

July 2023

# A SHARP TURN RIGHT

**A New Breed of Charter Schools  
Delivers the Conservative Agenda**



**NETWORK for  
PUBLIC EDUCATION**

---

# Table of Contents

Preface	1
Introduction	3
The Landscape in 2023	5
What is a Classical Charter School?	7
Hillsdale Classical Charter Schools	10
Ascent Classical Academies	17
Great Hearts' Grand Aspirations	19
American Leadership Academy's Profitable Way	21
Public Schools or Right- Wing Charter Schools?	23
Conclusion	26
Endnotes	27

## Special Thanks to the Following

Report authors **Karen Francisco** and NPE Executive Director **Carol Burris**.

NPE Director of Communications **Joanna Oszeyczik** designed the report.

NPE's Grassroots Network Coordinator **Marla Kilfoyle** assisted with the research.

We would also like to thank:

**Leigh Dingerson** who provided feedback and edited the report.

This report would not have been possible without the effort and commitment of the Board of Directors of the Network for Public Education (NPE), with special thanks to **Diane Ravitch**, President of NPE. Diane generously gave her support, guidance, editing, and advice throughout the writing of this report.

Finally, thank you to all of our generous donors who make our work supporting public education possible. No outside organization contributed to, reviewed, or influenced our findings.

## About the Authors

**Karen Francisco** was a reporter and editor at Indiana newspapers for 40 years. She now lives in Littleton, Colorado.

**Carol Burris** is the Executive Director of NPE. She is a retired award-winning high school principal and the author of three books on equity initiatives in public schools.

# Preface

In the spring of 1988, I attended a conference at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. My friend, former AFT President Albert Shanker, was also there. At one point, we had a chance for a private conversation, and he told me that he was excited about a new idea called “charter schools.” He envisioned them as “schools within schools,” created by teachers and subject to union and school district rules.

They were to be places of innovation designed to test out new ideas to reach the most challenging to teach students. He said, “These would be schools that would find new ways to motivate the kids who are now sitting in the back of the classroom, with their heads on their desks.”



By 1994, however, Shanker turned against charter schools, publicly expressing his disappointment in *The New York Times*. He said then that charters were no different from vouchers. Shanker recognized that even at the very beginning of the charter movement, profiteers were moving in, and charter schools were propped up to compete, not cooperate, with public schools. He concluded that the real purpose of charter schools was to eliminate teachers’ unions.

For years, the Network for Public Education has continued the legacy of Albert Shanker by calling for reforms that would bring charters back to their original mission. We have exposed the daily scandals, the high-closure rates that leave children stranded, and the widespread profiteering in the charter industry.

Like Shanker, we believe that charters should be controlled by public school districts, enrolling the neediest students and identifying practices that would strengthen public schools. Instead, they have become a sector that demands public resources without public accountability and often employs strategies and disciplinary policies intended to weed out the students who need the most help.

This new report, **A Sharp Turn Right**, exposes yet one more problem — the creation of a new breed of charter schools that are imbued with the ideas of right-wing Christian

nationalism. These charter schools have become weapons of the Right as they seek to destroy democratically governed public schools while turning back the clock of education and social progress by a century.

The report carefully lays out the case that the new breed of charter schools is designed to attract families with Christian nationalist beliefs. They have student bodies that are whiter and wealthier than other charter schools and district public schools. And it exposes how, despite prohibitions on teaching religion in charter schools, such schools have deep connections with the conservative Christian movement and, in some cases, conservative Christian private schools.

Few doubt that the religious right has decided to stake its claim on the next generation of hearts and minds with its unrelenting push for vouchers and book and curricular bans. This report exposes the lesser-known third part of the strategy—the proliferation of right-wing charter schools. It should be a wake-up call to those with progressive ideals who have embraced charter schools. A movement you support is now taking a sharp turn right to destroy the values you cherish.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Diane Ravitch". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

**Diane Ravitch**  
President of the Network for Public Education

# Introduction

On June 5, the state-wide virtual charter school board of Oklahoma approved the nation's first religious charter school. The state's right-wing governor, who appointed members of the approving board, [called the decision](#) **"a win for religious liberty and education freedom."** The decision, which will be challenged in the courts, was unsurprising. It is one step forward in the accelerating movement to establish right-wing and Christian nationalist charter schools.

Baker A. Mitchell Jr. requires girls in his schools to wear skirts or jumpers at the four Roger Bacon Academy charter schools he operates in southeastern North Carolina. The [requirement](#) is intended, according to Mitchell, to ensure girls are "regarded as a fragile vessel that men are supposed to take care of and honor," as described in the New Testament of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

A ruling in a lawsuit challenging the dress code is on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court after a federal judge ruled in favor of Bonnie Peltier, who objected to the unequal treatment of her daughter. The key legal question centers on the status of charter schools as "state actors" subject to the same laws and requirements applied to public schools. The violation of female student rights under the Equal Protection clause and Title IX are clear. But *Peltier v. Charter Day School* also exposes a far more concerning trend — the right-wing ideology powering the fastest-growing segment of charter schools: those following a "classical" or "traditional" curriculum. In most cases, however, these two terms are code for a lot more than back-to-basics instruction. **They are dog whistles to attract conservative families with Christian nationalist identities anxious to place their children in schools that reflect early and mid-20th century values, pedagogy, and curriculum.**

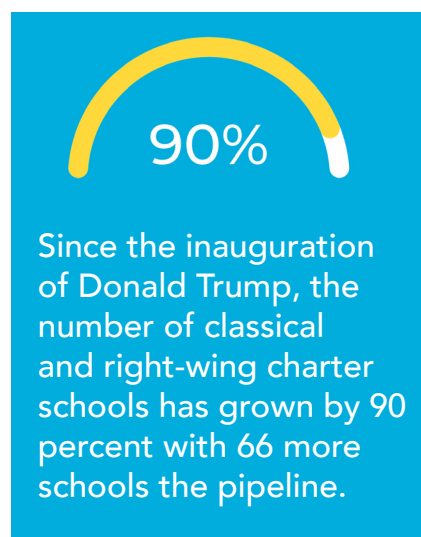


At Bacon Academies, students are required to recite an [oath](#) daily: "... I pledge to keep myself healthy in body, mind, and spirit; staying physically fit, mentally awake, and morally straight; I pledge to be truthful in all my works; guarding against the stains of falsehood from the fascination with experts, the temptation of vanity, the comfort of popular opinion and custom, the ease of equivocation and compromise, and from over-reliance on rational argument ..."<sup>2</sup>

The pledge doesn't include any promise to refrain from fleecing taxpayers, of course. Nearly a decade ago, [ProPublica exposed the lucrative scheme](#) that Mitchell, a politically connected businessman ([and many other charter operators](#)) set up.<sup>3</sup> Mitchell's classical charter schools bought or leased land, buildings, and more from companies he owned. His appointed boards of trustees hired Mitchell's education management organization to operate the schools. The chief financial officer of the for-profit management company was also the treasurer of the nonprofit entity controlling the schools, with the two organizations sharing a bank account. A Mitchell-owned company even sold families their school uniforms. Financial statements showed that the retired entrepreneur collected nearly \$20 million in revenue over six years from just two schools.

"People here think it's unholy if you make a profit" from schools, Mitchell [said](#) in 2014, in remarks made at a luncheon celebrating Libertarian free-market champion Milton Friedman.<sup>4</sup> Profits at taxpayer expense are apparently a "traditional value" supported at Mitchell's charter schools, which emphasize a "traditional curriculum, traditional manners, and traditional respect" – "more like schools were 50 years ago compared to now," [according to one of its board members.](#)<sup>5</sup>

Baker A. Mitchell Jr. is far from alone in promoting a classical or traditional curriculum. Michigan-based Hillsdale College, a political powerhouse, is spreading its [Barney Charter School Initiative](#) nationwide. [Great Hearts Academy](#), an Arizona-based chain of classical charter schools, has deep ties to right-wing politicians and designs to tap into more public funds funneled through its new private school initiative that will capitalize on so-called Education Savings Account vouchers. [American Leadership Academy](#), another Arizona-based operator, has delivered great profits to its founder, former Utah lawmaker Glenn Way, via its [multi-state chain of charters](#) that are often located and designed to attract conservative Mormon families.<sup>6</sup>



The Network for Public Education exposed the lucrative landscape of charter schools in its exhaustive report "[Chartered for Profit: The Hidden World of Charter Schools Operated for Financial Gain.](#)"<sup>7</sup> Classical charter schools and "back to basics" charters designed to appeal to conservative white families deliver an additional fortune: training grounds for the next generation of conservative warriors and a handy platform for spreading far-right ideology. Their websites, often citing moral values and describing strict dress codes, clearly signal what kind of student would "fit in."

Ironically, these new laboratories of right-wing thought are flourishing with the silent accord of charter school supporters on both the left and right ends of the political spectrum.

# The Landscape in 2023

Our investigation focused on two types of charter schools. The first is classical charter schools. These schools identify and market themselves as such, often including the word “classical” in the school’s name. Later in the report, we will describe these schools in greater detail.

The second type of school we examined offers a “back to basics” curriculum without necessarily identifying the curriculum as classical. These schools include right-wing clues on their website to attract families with Christian nationalist beliefs.

