



## Education In Virginia's Election: It Wasn't Just About Critical Race Theory

Audie Cornish

November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

In last week's Virginia election, you might have heard that a lot of Republicans were angry about critical race theory, but that's not the whole story.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

GLENN YOUNGKIN: Let me be very, very clear. We will teach accelerated math in Virginia schools.

(APPLAUSE)

CORNISH: That was an election eve rally for Republican Glenn Youngkin, who won the race for governor the next night. Cheering accelerated math - not exactly a page out of Donald Trump's Republican playbook, but it was a regular applause line at Youngkin's rallies. So how did this happen?

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE INGRAHAM ANGLE")

LAURA INGRAHAM: And parents and students in Virginia are reacting to the state's proposal to cancel advanced math options before 11th grade.

CORNISH: Well, back in April, Fox News ran multiple stories about a proposed plan by Virginia education officials to eliminate advanced math for some kids.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE INGRAHAM ANGLE")

INGRAHAM: Because they're worried that students who excel aren't diverse enough.

CORNISH: And that story bubbled up from a viral Facebook post by a local school board member in Loudoun County, who'd been in a meeting about some proposed changes to the state's math program. This school board member posted that the changes would mean the end of accelerated math for some kids.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "THE INGRAHAM ANGLE")

INGRAHAM: Punishing all the gifted students in the name of racial justice.

CORNISH: The only problem - that wasn't the plan at all.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

JAMES LANE: Absolutely, acceleration is not going away in mathematics courses in Virginia.

CORNISH: Within days, State Superintendent James Lane had to refute the story and clarify - advanced math was not going away. It turned out the viral Facebook post was based on a misinterpretation. What the state was actually talking about was a scheduled revamp of its math program to include more data science in classes like algebra and geometry.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

LANE: We are not eliminating accelerated courses. We're not reducing the rigor in our curriculum.

CORNISH: Now, all this happened back in April. But on November 1, it was still a big applause line at Glenn Youngkin's rally...

(APPLAUSE)

CORNISH: ...Where he also attacked critical race theory by quoting Martin Luther King Jr.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

YOUNGKIN: Who implored us to be better than ourselves, to judge one another based on the content of our character and not the color of our skin.

(APPLAUSE)

YOUNGKIN: So, friends, on day one, I will ban critical race theory and make sure...

CORNISH: CONSIDER THIS - the hot takes about Virginia's election have cooled. Yes, Virginia Republicans were angry about education, but that anger came from a lot of different places. From NPR, I'm Audie Cornish. It's Monday, November 8.

It's CONSIDER THIS FROM NPR. It's been a week of questions for Democrats after their loss in the governor's race in Virginia. Virginia, after all, is a state Joe Biden won last year by 10 points. So what went wrong for Democrats this year?

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: People need a little breathing room. They're overwhelmed. And what happened was - I think we have to just produce results for them, to change their standard of living and give them a little more breathing room.

CORNISH: That was one version of events from President Biden last week. He meant that Democrats in Congress need to work harder to pass some of their landmark legislative proposals. Other hot takes include Democrats ran a bad candidate in Terry McAuliffe, Democrats talk too much about Donald Trump, Democrats talked not enough about kitchen-table issues, and that it's historically been tough for Democrats in the White House to win Virginia's off-year election for governor. The truth is it might have been all of those things, but some Democrats believe education played a major role.

DAN SENA: I think it's just something the Democrats really need to pay attention to in 2022 and likely come up with a more inclusive policy that certainly gives parents a seat at the table, given how frustrated parents really are about - you know, their dining room tables have been where they're teaching geometry for the last 18 months.

CORNISH: Democratic strategist Dan Sena spoke to NPR this past week. He cited the Republican Party's ability to weaponize the issue of critical race theory. It's an academic theory of structural racism. We should note it's not taught in Virginia's K-12 curriculum. But in the end, that was beside the point.

SENA: I think the Democrats just have to really sharpen their tools and prepare for what I believe will be rough going on the cultural wars in 2022. And in many ways, the Democrats have sort of brought a knife to a gunfight on this message-wise.

CORNISH: So, yeah, on the surface, education was a big issue in Virginia. And some strategists now think it will be that way in next year's House and Senate elections as well. Battles over what's happening inside school classrooms, well, sometimes that's a proxy for what's happening on the outside. I spoke with our NPR correspondents, Anya Kamenetz of the NPR ed team and our White House correspondent, Tamara Keith.

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?

TAMARA KEITH, BYLINE: 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.

RORY 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 Rory 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?

ANYA KAMENETZ, BYLINE: 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: You know, 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 became a catchall for a lot of things, a lot of dissatisfaction. Outrage over it certainly motivated some of Youngkin's voters, in particular more conservative voters who are solidly part of the Republican base. But Youngkin could not have won on base votes alone. In an interview with Politico's "Deep Dive" podcast, one of Youngkin's chief strategist, Jeff Roe, said that they put a focus on education from the very beginning. They were targeted about it, and they were doing it to try to win over independent and Democratic voters.

(SOUNDBITE OF PODCAST, "PLAYBOOK DEEP DIVE")

JEFF ROE: Some people get animated about CRT. Some people get animated about school choice. Some people get animated about advanced math. Some people get animated about school resource officers. And so we were having a hard time. Those people don't fit in the same rooms together. And so Terry McAuliffe said it better than we could have ever said it.

KEITH: That is, during a debate, the Democratic candidate for governor delivered a line about parental involvement in education that Youngkin's team turned 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.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

CORNISH: It's CONSIDER THIS FROM NPR. I'm Audie Cornish.