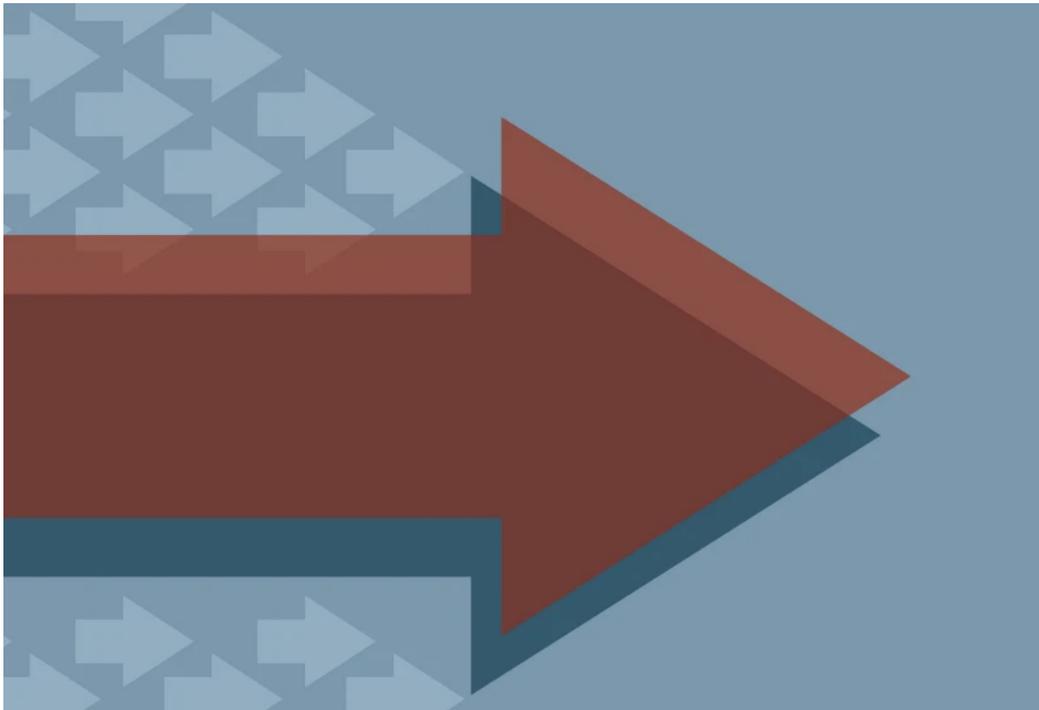


Why National Advocates Are Getting More Involved in School Board Elections



By Libby Stanford — October 31, 2022

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Laura Baker/Education Week and DigitalVision Vectors

In 2020, after the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer set off a convulsive national dialogue about racism, Ryan Girdusky was shocked to hear that his godson's teacher had read the book *Race Cars: A Children's Book About White Privilege* to his elementary school class.

The book, by Jenny Devenny, aims to help parents and educators facilitate difficult conversations about race with children, according to its Amazon listing. But Girdusky said the teacher, after reading the book, went into a "diatribe about policing" and suggested that police officers target Black people, not white people.

The occurrence took place in a New York "community that was overwhelmingly represented with police officers," he said in an interview. "So the parents were at home ... and were incensed by what the teacher had said."

Though not a parent himself, Girdusky, who has a background working on political campaigns in New York, including for Michael Bloomberg's mayoral campaign and for conservative politicians, quickly became concerned with how race was being taught in schools. He briefly thought of opening his own school before deciding he didn't have the means.

Instead, he used his political and media connections to create the 1776 Project, a national political action committee dedicated to electing school board members nationwide "who want to reform our public education system by promoting patriotism and pride in American history," according to its website. So far, that work has

meant endorsing school board members that aim to prevent critical race theory—the academic concept that teaches that racism can be embedded into legal systems and policies—and ideologies like it.

The 1776 Project is just one example of a slew of political organizations—many of them conservative, but some of them liberal-leaning groups pushing back—that have set their sights on education elections. Often, they are targeting school board contests, which are technically nonpartisan in most states.