Such clues include red, white, and blue school colors, patriotic logos, pictures of the founding fathers, using terms such as virtue, patriotism, and even outright references to religion. For example, the website of the four-campus Advantage Academy boasts of educating students in a “[faith-friendly environment](#).”<sup>9</sup>

The fastest-growing sector of right-wing charters combines both features. These schools are distinguished by a classical “virtuous” curriculum combined with hyper-patriotism for Christian nationalist appeal. They are exemplified by charters that adopt The Hillsdale College 1776 Curriculum, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this report.

We identified 273 currently open charter schools<sup>10</sup> that offer a classical curriculum and/or have websites designed to attract white conservative families. Many are part of chains that we feature in the report. For-profit management corporations run twenty-nine percent of these charters, **a percentage nearly twice as high as the charter sector as a whole.**

Because we relied on keyword name searches and news stories to identify the schools to include, we are confident there are schools and even chains we missed.

However, we identified a representative sample from which we can conclude who attends these charter schools. The patterns are evident.

Whatever the total number may be, the classical/right-wing sector is rapidly growing. **Forty-seven percent of the schools we identified opened since the inauguration of Donald Trump in 2017.**

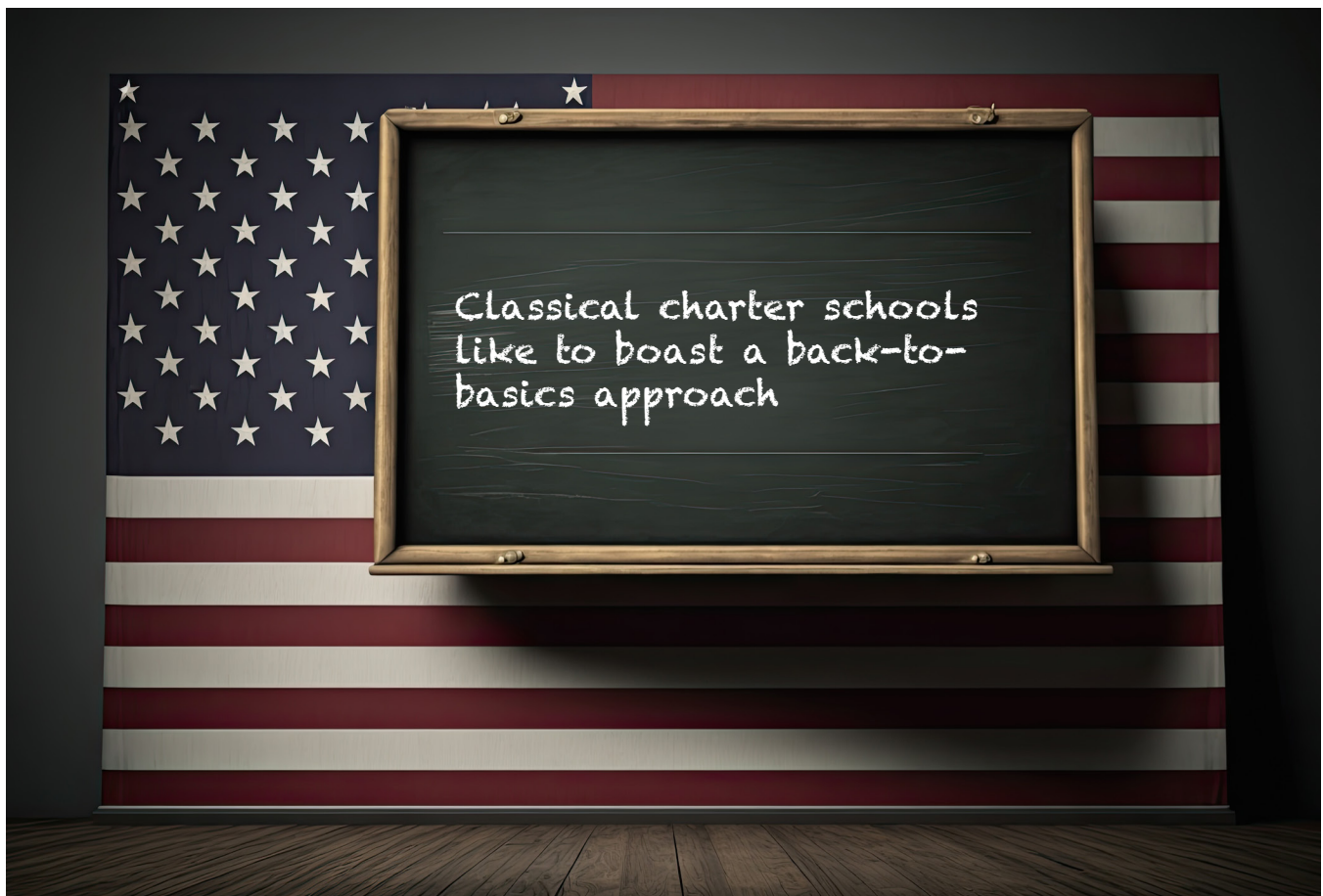
Throughout this report, we frequently refer to the term Christian nationalism. We use the term as described by [Kelefa Sanneh](#) in his piece in the New Yorker entitled *How Christian is Christian Nationalism?*

The author states that Christian nationalists are those who are “[resentful of a world that won’t stop changing](#)” and view Christianity as a cultural and tribal identity that began with the founding of the nation.<sup>8</sup>

We found an additional 66 schools in the pipeline with plans to open in 2023 or 2024.

Unlike the entire charter school sector, the overall student body of these charter schools is disproportionately white. For example, during the 2021-2022 school year, the year for which we have the latest data, more than 52 percent of the students who attended these charter schools were white, compared with 29 percent of all charter school students. Nationally, nearly one in four charter students is Black. In right-wing charters, Black students comprise only seven percent of enrollment.

The most startling difference, however, is the relative proportions of students who were eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch – only 17 percent of students in these charters are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch as compared with 48 percent of all charter school students and 43 percent of the students in democratically-governed public schools.





# What is a Classical Charter School?

The classical education model is not new. Private classical grammar and high schools have long existed, emphasizing Eurocentric texts and the study of Latin and Greek. What is recent is the use of taxpayer dollars to fund them when they become or are established as charter schools. Founders of classical charters view the rejection of modern instructional practices as a selling point. Proponents of classical education vilify the [progressive movement](#), accusing John Dewey and his followers of removing Christian ideals and redesigning schools to achieve social goals.<sup>11</sup>

“While Christians championed other causes, progressives tirelessly and quietly worked to re-form children,” [laments the Association of Classical Christian Schools](#), “And they have controlled the American education system ever since.”<sup>12</sup>

In classical Christian schools, the curriculum focuses not only on the Western canon — Homer to C.S. Lewis — but also on scripture. Classical charter schools emphasize “values” or “virtues,” which stand as shorthand for quoted scripture. This is especially true of the latest crop of classical charters, which have opened since 2017, the first school year during the Trump Administration. From red, white, and blue decor, patriotic insignia, white students and teachers featured almost exclusively on websites, and the generous use of the word “virtue,” more than 80 percent of the new classical charter schools have websites designed to attract Christian nationalist families.

Liberty Common High School in Fort Collins, Colorado, [celebrates](#) “capstones” representing the “highest order of virtue and character,” including “prudence, temperance, and patriotism.”

American Classic Charter Academy in Saint Cloud, Florida, [promotes](#) eight “pillars of character” and four “classical virtues.”

From videos posted on websites to crosses shown on the

## Who funds the opening of classical and/or right-wing charter schools?

While many of these schools receive private startup funding from right-wing donors, all American taxpayers fund these charter schools with startup funds or expansion grants through the Federal Charter School Programs.

Since 2006, over half of the charter schools we identified received CSP funding totaling over \$75 million. This does not include the nearly \$56 million that Responsive Ed, notorious for its prior use of a creationist curriculum, received in two grants in 2019 and 2020.

top of the school, we found example after example of charter schools presenting themselves as free private Christian schools.

“We’re a school that’s about justice, not ‘social justice.’ Virtue, not ‘virtue-signaling.’ Objective truth, not ‘your truth’ and ‘my truth,’ [said the founder](#) of the Hillsdale-affiliated Tulsa Classical Academy. “And finally, we’re about great books, not necessarily Chromebooks.”<sup>13</sup>

The classical charter school community likes to boast of its back-to-basics approach, deemphasizing technology and touting the instruction of cursive writing and sentence diagramming, for example. Phonics-based instruction, along with Singapore or Saxon math and the Core Knowledge curriculum, are frequently heralded.

“... The burgeoning crop of classical charter schools is often fueled by efforts to shape students to the school founders’ Christian nationalist worldview.”

Reading lists show a notable absence of diversity. At True North Classical Academy in Miami, the sixth-grade [reading list](#)

includes Dickens and J.R.R. Tolkien, but not a single person of color among the authors or their protagonists.

While long-established classical schools appear devoted to building character, the burgeoning crop of classical charter schools is often fueled by efforts to shape students to the school founders’ Christian nationalist worldview.

Russ Donley, a former Republican state house speaker, and chair of a newly approved charter school in Casper, Wyoming, [cited](#) Black Lives Matter protests in explaining his support for the classical model: “I was watching the beautiful young people marching to change America into a socialist country, and that type of thing, back in 2020,” he said. “And I thought, that’s what’s wrong. It’s just education: people don’t understand what a great country this is, and how it should be, and what was intended by our founders.”<sup>14</sup>

In Texas, Stuart Saunders is the board chair of Houston’s proposed Heritage Classical Academy. He’s also a prominent donor to the Texans for Educational Freedom political action committee.

