent Tamara Keith.

Hey there, Tam.

TAMARA KEITH, BYLINE: Hello.

CORNISH: And education reporter Anya Kamenetz.

Welcome back, Anya.

ANYA KAMENETZ, BYLINE: Thanks, Audie.

CORNISH: Tam, I want to start with you. What are we learning about what kind of role education and issues around education played in this gubernatorial race?

KEITH: Certainly in the closing stretch, it was the most prominent issue that both campaigns were talking about. That doesn't mean it was the only thing that mattered or the only factor in Youngkin's win. The economy was part of it, too. But here is what one Republican political consultant told me.

ROY COOPER: If the schools in Virginia opened up in fall of 2020, like they did so many other places in America, Terry McAuliffe wins the governor's race, and it's not even close.

KEITH: That's Roy Cooper. He's a Republican consultant who lives in suburban northern Virginia. He has three kids and has been quite vocal about his frustrations with the schools being slow to return to in-person education. Parents with their kids at home struggling to connect them to Zoom led to far more parent engagement, he says, and also massive anger and frustration.

COOPER: And that is what made them go to school board meetings, and that's what made them start looking at curriculum. And that's what made them start looking at other issues in other counties they didn't even live in.

CORNISH: Anya Kamenetz, does any of this sound familiar to you?

KAMENETZ: You know, Audie, parents are not a monolith. And even many of those who are dissatisfied with school closing - they may be worried about coming back to school. But I hear from many parents who are angry and alienated by prolonged school closures. They drove mothers out of the workforce. Kids suffered seriously with their mental health, with their learning. And, you know, when you look at in-person learning days last school year - that's tracked by the website Burbio - Virginia was seventh lowest in the nation. And New Jersey, where we saw a near upset in the governor's race on Tuesday, was 10th lowest in the nation.

And nationally, not just in those races, there is a lot of energy going into local school board races. So Ballotpedia - they track a few hundred local races. And what they saw was three or four times as many recall elections as a typical year and many more contested seats where the candidates are bringing up kind of these hot-button national issues like race and sex and gender as well as masks and vaccines.

CORNISH: So is it just about school closures? - because a lot has been made of the culture war going on in our schools.

KAMENETZ: I think just as Tam said, like, this issue is connected to the first. So generally with Zoom school, parents saw and heard a lot more of what was happening in their schools, and some primarily white parents perhaps did not like what they saw. And so, you know, what happened over the last summer, the last fall with the Black Lives Matter uprising, with The 1619 Project from the New York Times, schools, along with other institutions, have been increasingly trying to address white supremacy, trying to address structural racism.

And then you have this backlash phenomenon. It's almost like a repeat of the Tea Party, right? The Dems have control of the national government. The Republicans seize on culture war issues. And, you know, there is grassroots, authentic anger. But we would be remiss not to mention that it is also amplified. It's amplified on right-wing media. It's amplified on social media. There's think tanks, well-funded groups at all levels.

So if you want to get up and protest at a school board meeting or if you want to run for school board yourself, there's people there to help you out - the Cato Institute, Manhattan Institute, brand-new networks like Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education and even a PAC, a national political action committee, for school board races called the 1776 PAC.

CORNISH: So that brings us back to Virginia. Tam, Youngkin promised that he would not allow critical race theory to be taught in schools. It's not on the curriculum, but he very much was talking - using that kind of language. So how big of a factor was that based on your reporting?

KEITH: CRT certainly became a catchall for a lot of things. Outrage over it definitely motivated some of Youngkin's voters, in particular more conservative voters who were solidly part of the Republican base. But Youngkin could not have won on the Republican base votes alone. And in an interview with Politico, one of Youngkin's chief strategists, Jeff Roe, said they put a focus on education from the very beginning, really targeted it to different groups of people to try to win over independent and Democratic voters. For some people, it was about CRT. For others, it was about advanced math or school resource officers on campus or testing. And then the Democratic candidate, Terry McAuliffe, made a comment in a debate that came off as dismissive of parents, and Youngkin's team turned it into an ad within hours.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: The topic was education, and Terry went on the attack against parents.

TERRY MCAULIFFE: And I'm not going to let parents come into schools. I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.

KEITH: That statement from McAuliffe that he said was taken out of context was gold for Youngkin. He had a rallying cry. But political analysts I've spoken to say it would be a mistake to assume Youngkin won simply because of culture wars and CRT because in reality, he was talking about a lot more. And there were elements of his message that were nationalized and other elements that were quite localized. And let me just add he also campaigned extensively on the economy, which didn't get as much media attention, but his ads about grocery prices were unavoidable.

CORNISH: So, Anya, if all politics is local, what happens next?

KAMENETZ: Well, you know, I want to take your attention back to those local school board races. As you mentioned, you know, there was so much energy. There was all this national money coming in. But at the end of the day, I talked to Ballotpedia about this. They track a sample of local races, and they said, you know, most incumbents kept their seats. And even amongst these kind of nationalized races, the pro-teaching kids about race, the pro-masking candidates won two times as often as kind of the anti-woke or the anti-mask candidates.

But I do agree that, you know - that the underlying issue that ties it all together here is parent voice. You know, parents really are fired up. They really do want more of a voice in what goes on in schools. And I talked to Keri Rodrigues about this. She's a president of a parent voice group founded in 2020 called the National Parents Union. And her belief is that CRT is kind of a drummed-up issue. But frustration over the rocky school closing and reopening is very real, and it could be lasting. It could be a problem for Democrats.

KERI RODRIGUES: Parents are not interested in going back to the status quo that didn't work for our kids before. And we had a firsthand view of what was not working. And so we are very interested, and we need to see some urgency from folks around this.

KEITH: And parental political engagement could continue into the midterms in 2022. People I've spoken to aren't convinced that Youngkin's strategy on education would translate into every House race in the country. But certainly there are going to be a lot of governors on the ballot in 2022. And education often plays a big role in governor's races, whether it's these sort of culture war issues or teacher pay and class sizes.

CORNISH: That's NPR's Tamara Keith and Anya Kamenetz.

Thanks to you both.

KEITH: You're welcome.

KAMENETZ: Thank you.