



## **Pushing partisanship in dealing with public schools doesn't help them**

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The majority leadership of the North Carolina General Assembly, following the strategy of their national party, doesn't miss an opportunity to inject partisanship into every aspect of public life.

Of even greater significance, however, is that this effort is diametrically contrary to the behavior of North Carolinians.

At the end of 2010 more than three quarters of the state's voters were either Democrats or Republicans just the remaining quarter were not affiliated with the two major parties. Today, more than a third of the votes are independent of the Democrats or Republicans.

So, the question remains, as the state trends less partisan, why are the state's legislative leaders unrelenting on forcing party politics – most significantly these days – in public education? It is not a formula that promotes consensus nor one that drives decision-making based on what is best for students and teachers' success in the classroom. Rather the priority is what promotes the power and dogma of a particular political party.

Since 2011, the state has gone from partisan board elections in just 14 of the state's 115 public school districts to 43. In many cases, these changes were NOT at the request of local voters. Rather, they were mandates solely at the initiative of partisan legislators in Raleigh. Boards of education in counties represented by state Senate Leader Phil Berger, R-Rockingham, have switched to partisan school board elections since 2011.

It is either naive or simply diverting, to contend that partisan elections help voters. Key education issues – class size, teacher training and quality, student support services, preparation for careers and advanced learning, rarely conform to the compartmentalized ideology of political parties.

Instead, it is a strategy to divert focus on education quality and the needs of students in their classrooms on to one that promotes partisanship and bickering. All that came into sharp focus last week as the instigators crowed about their success in the most recent elections – particularly in Virginia.

Political leaders are looking to stoke racial animosity -- attacking diversity programs and non-course-of-study matters such as “critical race theory;” health and safety concerns such as COVID-19 mask mandates and demonize classroom teachers’ groups– all under the deceptive label of parental rights.

They falsely attack classroom teachers with nebulous charges like injecting “leftist” training in wokeness. What justification is there to demean them and treat them like tokens in a political board game? Our dedicated teachers work too hard and have been going above-and-beyond. They’ve earned and deserve broad praise and support.

It is really about camouflaging the true intent – pressing the culture wars in the nation to stoke prejudice and fear.

For some consultants, advocacy groups and propagandists it has all morphed into a booming cottage industry. For those looking to take on, or even disrupt, local school boards or even become candidates, there are consultants and groups poised to help including the Cato Institute, Manhattan Institute and emerging networks such as “Moms for Liberty” or “Parents Defending Education” along with political action committees such as the “1776 Project PAC.”

In North Carolina it provides an all too convenient and simplistic diversion from the most central issue in public education – the state’s failure to adhere to the constitutional right of every child to receive a quality education.

Rather than assure implementation of a consensus court-ordered remedial plan to assure every child in every classroom in North Carolina has access to a quality education, legislative leaders seek to shift attention away from their stubborn refusal to support public schools. They aim to defy a legitimate court order in pursuit of partisan advantage.

Meeting the challenges of educating children even under the best of circumstances – not to mention dealing with a pandemic – requires cooperation.

Pushing partisanship in public education is misguided and diverts much-needed focus and resources away from assuring children get the education they need to build a secure future for themselves and our state.

Our schools, teachers, parents and children deserve better than the bloviations of the General Assembly’s opportunistic self-serving politicians.