From the group’s [website](#): “Liberal politics has taken root in our classrooms, and our children are being subjected to radical indoctrination, anti-American curriculum, and sexually explicit materials. Critical race theory and other Marxist teachings pose an immediate risk to our schools, our kids, and our future.”

Right-wing politicians often support and promote Christian nationalist charter schools. A former Wisconsin Republican state chairman and lawmaker, Paul Farrow, [stepped up to authorize](#) the Hillsdale-affiliated Lake Country Classical Academy after its original authorizer, Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe College, cut ties in the wake of controversial comments made by Hillsdale College President Larry Arnn.<sup>15</sup> Farrow can authorize charter schools in his role as Waukesha County executive — power afforded by state law to the county executive only in Waukesha County, a Republican stronghold.

Donley, Saunders, and Farrow are political players, but some classical charter founders are driven solely by ideology. In Arkansas, [the proposed Omni Classical Prep](#), housed in a portion of a Baptist Church, “will take back language and math and teach a very deep language and math program,” according to Melissa Bosch. She told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette that parents were unhappy with the curriculum at the local public school, a common complaint among parents and community members angered by COVID protocols and whatever they perceive as “woke” ideas.<sup>16</sup>

Bosch, who filed the petition to open the charter, is an anti-masking administrator of a local Moms for Liberty group. Recently caught on tape making a statement expressing a desire to [“plow down” a school librarian](#), she has been banned from local public school campuses for her disruptive behavior.<sup>17</sup>



# Hillsdale Classical Charter Schools

## The Growing Influence of Hillsdale College

Jonah Apel is not a teacher nor a mathematician. He is not a Florida resident and does not attend school there. But Apel, a Hillsdale College student, believes he knows critical race theory when he sees it. The college sophomore found it in a high school algebra and trigonometry book he reviewed for the Florida Department of Education last year.

“I found several instances where CRT could be said to be present, albeit usually indirectly,” he wrote.<sup>18</sup> Apel’s [conclusion](#), along with similar claims by a Hillsdale administrator and a member of a right-wing Moms for Liberty group,<sup>19</sup> validated the need to “keep all of the crazy liberal stuff out” of textbooks, according to then-Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran. He lamented the textbook dilemma in an [address](#) a year earlier at Hillsdale College.<sup>20</sup>

Hillsdale College, a small nondenominational conservative Christian college in Michigan, has had a growing and oversized influence on education policy in the Republican Party. The [tiny college](#) has an enrollment of only about 1,400 students, making its \$700 million endowment remarkable for a college its size.<sup>21</sup>

Tug any thread of Florida’s present education policy, and you will find this small Michigan college at the other end. Hillsdale’s political and ideological influence swamps the Sunshine State and now spreads quietly across the country, making inroads even in the “woke” states Hillsdale supporters decry. Its influence grows under the machinations of Hillsdale President Larry Arnn, who knows education policy is a mighty political tool.

“The political successes of Governor Ron DeSantis in Florida, Governor Glenn Youngkin in Virginia, and many other politicians in other states have largely been won on this battleground of education,” Arnn [said](#) last November, less than a week before DeSantis cruised to reelection and a top spot among 2024 Republican presidential hopefuls.<sup>22</sup>

The Florida governor and now presidential hopeful is “one of the most important people living,” Arnn proclaimed in introducing DeSantis’ 2022 [address](#) at a Hillsdale event. “This person’s most important work is before him — and we need him.”<sup>23</sup>

But Arnn also boasted of his college’s clout as he praised DeSantis: “There are several states where Hillsdale College turns out to be the prime influence in the teaching of civics and other things in the state. And Florida is the one where it was easy. It was easy because they are competent, these people.” DeSantis and his administration lean

heavily on Hillsdale College, which holds remarkable sway on Florida's K-12 school and education policy. Just after his inauguration for a second term, the governor appointed six new trustees at the New College of Florida, with a goal of making the progressive college into the "[Hillsdale of the South](#)."<sup>24</sup>

The new trustees include Matthew Spalding, a professor and dean at Hillsdale, and Christopher Rufo, the Manhattan Institute senior fellow who ginned up hostility over critical race theory after George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police officers. Last year, Rufo was a visiting fellow in the journalism department at Hillsdale. Not surprisingly, Corcoran was tapped to lead New College as interim president.

In addition to finding college "experts" to review its math textbooks, Hillsdale was chosen as an adviser on civics education when Florida lawmakers mandated a statewide curriculum review. At the time, Richard Corcoran's wife [was listed as a director](#) of the Hillsdale-affiliated Tallahassee Classical School, a charter school that enrolls about 500 students.<sup>25</sup>

The Michigan College's influence in Florida and other states is not new and not limited to state government. In 2018, Democrats and four moderate Republicans in the U.S. Senate [blocked a provision](#) in a GOP tax bill that would have given a tax break to a single entity: Hillsdale College.<sup>26</sup>

Then-Senator Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania had inserted the provision, defending Hillsdale as "a wonderful institution." U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas's wife, Ginni, was associate director of Hillsdale's Washington, D.C. operations in 2008-09.

But perhaps the most significant way the college is spreading its gospel of extreme conservative thought is by attempting to influence young minds through its Barney Charter School Initiative. Kyle Shideler is a senior analyst for homeland security at the Center for Security Policy, an anti-Muslim organization classified as [a hate group](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center.<sup>27</sup>

In a recent [unnerving article in \*The Federalist\*](#), Shideler argues that donors should fund boot camps to train right-wingers in "the political dark arts" of organizing. In that same article, he praises Hillsdale College for "the growing Christian classical school movement...for the purpose of forming young minds."<sup>28</sup> The K-12 movement to which he refers is Hillsdale's Barney Charter School Initiative.

“Tug any thread of Florida’s present education policy, and you will find this small Michigan college at the other end.”

Hillsdale’s political and ideological influence swamps the Sunshine State ...”

## The Barney Charter School Initiative

The Barney Family Foundation was established by Stephen Barney and his wife Lynne in 1998. Barney, a highly successful portfolio manager for American Century Funds, cashed out in the late 1990s to become a philanthropist. Although the foundation focuses on the welfare of children as its giving theme, an examination of the foundation's 990s reveals that in addition to its health and child-centered charities, it also generously funds right-wing think tanks, foundations, and even organizations that exist to create right-wing model legislation. Beneficiaries include Americans for Prosperity, The Cato Institute, Hoover Institution, The Heartland Institute, State Policy Network, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, and the Heritage Foundation.

Over the years, the foundation has also generously funded Hillsdale College. Stephen Barney, a trustee emeritus on the Hillsdale College Board, has been one of its most generous donors. Between 2010 and 2019, [we identified over \\$4 million](#) earmarked for the college from his foundation. That does not include donations in 2011, which were unlisted, or donations before or after those years.<sup>29</sup>

In 2010, the foundation's gifts to Hillsdale sharply increased. It was the year that the Barney Charter School Initiative began with a half-million-dollar contribution from the foundation. Contributions in that range are recorded every year for which records are available.

In a three-part 2022 investigative series on Hillsdale College, journalist Kathryn Joyce



### CHARTER OR PRIVATE SCHOOL? Hillsdale's Cincinnati Classical Academy

The school's website features a motto and a coat of arms. Its headmaster's message speaks of morals, virtue, and "old-fashioned" methods. All of the school building photographs feature a cross on its top. In a photograph of a school hallway lined with posters depicting the school's virtues, Mary and the infant Jesus from Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat* illustrates the virtue of humility. To illustrate gratitude, it shows a family praying before a meal.

See how long it takes you to find any mention of the school being a public charter school on its website. Cincinnati Classical Academy received a start-up grant of \$100,000 from the Federal Charter School Programs.

[exposed the religious and political ties](#) associated with the Barney Charter School Initiative. Since that time, the movement has grown. We identified 59 charter schools that are open or will soon open that claim affiliation with Hillsdale College. Hillsdale categorizes them as “member schools,” “member candidates,” and “curriculum schools,” based on the level of support they receive from Hillsdale College. What they all have in common is teaching Hillsdale’s prescriptive 1776 curriculum, which disparages the New Deal and affirmative action while downplaying the effects of slavery. Climate change is not mentioned in the science curriculum; sixth-grade studies include a single reference to global warming.

Another feature of Hillsdale schools is the relative homogeneity of their student body: whiter and wealthier than public schools and other charter schools. During the 2021 school year, 66 percent of all Hillsdale-affiliated charter school students were white, and only 12 percent were eligible to receive a subsidized lunch, making Hillsdale charter families not only less diverse and more affluent than the public and charter sectors but even whiter and wealthier than the right-wing charter sector as a whole.

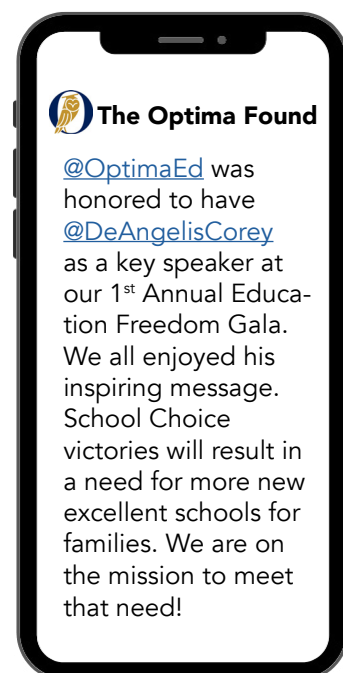
These demographics should come as no surprise. A scan of Hillsdale-affiliated charter school websites shows few (if any) students or faculty of color featured in school pictures. In many instances, the school appears to be private, with its charter status never mentioned on the homepage.