In 2021, the 1776 Project endorsed 58 conservative candidates in New Jersey, Ohio, Virginia, Minnesota, Kansas, and Colorado, and 42 of them won. As of October, the PAC has endorsed 64 candidates, according to its website. From April 2021 to September 2022, the PAC raised nearly \$3 million in contributions and had spent \$2.6 million helping school board candidates win their campaigns, according to the most recent federal campaign filings. (The PAC doesn't donate directly to any campaigns, instead, it sends mailers, digital ads, and text messaging on their behalf.)

“I think that public education, specifically school boards, is the only democratic recourse parents have to demanding change to what is a public good, which is education,” Girdusky said. “If you are taught from an early age that systems of this country are inherently racist and are working to keep you down, that you cannot succeed because of that, then what incentive do you have to preserve that [society] or what incentive do you have to invest in that [society]?”

Election Guide 2022

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The groups include both new upstarts and longstanding players

Alongside the 1776 Project are conservative groups like Moms for Liberty, Parents Defending Education, and Patriot Mobile Action—a PAC born from the conservative Christian wireless provider Patriot Mobile—that aim to help candidates that promote their conception of parents' rights, anti-critical race theory bills, and oversight of learning materials and books.

Meanwhile, left-leaning political organizations including Stand for Children, the Campaign for Our Shared Future, Education Reform Now, along with stalwarts like the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—both teachers' unions—campaign for candidates that aim to promote educational equity, raise funding, and increase teacher pay.

Some organizations like the Campaign for Our Shared Future Action Fund hope to offset the impact of conservative groups like the 1776 Project and Moms for Liberty.

“We saw [conservative influence on local campaigns] as an attack on equity and an attack on diversity, inclusion, and all of the policies that have been created to support students, their parents, their families,” said Joaquin Guerra, political director for the Campaign for Our Shared Future, which has endorsed 38 liberal-leaning school board candidates in Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, and Michigan in the 2022 election cycle.

As with the 1776 Project, the Campaign for Our Shared Future sends mailers, digital ads, visual ads, and text messaging on candidates' behalf instead of donating directly to candidates. Guerra estimates the organization will spend around \$100,000 on the 2022 campaign cycle.



Political advertisement showing endorsements for Katy Campbell's re-election to Brevard School Board, District 5 in Florida. Courtesy of Katy Campbell

Sights set on school board

At the center of national groups' efforts to influence campaigns are the candidates themselves, who are often driven by hyper-local concerns that don't have a spot on the national stage.

Before being re-elected to the Brevard County, Fla., school board on Aug. 23, Katy Campbell was endorsed by the 1776 Project and the local chapter of Moms for Liberty.

Campbell, who identifies as conservative, sought out both endorsements after learning about the 1776 Project from a community member; she was already familiar with the local Moms for Liberty chapter. The endorsements from both groups came with mailers and digital ads with Campbell's name attached to the group.

Moms for Liberty also supplied volunteers to help canvass for Campbell, and the group's Florida PAC donated \$250 to her campaign. The PAC had donated \$13,000 to Florida campaigns as of Oct. 5, according to Florida campaign finance reports.

Though grateful for their support, Campbell was wary of what message the endorsements would send. When Moms for Liberty helped her with knocking on doors, she instructed the volunteers to wear shirts with her name instead of the organization because she didn't want to polarize voters who were on the fence.

She requested that neither campaign send anything negative about her opponent, Kim Hough, with Campbell's name attached to it.

She also rejected an offer to be endorsed by Florida's Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has made an effort to support conservative school board candidates across the state, after she found out she would have limited control over what would be sent on her behalf.

"I try to be really careful with endorsements because I recognize they're a reflection on me, just as they would feel like I'm a reflection on them," she said.

Campbell said she's noticed more national attention on school boards than when she first ran in 2018, and she's not imagining it.

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Katye Campbell, member of the Brevard County, Fla., school board

The 1776 Project and Moms for Liberty were both born during the pandemic when parents felt increasingly mobilized to have a say in how the schools handled closures and mask mandates. Other groups, like Patriot Mobile Action, which endorsed 11 winning conservative Texas candidates for school board, were formed earlier this year echoing national discourse about race and gender identity in the classroom.

