

Why the Right Loves Public School Culture Wars

May 3, 2021



By Michelle Goldberg

Opinion Columnist

There is a quote from Ralph Reed that I often return to when trying to understand how the right builds political power. “I would rather have a thousand school board members than one president and no school board members,” the former leader of the Christian Coalition said in 1996. School board elections are a great training ground for national activism. They can pull parents, particularly mothers, into politics around intensely emotional issues, building a thriving grass roots and keeping it mobilized.

You could easily write a history of the modern right that’s about nothing but schools. The battles were initially about race, particularly segregation and busing. Out of those fights came the Christian right, born in reaction to the revocation of tax exemptions for segregated Christian schools. As the Christian right grew, political struggles over control of schools became more explicitly religious. There were campaigns against allowing gay people to work in schools and against teaching sex education and evolution.

Now the Christian right has more or less collapsed as anything but an identity category. There are still lots of religious fundamentalists, but not, post-Donald Trump, a movement confidently asserting itself as the repository of wholesome family values. Instead, with the drive to eradicate the teaching of “critical race theory,” race has moved back to the center of the public-school culture wars.

I put critical race theory in quotes because the right has transformed a term that originally referred to an academic school of thought into a catchall for resentments over diversity initiatives and changing history curriculums. Since I first wrote about anti-critical race theory activism in February, it’s become hard to keep up with the flurry of state bills aimed at banning the teaching of what are often called “divisive concepts,” including the idea, as a Rhode Island bill puts it, that “the United States of America is fundamentally racist or sexist.” “We will reject Critical Race Theory in our schools and public institutions, and we will CANCEL Cancel Culture wherever it arises!” the irony-challenged Mike Pence tweeted last week.

As The Washington Post’s Dave Weigel pointed out, Glenn Youngkin, a candidate in Virginia’s Republican primary, recently released four anti-critical race theory videos in 24 hours.

Part of the reason the right is putting so much energy into this crusade is because it can’t whip up much opposition to the bulk of Joe Biden’s agenda. Biden’s spending plans are much more ambitious than Barack Obama’s were, but there’s been no new version of the Tea Party. Voters view this president as more moderate than Obama, a misconception that critical race theory scholars would have no trouble explaining. Republicans have grouched about how hard Biden is to demonize. They need a more frightening, enraging villain to keep their people engaged.

Critical race theory — presented as an attack on history, a program to indoctrinate children and a stealth form of Marxism — fits the bill. The recent elections in Southlake, Texas, show how politically potent the backlash to critical race theory can be.

In 2018, the affluent Texas suburb was in the news for a viral video of a group of laughing white students shouting the N-word. Black residents told reporters about instances of unambiguous racism, like a sixth grader joking to a Black student, “How do you get a Black out of a tree? You cut the rope.” The video, reported NBC, “seemed to trigger genuine soul-searching by school leaders,” and they created a diversity council of parents, teachers and students to come up with a plan to make their school more inclusive. The council, in turn, created a document called the Cultural Competence Action Plan.

The reaction from conservative parents was furious. A PAC formed to fight the plan. At a contentious school board meeting, The Dallas Morning News reported, a Black student on the diversity council “was booed after testifying: ‘My life matters.’” Two school board members who supported the plan were indicted on charges they violated Texas’ Open Meetings Act, merely because they texted about the plan before a board meeting. The conservative radio host Dana Loesch, who lives in Southlake, appeared on Tucker Carlson to denounce “very far-left Marxist activists” trying to “implement critical race theory education.”

This weekend, in a Southlake election that drew three times the ordinary number of voters, opponents of the Cultural Competence Action Plan dominated, winning two school board seats, two City Council seats and the mayor's office by about 40 points in each race. Their victories will likely serve as an example to conservative organizers nationwide. The Federalist, a right-wing website, heralded the election as the early stage of a new "cultural Tea Party" marshaled against "critical race theory" instead of government spending.

The Christian Coalition took off during Bill Clinton's presidency, when the religious right engaged locally because it felt shut out of national power. Clearly some conservatives think that opposition to critical race theory could be the seed of something similar. Telling parents that liberals want to make their kids hate their country and feel guilty for being white might be absurd and cynical. It also looks like it might be effective.