## Cashing in on Hillsdale Charter Schools

Hillsdale [boasts](#) of providing its classical curriculum and services to its member charters at no cost to the schools. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t money to be made.

The nonprofit Optima Foundation’s president and CEO is Erika Donalds, wife of Florida Congressman Byron Donalds, who garnered 20 votes for U.S. House speaker in one of the many rounds of balloting it took to elect Speaker Kevin McCarthy. As described on its [“about” page](#), the foundation’s purpose is to connect philanthropic donors to charter schools to open them, expand them and pay “academic experts to procure an excellent, classical curriculum.”

This year’s Optima Ed Education Freedom Gala’s sponsors included Americans for Prosperity, Betsy DeVos’s American Federation for Children, the James Madison Institute, and charter school real estate broker Building Hope, along with other school vendors.



The Optima Foundation’s website mentions a “sister organization,” OptimaEd. It does not say, however, that the “sister” is a for-profit charter management firm also owned by Erika Donalds. She is [its CEO](#). OptimaEd lists four operational classical charter schools, one planned school, and a [virtual reality classical charter school](#) that puts [Optima-branded VR headsets](#) on young student heads. OptimaEd, the for-profit, sells everything from management services to its classical virtual reality curriculum to charter and private schools.

It is a lucrative business model. Big donors give tax-deductible donations to Erika Donalds’ nonprofit to open charter schools and develop curriculum. Those schools, and others, then become the clients for the for-profits that she owns. The relationship between the nonprofit developing curriculum and the for-profit selling curriculum is unclear.

Such related party transactions between a nonprofit and a for-profit owned by the same person should be examined. However, that is unlikely to happen in the Sunshine State, where, according to a Florida lawsuit, the Donalds and Hillsdale receive considerable support for their ventures from local and state politicians. One example of that support was revealed in legal filings over the control of a Naples, Florida, classical charter school that exposed the connections between the Donalds, other Republican power-brokers, and Hillsdale’s Larry Arnn.

“Through dozens of emails and text messages, the complaint alleges Hillsdale’s leaders received assistance from powerful state Republicans in its takeover attempt.”

In August of 2022, Mason Classical Academy’s board filed an “abuse of power” [lawsuit alleging](#) that Optima, Byron Donalds, Hillsdale President Arnn, and others conspired to take control of the Naples, Florida, charter school.<sup>30</sup> When the school first opened, Congressman Donalds was a school board member, and Erika was

an advisory board member. According to the plaintiffs, when the takeover plot failed, they cut ties with the school and set up entities to begin their own chain of classical schools.

“[This cast of conspirators and their accomplices and enablers](#) includes current and former elected officials, attorneys, their spouses, and affiliated companies, and others with political aspirations or grudges against Plaintiffs, who covertly planned and carried out a continuing series of criminal and tortious acts ...,” reads the complaint, filed in Florida’s U.S. District Middle Court.<sup>31</sup>

“Regardless of whether they were motivated by the money, power, and political benefits associated with controlling Mason Classical Academy or driven by greed, political alliances, ill-will, hatred, or spite, each Defendant shared a common goal of harming



Plaintiffs so they could advance their own social, political, or economic interests.”

Through dozens of emails and text messages, the complaint alleges Hillsdale’s leaders received assistance from powerful state Republicans in its takeover attempt. According to the complaint, then-state Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran was in close contact with Arnn as Hillsdale attempted to take control of Mason Classical Academy. The lawsuit presents a rare glimpse into the backroom dealings of the Barney Charter School Institute and highlights an unusual rift between right-wing players jockeying to control the classical school brand in Naples.

## Hillsdale’s Charter Schools Expansion

Florida is not the only state in which Hillsdale has courted a Republican governor. And Mason Classical Academy is not the only time its charter initiative has received negative publicity. In Tennessee, Republican Gov. Bill Lee invited the college to open 50 charter schools, highlighting the close ties between the Hillsdale initiative and GOP politics.

“I’ve been following charter schools over the last 25 years, and I’ve never seen a governor attempting to use charters in such an overtly political way,” Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, told [The New York Times](#).<sup>32</sup> “You’ve had governors who’ve encouraged the growth of charters to provide more high-quality options for parents, but it’s highly unusual to see a governor deploy the charter mechanism for admittedly political purposes.”

But the ambitious Tennessee plan came to a grinding halt. Appearing at a private event with the governor, Hillsdale President Larry Arnn was [caught on camera](#) slamming public school teachers as “trained in the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country.”<sup>33</sup>

Arnn’s remarks drew a bipartisan backlash in Tennessee — enough to force American Classical Education, a Memphis-based organization seeking to open Hillsdale charter schools in three smaller cities, to temporarily withdraw its application before the state’s Public Charter School Commission.

A Texas classical chain, Responsive Ed, which gained notoriety for its creationist curriculum, quickly dis-

Hillsdale’s national profile was bolstered by the late **Rush Limbaugh**. When the bombastic radio host died in 2021, Larry Arnn issued a statement:

“My friend Rush Limbaugh, who died today, was a force of nature. More than any other individual, he was responsible for breaking the Left’s media monopoly,” [Arnn wrote](#). “His voice on the radio, where he has promoted **Hillsdale College** for more than 10 years, will never be equaled.”<sup>35</sup>

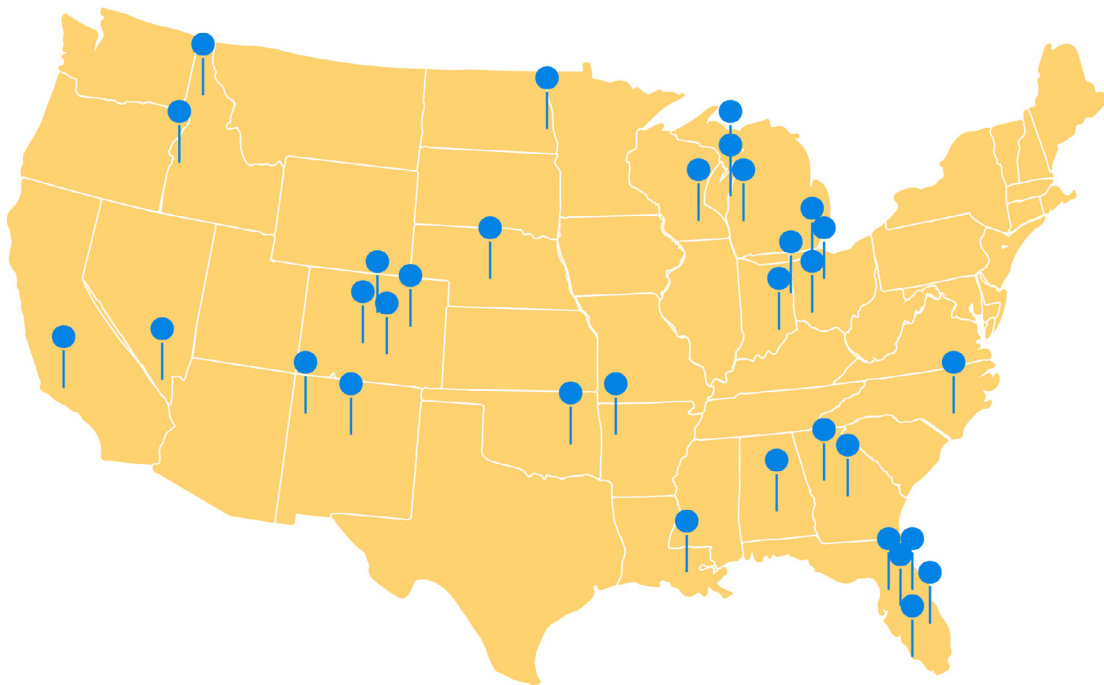
tanced itself from Hillsdale as it tried to move its Founders Classical Academy brand into the state. Board member Mitch Emoff quickly stated that Responsive Ed severed ties with Hillsdale in 2021 and lamented that they too often “get put in the boat” with Hillsdale.<sup>34</sup>

The Barney Charter School Initiative returned to Tennessee when the outrage subsided. By early 2023, Hillsdale-affiliated schools were proposed in [five Tennessee counties](#).<sup>36</sup>

The controversy barely registered outside the Volunteer State. In the weeks and months that followed Arnn’s comments, charter school founders in Colorado, South Carolina, [Wyoming](#)<sup>37</sup>, [Ohio](#)<sup>38</sup>, and [Indiana](#)<sup>39</sup> advanced plans to open schools using the Hillsdale curriculum. In South Dakota, the Republican-controlled state department of education [paid a former Hillsdale professor of politics](#) \$200,000 to develop social studies standards aligning with the Hillsdale 1776 Curriculum, the 2,400-page curriculum Hillsdale created in response to The New York Times “1619 Project” and to spurious charges of critical race theory infiltrating school lesson plans.<sup>40</sup>

Despite Hillsdale’s [frequent boasts](#)<sup>41</sup> of rejecting federal money (and the federal regulations that come with it, including Title IV provisions), the college’s affiliated charter schools eagerly dip into the Federal Charter School Programs funding to the tune of \$14.75 million for school start-ups or expansions.