“Patriot Mobile Action is engaging on the front lines of this culture war,” the wireless provider said in an announcement of the PAC on its website. “We are independently researching candidates and advocating on behalf of those who will stand for American values and stand against leftist indoctrination, racist critical race theory and the sexualization of children that is rampant in public schools.”

In states where one party dominates over the other, local elections are an opportunity to sway political tides: School boards’ power is also often underestimated. While lawmakers can impact statewide and national policy on school funding and curriculum, the school boards have final say on how those policy decisions play out locally.

“The decisions that your school board make affect your life and your child’s life in a very real way,” said Tiffany Justice, a founder of Moms for Liberty. “It affects your community, and it affects your country.”

Liberal-leaning organizations fight back

Guerra, of the Campaign for Our Shared Future, likened the battle over local control to Luke Skywalker’s fight against the Galactic Empire in “Star Wars”—the evil empire being the conservative mobilization in schools.

The group “is a response ... many anti-equity and education groups that have chosen to weaponize school board races,” Guerra said. “The equity side is outmatched, just in terms of not having the depth of resources that conservative groups have.”

Jacob Martinez, a candidate for the governing board of the Mesa, Ariz., district, was endorsed by the Campaign for Our Shared Future along with other liberal-leaning organizations, including the Future Democrats and New Politics PACs. The endorsements have helped Martinez, a first-time political candidate, to get his name out there, he said.

Martinez sees the school board as the “newest battleground.” The Mesa district is the largest in Arizona with 64,500 students and nearly 80 schools.

“There’s a lot of bad and dangerous people running for school boards right now,” he said. “People who don’t support public education, people who think the solution to school shootings is by teaching students how to tackle the shooter. All of these ideas, they have no place on the board for a public education system.”

Like the Campaign for Our Shared Future, Stand for Children has mobilized its efforts to support liberal-leaning candidates in Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington. Each state has its own chapter of the nonprofit, which oversees local political work.

Rebecca Gau, the executive director of the group's Arizona chapter, said her team has focused its attention on the gubernatorial and legislative races in that state with the hopes of preserving education funding. The Arizona chapter has invested \$600,000 in materials to campaign for Arizona's Democratic candidate for governor, Katie Hobbs, and around \$800,000 in legislative races, Gau said.

The Arizona chapter chose not to focus on school board races this year although it has in the past. Arizona is already rife with groups working on local campaigns, and Gau and her team felt it would be best to focus efforts on statewide races.

"The scale is tipping toward Republican extremism in our state," Gau said. "So it's important to us that we not have that kind of leadership in the state. We think it would be incredibly damaging to Arizona's schoolchildren."

 Interactive content by Flourish

What political endorsements actually accomplish

Both Martinez and Campbell are grateful for the endorsements they've received from outside groups. But the jury is out on how effective they are at getting school board candidates elected.

Martinez's election will take place on Nov. 8, but he said the mailers, digital ads, and canvassing from political groups have been helpful in expanding his reach.

"It helps, coming forward as a school board candidate who most people don't know anything about," he said. "It really helps lend that legitimacy to the campaign."

Campbell is less sure how much her endorsements helped her secure her win on Aug. 23. She heard from one voter who said they were excited to see that she was endorsed by 1776 Project, but otherwise didn't hear much about it.

Voters were more aware of the local Moms for Liberty group and, in some cases, swayed by that endorsement, but the group was also polarizing to a section of voters who didn't agree with its ideas.

"It definitely made a difference with the local voters who were just kind of getting engaged and tuned in," she said. "Honestly, it probably hurt me in some circles. Because I've had people who said to me, 'Oh, if you're associated with [Moms for Liberty] I won't vote for you.'"

Although they represent opposite ends of the political spectrum, both Campbell and Martinez are concerned by the level of extreme messaging taking place in education campaigns. Martinez said he was surprised how partisan the technically nonpartisan school board race has been.

"A lot of times, one of the first questions that come out of people is, 'What party are you?'" he said. "And they won't take saying that it's a nonpartisan position. They won't take that as an answer."