## Hillsdale Classical Schools in the US



\* Pins represent Hillsdale member schools and candidate member schools and reflect approximate locations.

# Ascent Classical Academies

Colorado's far-right flank lost big in the 2022 midterm elections, losing every statewide race and narrowly retaining a GOP-leaning congressional seat held by U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert. But Christian nationalism grows quietly and quickly in Colorado's classical school environment, thanks partly to its strong ties to the [Leadership Program of the Rockies](#).

The Leadership Program is purportedly nonpartisan but has a distinct conservative flavor. It seeks to "train emerging leaders in America's founding principles — why they were important in the beginning and how they apply to the challenges of today." The program is part of the right-wing State Policy Network, which is [funded by a who's who of conservative, libertarian, and free-market figures](#).<sup>42</sup>

Former U.S. Rep. Bob Schaffer, chairman of the Leadership Program of the Rockies, is headmaster of Liberty Common High School, a classical charter school in Fort Collins. Republican Heidi Ganahl, who lost to Gov. Jared Polis by almost 20 points in the 2022 gubernatorial election, is also an LPR graduate and a Golden View Classical Academy founder.

Ganahl advocates for one of the fastest-growing Hillsdale-affiliated charter chains, [Ascent Classical Academies](#) (ACA), which presently operates two schools in Colorado. However, its near plans include opening four schools in South Carolina, three more in Colorado, and at least one in North Carolina. Ascent's CEO is Derec Shuler, a graduate and advisory board member of the Leadership Program of the Rockies. Shuler, a former special agent in military intelligence, describes himself as a "visionary" on his [LinkedIn page](#). He is also a founder of Colorado's Golden Classical Academy and has ties to the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

Ascent has vocal supporters. In western Colorado, parents criticized the Ignacio School District while pushing its school board to approve Ascent Classical Academy. "Ascent is focused on education, not identity," [said Durango resident Whitney Hargraves](#). "Did you get into this thankless job for the kids or for the teachers union?"<sup>43</sup>

Along with its criticism of unions and critical race theory, Shuler's network of schools has garnered criticism for engaging in religious

“If you are not Christian/Catholic, as I am not, do not even try,” [cautions a former student](#) at Ascent Classical in Lone Tree, Colorado.

“Between group prayers (including teachers) and bible readings, I was made to feel like an outsider for not partaking in their religion.”

indoctrination. “If you are not Christian/Catholic, as I am not, do not even try,” [cautions a former student](#) at Ascent Classical in Lone Tree, Colorado. “Between group prayers (including teachers) and bible readings, I was made to feel like an outsider for not partaking in their religion.”

The same classical school ran afoul of its then-authorizer, the Douglas County School District, when it [refused to abide](#) by the district’s prohibition on teachers carrying guns three months after one student was killed and eight others injured at the district’s STEM School in Highlands Ranch, Colorado.<sup>44</sup>

Ascent Lone Tree’s sister school is located in northern Colorado. In a 2020 [news story](#) announcing the appointment of a Hillsdale College graduate as headmaster of the Ascent Classical Academy of Northern Colorado, the North Forty News reported the new charter school was “now hiring talented teachers and staff,” noting “a teaching license is neither required nor preferred.”<sup>45</sup>

But only some Colorado communities embrace the classical charter chain. Despite the enthusiastic support from Heidi Ganahl, Ascent Classical Academies failed in its bid to open a school in the Boulder Valley School District in 2019. Parents expressed concerns that the charter school would not support or protect students in the LGBTQ community because of its affiliation with Hillsdale College, which is widely known to be [opposed to same-sex marriage](#).<sup>46</sup>



Ganahl said that wasn’t the case. “We love all of you,” she said at the time. “We want all of you to be welcome at our school.”

Three years later, a not-so-welcoming Ganahl told [Colorado Public Radio](#) she was inspired to run for governor, partly because of a school musical with a transgender theme in the Boulder Valley School District: “I am a pissed-off mom. I’ve had enough. I’m ready to take back our state for all of our kids,”<sup>47</sup> Ganahl told a campaign audience before the November election.

The pissed-off mom’s campaign floundered, but the classical charter schools she supports are quietly spreading in Colorado and beyond. And federal tax dollars are helping the spread.

# Great Hearts' Grand Aspirations

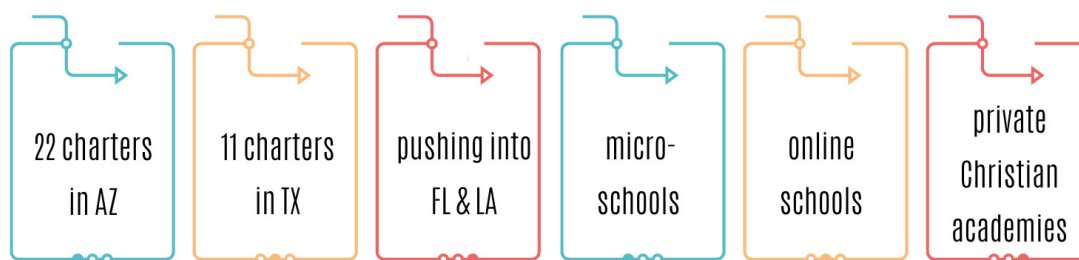
Jay Heiler was one of the founders of Great Hearts Academies in 2003 and is now chief executive officer. He is also a former member of the Arizona Board of Regents, where his 2012 appointment spurred controversy [based on statements](#) he made in 1980 when he referred to homosexuality as an “aberration” and in 1994, when he referred to gays as “queers” when speaking with the press.<sup>48</sup>

Heiler, whose name was floated as a replacement for former Arizona Senator Jeff Flake, was a fervent supporter of then-President Donald Trump. “The president’s agenda is one which I wholeheartedly endorse,” [Heiler said](#). “I have not seen the president advance anything which I don’t think is in the best interest of the country.”<sup>49</sup>

Great Hearts Academies claims to be the “leading provider of classical education in the country,” operating at 22 sites in Arizona and 12 in Texas, with designs in Florida and Louisiana. It also has an online option and is moving into the “micro-schools” field of tiny multi-grade schools that generally operate out of homes or storefronts with little supervision and at low overhead. Its mission is to cultivate “the hearts and minds of students in the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty.”

Those virtues take an interesting form at the Arizona-based charter management organization, which regularly comes under fire for civil rights violations and hostility toward transgender students. In 2018, the school issued a [biological and gender nonconforming policy](#), requiring students to use facilities corresponding to the gender listed on their birth certificates.<sup>50</sup> The ACLU of Arizona filed suit against the schools, alleging the charter school network broke the state’s public records and open-meetings law in private deliberations over policies related to transgender students. Former [Great Heart parent](#) Robert Chevaleau whose youngest daughter is transgender, addressed his concern to the president of his school’s board, who told him Great Hearts Academies wouldn’t alter the policy “until forced to do so by the Supreme Court of the United States.”<sup>51</sup>

## Great Hearts Academy's Reach



While the policy did change thanks to parents like Chevaleau, in 2021, the Arizona charter chain announced they [would no longer allow student-led groups](#), a year after students started a Gender Sexuality Alliance at a Great Hearts school.<sup>52</sup>

Controversy has extended beyond issues of gender. The superintendent of Great Hearts' Texas schools apologized after students in an eighth-grade history class were [asked to list positive aspects of slavery](#). The *Arizona Republic* reported in 2020 on allegations of racial intolerance at Great Hearts Academies, including reports of Black students disciplined for their natural hairstyles and braiding.<sup>53</sup>



**Former Great Heart Parent  
Robert Chevaleau**

Tucker Quayle, son of former Vice President Dan Quayle, is a board member for Great Hearts Arizona. The Quayle family [has donated at least \\$1.5 million](#) to the schools.<sup>54</sup> Arizona Supreme Court Justice Clint Bolick, a co-founder of the Koch-funded Institute for Justice, served on the Great Hearts board for over a decade, as did conservative talk-radio host Hugh Hewitt.

Great Hearts' [expansion plans](#) appear turbo-charged as the push for Education Savings Accounts — Arizona's tax-payer-funded voucher program — grows. It began launching micro-schools, which it refers to as "extensions," pitching its curriculum to online and homeschool families looking for an in-person option.<sup>55</sup> Some are located in churches. Wherever a funding stream flows, you'll find Great Hearts, which now plans to open Christian private schools.

"Arizona's most successful charter school operator, Great Hearts Academies, which operates forty-two charter schools in Arizona and Texas, has quietly been courting churches and pastors to partner in a network of private Christian academies aimed at low- and middle-income families, with tuition paid almost entirely with ESA funds," gushed Robert Pondiscio of the pro-charter and voucher Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

"Great Hearts officials confirm they will shortly begin recruiting families to schools in the network, dubbed Great Hearts Christos. Plans call for three church-based schools to be opened in the Phoenix area this August."<sup>56</sup>

And federal tax dollars have fueled the chain's expansion. Great Hearts has received almost \$13 million in federal Charter School Program Grants.

# American Leadership Academy's Profitable Way

Another Arizona-based charter company, American Leadership Academy, stands at the intersection of right-wing ideology and a sheer grab for profits. Founder Glenn Way, a former Utah state lawmaker, saw easy money in Arizona's lax charter school regulations and an easy mark in communities seeking "the best educational experience ... in a moral and wholesome environment."

What's the curriculum? It's tough to tell from the schools' cookie-cutter websites. An application to the North Carolina State Department of Education stated that a proposed ALA school would follow a "classical education model."

Charter One is the for-profit company founded by Way to manage ALA charter schools. "By utilizing Charter One's proprietary and innovative leadership curriculum (called RAISE), students will learn leadership skills such as self-discipline, goal attainment, and how to inspire others," according to the application.

"Regarding our RAISE curriculum, students from grades K-8 will be exposed to wholesome principles each day, which will teach them how to properly treat others and themselves while instilling an internal sense of their importance [sic] of a strong work ethic."

While ALA schools tout a "values-based" approach to instruction, there's no value for taxpayers. In [extensive reporting](#) for the Arizona Republic, Craig Harris has detailed how Glenn Way's finance and development companies bought land and built schools that were then sold to his charter management company ALA at a profit of \$37 million.<sup>57</sup>

Charter One is paid millions each year to operate the schools.

[According to Transparency USA](#), Way and his wife have made more than \$50,000 in political contributions to Republican candidates, including the maximum \$10,600 contribution to unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate Kari Lake, \$5,000 to former President Donald Trump and a \$1,000 contribution to U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, R-Colorado.<sup>58</sup>



**According to the Arizona Republic, ALA targeted Phoenix families in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints**

Ironically, ALA blamed politics when the state board of education [rejected the charter company's bid to open a school in Monroe, North Carolina last fall.](#)<sup>59</sup>

"Sadly, the decision appeared to be strictly based on politics," complained Michael Way, Glenn Way's son and a regional president for the for-profit Charter One. [Writing in the Carolina Journal](#), a publication of the right-wing John Locke Foundation, Michael Way whined "there is a war on school choice and charter schools across the United States."<sup>60</sup>

Politics, indeed. Michael Way neglected to note that Republican Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson, a member of the state board, recused himself from the ALA-Monroe vote because his wife serves on the school's board of directors.

In South Carolina, GOP state Treasurer Curtis Loftis was among the officials at a site visit for the new ALA school in Lexington, [promoted by the local newspaper](#) as a "charter school emphasizing patriotism."<sup>61</sup>

"I believe we have to stress ... the wonderful things about America and meritocracy," Loftis said. "We've got to make sure that our students learn to love education. You got to learn to love it."

Once again, federal tax dollars are giving the profiteering chain a boost — nearly one million federal tax dollars through the Charter School Programs have been promised to expand schools run by the chain. A half million dollars has already been spent.

Glenn Way isn't the only classical charter school operator to strike it rich in Arizona. The Benjamin Franklin charter school chain, founded by [Eddie Farnsworth](#), sold in 2018 for \$56.9 million. According to the Arizona Republic, Farnsworth, an Arizona state senator at the time, netted \$13.9 million from the sale.

But the Republican lawmaker didn't sever ties with the four classical charter schools; he off-loaded them to a newly formed nonprofit entity and continued as a consultant, landlord, and lender. The deal set him up to collect a fortune in rent and interest on loans he made to the nonprofit, overseen by a three-member board that included two former lobbyists. The Arizona Republic noted that Farnsworth supported policies favorable to those lobbyists' clients.

The charter school operator also voted twelve times for state budgets that increased funding for Arizona charter schools — a glaring conflict of interest by any definition.



# Public Schools or Right-Wing Christian Schools?

Our investigation found that American Leadership Academy, Great Hearts, and other Christian nationalist charter schools masquerade as public schools but operate like right-wing faith groups. They blur and even erase the line between church and state. YouTube music videos posted by choirs at **American Leadership Academy** in Spanish Fork, Utah, sound a [clear religious theme](#).<sup>62</sup>

A comment attached to one video, filmed primarily in a church sanctuary, reads: "We want to help kids and adults turn to Jesus or become Jesus people ... So this charter school choir of American Leadership Academy chose to sing 'Stand in Faith' from Danny's Gokey's new album. If you stand in faith, as the lyrics state, 'Nothing's Impossible' with God."



The Arizona Republic in 2018 reported that the charter network was targeting Phoenix-area families in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

"ALA has sought to appeal to the East Valley's Mormon community by playing up its ties to church-owned Brigham Young University," the [newspaper reported](#).<sup>63</sup> "It uses BYU's [Brigham Young University] independent-study curriculum for online classes, and touts that several of its administration members have graduated from the Utah school."

Even as **Great Hearts** chases education savings account dollars with faith-based Christian schools, the network insists its public charter schools are non-sectarian. However, comments from former employees suggest otherwise. "Requires a bible in the classroom at all times (but will not tell you this in any of your interviews, will tell you your first day after you've already signed a contract)," [reads a review](#) on the Glassdoor employment website.<sup>64</sup>

"If you disagree with any of the ideologies behind Great Hearts' mission, you're going to have a bad time," [warns another former employee](#), describing the school as cult-like. "If you truly value anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion, you're going to have a bad time."<sup>65</sup>

"Great Hearts are conservative Christian schools, and the higher-ups have made violently homophobic comments," [according to a former Great Hearts employee](#) in Good-year, Arizona.<sup>66</sup>

A parent who left a [Yelp review](#) of **South Brunswick Charter School** in North Carolina, founded by Baker A. Mitchell Jr., wrote that the publicly funded school has "a very definite" religious agenda. "The female teachers and students are not allowed to wear pants, and their mantra is alarmingly rearranged bible psalms more or less," she wrote.

While Hillsdale College does its best to conceal the religious overtones of its **Barney Charter School Initiative**, Florida's DeSantis sounds an all-out Christian nationalist call as he spreads its gospel. [Speaking at a Hillsdale event](#) in Florida in 2022, DeSantis invoked Ephesians 6:11-18 in his fiery remarks: "Put on the full armor of God. Stand firm against the left's schemes. You will face flaming arrows, but if you have the shield of faith, you will overcome them, and in Florida we walk the line here," he said. "And I can tell you this, I have only begun to fight."<sup>67</sup>

Former U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, another staunch Hillsdale supporter, has readily acknowledged she wants to advance school choice as a path to "[greater Kingdom gain](#)."<sup>68</sup> She and her husband, Amway heir Richard DeVos, have claimed public schools "displaced" churches as the center of communities.

It was during her tenure as Secretary of Education that **Responsive Ed**, a chain whose schools taught creationism, received CSP grants totaling \$55,750,201 — one awarded in 2019 and a second in 2020. If all of the funding is spent, Responsive Ed will be allowed to keep nearly \$11 million for "administering" the grant.

Responsive Ed is headquartered in Texas, a state that has long looked the other way when it comes to the religiosity of its charter schools. In 2010, it was reported that [more than one in five](#) Texas charter schools were affiliated with a religion.<sup>69</sup>

Even today, some still do not attempt to hide it.



Dallas-based **Advantage Academy**, formerly Eagle Academy, was founded by Allen Beck, a pastor and missionary who also started a Bible college. Beck is featured on the four-campus Advantage Academy website, which boasts of schools “nurturing a faith-friendly environment.”

In 2014, Zack Kopplin wrote an [investigative piece](#) for *Slate* after obtaining the curriculum of Responsive Education Solutions, aka Responsive Ed.<sup>70</sup> The Texas charter chain was founded in 2007 by Donald Howard, former owner of Accelerated Christian Education. The school included blatantly right-wing Christian beliefs across the curriculum.

“Responsive Ed has a secular veneer and is funded by public money, but it has been connected from its inception to the creationist movement and to far-right fundamentalists who seek to undermine the separation of church and state,” according to *Slate*.

Kopplin reported how the science texts presented misinformation to discredit evolution. The section that begins with the origin of life stated, “In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth.” It undermined vaccines by promoting the disproven allegation that they cause autism. A history textbook stated that “feminism forced women to turn to the government as a surrogate husband.”

Following the article's publication exposing the misinformation in the science textbook, the CEO of Responsive Ed removed the biology workbook from its curriculum.

But the charter chain's core mission to spread Christian nationalism remains. In the fall of 2022, Forrest Wilder of *Texas Monthly* [exposed an elaborate plan](#) cooked up by a Republican consultant and a Texas billionaire to create a charter school that “only existed on paper” in order to funnel funding to private schools so that students could get vouchers and attend without paying tuition.<sup>71</sup>

The co-conspirator in this scheme was Kalese Whitehurst, former education aide to Rick Perry and an executive with Responsive Education Solutions. ResponsiveEd, no doubt for a fee, would place K–12 students from around the state into private schools of their choice at “no cost to their families.”

While the plan was thwarted, ResponsiveEd's foot is still in the Christian private school world. It was [recently reported](#) that the private Plainview Christian Academy (PCA) will open as Plainview Classical Academy — a charter school — in the fall of 2023. PCA will continue to refer to itself as PCA to retain its brand. The private Christian school partnered with Responsive Ed to create the charter.<sup>72</sup>

# Conclusion

## Will Right-Wing Charters Weaken Progressive Charter School Support?

Ray Budde, an education professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in the 1970s, is credited with the idea of chartering. In his vision, states would give schools the authority to create innovative, experimental programs at existing schools. But Budde's proposal went nowhere until it caught the attention of American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker in 1988. He became the first cheerleader for charter schools as publicly funded, independently managed schools.

He pitched the proposal in *The New York Times*, catching the attention of progressive policymakers and educators in Minnesota, where the first charter schools opened in 1992. Shanker later realized the Pandora's Box that he had opened, but it was too late. Big chains, including for-profits, turned what was supposed to be a few experimental schools and turned charter schools into an industry.

From state to state, progressive politicians — bolstered by groups such as Democrats for Education Reform — formed alliances with conservatives to pass charter laws in 46 states.

Three decades later, charter schools continue to enjoy the support of high-profile progressives and Democrats. Nowhere is this more evident than in Colorado, a blue state where Gov. Jared Polis and U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet remain strong charter school proponents, even as right-wing charter schools open throughout their state.

Ironically, pro-charter progressives bolster the prospects for their political foes. Right-wing and classical charter schools are raising a generation of Christian nationalists and Libertarians trained to oppose Democrats whether or not they support charter schools. As the University of Illinois' Jon Hale noted in a *Washington Post* [op-ed](#), the movement now belongs to the right.

"Conservative education reformers hijacked their vision," he wrote. "Instead of schools run by public school teachers, the charters conservatives proposed would become public schools run by private entities."<sup>73</sup>

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools prominently notes that most charter

schools — 58.2 percent — are located in urban areas. That advances false claims of school choice serving low-income families who can't afford private-school tuition. But the fast-spreading classical schools are increasingly taking root in suburban Indianapolis, rural [Oregon](#),<sup>74</sup> and small-town Colorado.

They are whiter and infused with Christian nationalist leanings and aligned with right-wing leaders who make no secret of their plans to turn back progress. Conservatives in Oklahoma successfully pushed [the opening of an online Catholic charter school](#), which would make it possible to fully fund religious private school education apart from whether or not the state has a voucher program.<sup>75</sup>

The classical/traditional movement grows with alarming speed, at taxpayer expense, and with a Christian nationalist spin. Its clear ideological mission should prompt a reckoning from not only the left but also moderates and independent voters: Was the goal of charter schools to produce public school graduates steeped in free-market infallibility and American exceptionalism bordering on Christian nationalism? **We think not.**

Charter schools took a sharp turn right and now serve a purpose never imagined by their early proponents. The only question that remains is whether moderate, progressive, and liberal-minded voters and politicians recognize where the runaway charter movement is headed.

---

## Endnotes

**1** Peltier v. Charter Day School, Inc., No. 20-1001 (4th Cir. 2021). <https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/file/1515051/download>

**2** Roger Bacon Academy website. <https://rogerbaconacademy.com/our-pledge-2/>

**3** Wang, Marian. (2014, October 14). "Charter School Power Broker Turns Public Education into Private Profits." ProPublica. <https://www.propublica.org/article/charter-school-power-broker-turns-public-education-into-private-profits>

4 Ibid.

5 Peltier v. Charter Day School, Inc., No. 20-1001 (4th Cir. 2021). <https://www.justice.gov/crt/case-document/file/1515051/download>

6 Harris, Craig. (2018, July 11). "Arizona charter school founder makes millions building his own schools." Azcentral.com. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2018/07/11/american-leadership-academy-charter-school-founder-glenn-way-nets-millions/664210002/>

7 Burris, Carol and Cimarusti, Darcie. (n.d.). "Chartered for Profit: The Hidden World of Charter Schools Operated for Financial Gain." Network for Public Education. <https://networkforpubliceducation.org/chartered-for-profit/>

8 Sanneh, Kelefa. (2023, March 27). "How Christian is Christian Nationalism?" The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/04/03/how-christian-is-christian-nationalism>

9 Advantage Academy website: <https://www.advantageacademy.org/domain/32>

10 It should also be noted that many of these schools have multiple campuses, but only report as one school in the database, and therefore the total is an undercount. If we had counted individual campuses, the number would be far higher.

11 Association of Classical Christian Schools (n.d.) "What Happened?" <https://classicalchristian.org/what-is-cce/what-happened/?v=a44707111a05>

12 Ibid.

13 Carter, Ray. (2022, September 6). "Tulsa Charter School to be Countercultural—by Touting Western Civ." Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs (OCPA). <https://www.ocpathink.org/post/independent-journalism/charter-school-to-be-countercultural-by-touting-western-civ>

14 MacFarland, Clair. (2022, July 14). "Wyoming Moves Closer To Approving New Charter Schools Focused On Classical Education." Cowboy State Daily. <https://cowboystatedaily.com/2022/07/14/proposed-wyoming-charter-schools-to-teach-what-was-intended-by-founders/>

15 Conniff, Ruth. (2023, January 24). "Waukesha County Exec becomes new Lake Country Classical Academy authorizer." Wisconsin Examiner. <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/brief/waukesha-county-exec-becomes-new-lake-country-classical-academy-authorizer/>

16 Howell, Cynthia. (2022, March 21). "Charter school planners submit early plans for nine new campuses in Arkansas." Arkansas Democrat Gazette. <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2022/mar/21/charter-school-planners-submit-early-plans-for/>

17 Hale-Shelton, Debra. (2022, June 22). "Moms for Liberty member avoids criminal charges over comment about gunning down a school librarian." Arkansas Times. <https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2022/06/22/moms-for-liberty-member-avoids-criminal-charges-over-comment-about-gunning-down-a-school-librarian>

18 Postal, Leslie. (2022, May 17). "College student finds possible critical race theory in Florida math book, report finds." Orlando Sentinel. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2022/05/17/college-student-finds-possible-critical-race-theory-in-florida-math-book-report-finds/>

19 Greene, Peter. (2023, January 27). "Dark Money and Education Parent Grass Roots Groups." Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petergreene/2023/01/27/dark-money-and-education-parent-grass-roots-groups/?sh=184b48a44ebc>

**20** "Education is Freedom." (n.d.) Hillsdale College. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVujplator0>

**21** Leigh, Genevieve. (2022, July 14). "Michigan's Hillsdale College set to expand far-right charter schools." World Socialist Website. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2022/07/15/0c37-j15.html>

**22** Arnn, Larry. (2022, November). "Education as a Battleground." Imprimis. [https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/education-as-a-battleground/?utm\\_source=substack&utm\\_medium=email](https://imprimis.hillsdale.edu/education-as-a-battleground/?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email)

**23** Arnn, Larry. (2022, February 24). National Leadership Seminar — Naples, Florida America's Uncertain Future. Hillsdale College. <https://freedomlibrary.hillsdale.edu/programs/national-leadership-seminar-naples-florida/preserving-our-country>

**24** Moody, Josh. (2023, January 10). "DeSantis Aims to Turn Public College Into 'Hillsdale of the South.'" <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/01/11/desantis-seeks-overhaul-small-liberal-arts-college>

**25** Rado, Diane. (2019, August 23). "FL Education Commissioner's wife connected to private Christian college chosen for state civics education review." Florida Phoenix. <https://floridaphoenix.com/2019/08/23/fl-education-commissioners-wife-connected-to-private-christian-college-chosen-for-state-civics-education-review/>

**26** Associated Press (2017, December 2). "Senate votes to block last-minute GOP tax break for conservative Michigan college." Orlando Sentinel. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2017/12/02/senate-votes-to-block-last-minute-gop-tax-break-for-conservative-michigan-college/>

**27** "Center for Security Policy." Southern Poverty Law Center website. <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/center-security-policy>

**28** Shideler, Kyle. (2023, April 24). "If The Right Wants To Win, It Must Drop Its 'That's Not How We Do Things' Approach To Organizing." The Federalist. <https://thefederalist.com/2023/04/24/if-the-right-wants-to-win-it-must-drop-its-thats-not-how-we-do-things-approach-to-organizing/>

**29** Influence Watch website. The Barney Family Foundation. <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/barney-family-foundation/>

**30** Fleischer, Peter and Seaver, Matthew. (2022, August 30). "Charter school board members file lawsuit claiming 'abuse of power' at Collier County charter school." WINK. <https://winknews.com/2022/08/30/charter-school-board-members-file-lawsuit-claiming-abuse-of-power-at-collier-county-charter-school/>

**31** MASON CLASSICAL ACADEMY, INC. et al v. Arnn et al. Pacer Monitor. (2023, May 22). [https://www.pacermonitor.com/public/case/45674917/MASON\\_CLASSICAL\\_ACADEMY\\_INC\\_et\\_al\\_v\\_Arnn\\_et\\_al](https://www.pacermonitor.com/public/case/45674917/MASON_CLASSICAL_ACADEMY_INC_et_al_v_Arnn_et_al)

**32** Saul, Stephanie. (2022, April 10). "A College Fights 'Leftist Academics' by Expanding Into Charter Schools." The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/10/us/hillsdale-college-charter-schools.html>

**33** Williams, Phil. (2022, June 30). "REVEALED: Teachers come from 'dumbest parts of dumbest colleges,' Tenn. governor's education advisor tells him." News Channel 5, Nashville. <https://www.newschannel5.com/news/newschannel-5-investigates/revealed/revealed-teachers-come-from-dumbest-parts-of-dumbest-colleges-tenn-governors-education-advisor-tells-him>

- 34** Exum, Anika. (2022, July 21). "Founders Classical Academy wants to operate in Williamson County: 'We're not Hillsdale.'" *The Tennessean*. <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/williamson/2022/07/21/charter-school-aims-approval-once-again-williamson-county/10092100002/>
- 35** Gensiejewski, Reagan. (2021, February 18). "Rush Limbaugh, Radio Legend and Friend of College, Dies at 70." *The Collegian*. <https://hillsdalecollegian.com/2021/02/rush-limbaugh-radio-legend-and-friend-of-college-dies-at-70/>
- 36** Spears, Andy. (2022, December 31). "A History of Hillsdale in Tennessee." *The Education Report*. <https://theeducationreport.substack.com/p/a-history-of-hillsdale-in-tennessee>
- 37** Hillsdale College Podcast Network. Russ Donley: Bringing Classical Schools to Wyoming. <https://podcast.hillsdale.edu/russ-donley-bringing-classical-schools-to-wyoming/>
- 38** Layton, Miles and Bowman-Layton, Nicole. (2022, December 7). "Southeast Ohio Classical Academy organizers say school closer to fruition." *The Athens Messenger*. [https://www.athensmessenger.com/news/southeast-ohio-classical-academy-organizers-say-school-closer-to-fruition/article\\_4f12d834-763b-11ed-a44b-bb30e9cd4843.html](https://www.athensmessenger.com/news/southeast-ohio-classical-academy-organizers-say-school-closer-to-fruition/article_4f12d834-763b-11ed-a44b-bb30e9cd4843.html)
- 39** Beck, Caroline. (2022, September 23). "What to know about the proposed charter school in Carmel." *Indianapolis Star*. <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2022/09/23/carmel-charter-school-advocates-support-new-school-carmel-clay-schools-district-disagrees/69508391007/>
- 40** Grovers, Stephen. (2022, September 13). "Conservative college's curriculum gets foothold in South Dakota." *Argus Leader*. <https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/2022/09/13/conservative-colleges-curriculum-gets-foothold-south-dakota/10365253002/>
- 41** "Not One Penny." (n.d.). Hillsdale College website: <https://lp.hillsdale.edu/not-one-penny/>
- 42** Influence Watch website. State Policy Network (SPN). <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/state-policy-network/>
- 43** Olsen, Megan K. (2022, November 4). "Ignacio School District denies Ascent Classical Academy's application for a charter." *The Durango Herald*. <https://www.durangoherald.com/articles/ignacio-school-district-denies-ascent-classical-academys-application-for-a-charter/>
- 44** Wingerter, Meg. (2019, August 23). "Lone Tree charter school that allows staff to carry concealed guns will leave Douglas County School District." *The Denver Post*. <https://www.denverpost.com/2019/08/23/ascent-classical-academy-armed-teachers/>
- 45** Howerton, Blaine. (2020, June 5). "New Classical Public Charter School Opening in Fall 2020 Announces New Headmaster." *North Forty News*. <https://northfortynews.com/category/business-education/new-classical-public-charter-school-opening-in-fall-2020-announces-new-headmaster/>
- 46** Zeigler, Cyd. (2015, May 5). "Hillsdale College asks gay athlete to pray for destruction of "evil" same-sex marriage." *Outsports*. <https://www.outsports.com/2015/5/5/8553391/hillsdale-college-prayer-gay-marriage>
- 47** Kenney, Andrew. (2022, October 20). "How the conservative parents' rights movement — fueled by LGBTQ backlash — is shaping Heidi Ganahl's campaign." *CPR*. <https://www.cpr.org/2022/10/20/heidi-ganahl-parents-rights-lgbtq-schools/>



- 48** Davenport, Paul. (2012, February 8). "Board of Regents appointee's remarks on gays stir controversy in Senate." Arizona Capitol Times. <https://azcapitoltimes.com/news/2012/02/08/board-of-regents-apointees-remarks-on-gays-stir-controversy-in-senate/>
- 49** Martin, Jonathan and Burns, Alexander. (2017, October 5). "For Republican Leaders in Congress, the Headaches Keep Mounting." The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/politics/republicans-disarray-trump-senate-congress.html>
- 50** Flaherty, Joseph. (2018, March 21). "Advocates Say Great Hearts is Dropping Discriminatory 'Sex and Gender' Policy." Phoenix New Times. <https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/advocates-say-great-hearts-will-drop-sex-and-gender-policy-in-arizona-schools-10251342>
- 51** Chevaleau, Robert. (n.d.). "When a Charter Network Discriminated Against My Daughter, I Fought Back." Public Voices for Public Schools. <https://pv4ps.org/when-a-charter-network-discriminated-against-my-daughter-i-fought-back/>
- 52** Hernandez, Rocio. (2021, October 14). "Students question new policy that prohibits clubs at Great Hearts charter schools." KJZZ. <https://kjzz.org/content/1723422/students-question-new-policy-prohibits-clubs-great-hearts-charter-schools>
- 53** Longhi, Lorraine & Bowling, Joshua. (2020, September 11). Former Great Heart students, teachers call some school practices racist, sexist and discriminatory. Arizona Republic. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2020/09/11/former-arizona-great-hearts-students-teachers-call-some-practices-racist-sexist-charter-school/5582643002/>
- 54** Gonzales, Angela. (2012, August 13). "Quayle family donates \$1.5M to Great Hearts Academies charter school." Phoenix Business Journal. <https://www.bizjournals.com/phoenix/news/2012/08/13/quayle-family-donates-15m-to-great.html>
- 55** Pondiscio, Robert. (2023, January 26). "Public Dollars, Private Schools." Thomas B. Fordham Institute, "Flypaper" blog. <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/public-dollars-private-schools>
- 56** Ibid.
- 57** Harris, Craig. (2018, July 13). "Arizona charter school founder makes millions building his own schools." Arizona Republic. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2018/07/11/american-leadership-academy-charter-school-founder-glenn-way-nets-millions/664210002/>
- 58** Transparency USA. (n.d.) Shelina and Glen Way. <https://www.transparencysusa.org/az/contributor/glenn-way>
- 59** Childress, Greg. (2022, December 1). "State Board of Education denies two fast-track charter applications." NC Newsline. <https://ncnewsline.com/briefs/state-board-of-education-denies-two-fast-track-charter-applications/#sthash.bOXGxdp1.dpbs>
- 60** Way, Michael. (2023, January 19). "NC Board of Ed rejected our charter application. But they can't stop school choice." The Carolina Journal. <https://www.carolinajournal.com/opinion/nc-board-of-ed-rejected-our-charter-application-but-they-cant-stop-school-choice/>
- 61** Kokes, Kailee. (2022, December 7). "Charter school emphasizing patriotism to teach 2K students in Lexington starting next year." Lexington County Chronicle. <https://www.lexingtonchronicle.com/stories/>

[charter-school-emphasizing-patriotism-to-teach-2k-students-in-lexington-starting-next-year,34502](#)

**62** Danny Gokey - Stand in Faith | Cover by ALA Encore (Music Video). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XweswKJZhSk>

**63** Harris, Craig. (2018, July 13). "Arizona charter school founder makes millions building his own schools." Arizona Republic. <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2018/07/11/american-leadership-academy-charter-school-founder-glenn-way-nets-millions/664210002/>

**64** Glassdoor website. (2023, February 19). <https://www.glassdoor.com/Reviews/Employee-Review-Great-Hearts-Academies-RVW73768707.htm>

**65** Ibid.

**66** Ibid.

**67** Miami Herald. (2022, September 13). "DeSantis' 'full armor of God' rhetoric prompts concerns." Orlando Sentinel. <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/2022/09/13/desantis-full-armor-of-god-rhetoric-prompts-concerns/>

**68** Wermund, Benjamin. (2016, December 2). "Trump's education pick says reform 'can advance God's Kingdom.'" Politico. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/betsy-devos-education-trump-religion-232150>

**69** Hetzner, Amy. (2010, November 23). "One of every five Texas charter schools has religious ties." Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. <https://archive.jsonline.com/blogs/news/110222464.html/?page=1>

**70** Kopplin, Zack. (2014, February 16). "Texas Public Schools Are Teaching Creationism." Slate. <https://slate.com/technology/2014/01/creationism-in-texas-public-schools-undermining-the-charter-movement.html>

**71** Wilder, Forrest. (2022, October 18). "Inside the Secret Plan to Bring Private School Vouchers to Texas." Texas Monthly. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/inside-the-secret-plan-to-bring-private-school-vouchers-to-texas/>

**72** Holland II, Ma'Rico. (2023, May 5). "PCA answers questions regarding transition to charter school." Plainview Herald. <https://www.myplainview.com/news/article/pca-answers-questions-regarding-transition-18082112.php>

**73** Hale, Jon. (2021, August 25). "Organized teachers dreamed up charter schools — but their vision got hijacked." The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/08/25/organized-teachers-dreamed-up-charter-schools-their-vision-got-hijacked/>

**74** Vaughan, Jane. (2023, January 30). "Charter school proposal divides rural Southern Oregon community." OPB (Oregon Public Broadcasting). [https://www.opb.org/article/2023/01/30/charter-school-proposal-divides-rural-southern-oregon-community/?outputType=amp&fbclid=IwAR0QhUcBhirp1MZjFD3iJO71Iamft1rrDSHGPhZgM1-T\\_7zuTdsnlquC\\_sY](https://www.opb.org/article/2023/01/30/charter-school-proposal-divides-rural-southern-oregon-community/?outputType=amp&fbclid=IwAR0QhUcBhirp1MZjFD3iJO71Iamft1rrDSHGPhZgM1-T_7zuTdsnlquC_sY)

**75** Wallis, Alice. (2023, April 10). "Oklahoma Catholic Church hopes to open first publicly funded religious charter school." NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/10/1169122201/oklahoma-catholic-church-hopes-to-open-first-publicly-funded-religious-charter-s>