

The Philadelphia Inquirer

What is Parents Defending Education, the group accusing Lower Merion of discrimination?

Parents Defending Education has been filing complaints across the country, saying it's “fighting indoctrination in the classroom.” Here’s some background on the organization.



Buses leave Lower Merion High School in Ardmore on Dec. 9, 2020. This week the district was targeted by a national group that has been challenging school equity initiatives across the country. MONICA HERNDON / Staff Photographer

by [Maddie Hanna](#)

Published Feb. 2, 2023, 5:14 p.m. ET

The Lower Merion School District has offered affinity groups for students of color for more than a decade. But this week, those programs — which the district says are designed to boost

achievement and give students a “safe space to engage in conversations” — came under fire from a national group that has been challenging school equity initiatives across the country.

Parents Defending Education says it filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, accusing the Montgomery County district of racial discrimination through the affinity groups and its cultural competency lessons for students. (The district said [it “strongly disagrees”](#) with the group’s characterization.)

While it’s unclear why the group trained its sights on Lower Merion — no district students or families are mentioned in the complaint — Parents Defending Education has been filing similar complaints across the country, saying it’s “fighting indoctrination in the classroom.” Here’s some background on the organization:

How did Parents Defending Education start?

The group announced its launch in March 2021 and incorporated in Arlington, Va., later that year amid [heated disagreement around pandemic school closures](#) and a mounting [campaign by conservatives against critical race theory](#) that began to [dominate local school board meetings](#).

Announcing its launch, Parents Defending Education said it would “[begin reclaiming our K-12 schools](#) from political activists and extremists,” as it denounced “wokeism” and “the cult of antiracism.”

Who’s behind the group?

Parents Defending Education describes itself as a “national grassroots organization,” though it has ties to conservative advocacy groups and media. Its founder and president, Nicole Neily, previously worked for the Cato Institute think tank and the Independent Women’s Forum, a conservative nonprofit focused on economic issues, and founded a group called Speech First, which has [sued colleges over anti-bias policies](#) that it says infringe on students’ free-speech rights. Its vice president, Caroline Moore, has worked for the Federalist Society, a conservative legal organization, and the Mercatus Center, a libertarian think tank.

Among those who have served on the organization’s board is [Karol Markowicz](#), a columnist for the New York Post and Fox News. Media Matters for America, a liberal website that obtained the group’s IRS filing seeking tax-exempt status, [listed another board director](#) as Edward Blum, the founder of Students for Fair Admissions, which sued Harvard University and the University of North Carolina [challenging affirmative action policies](#) in a case heard last year by the U.S. Supreme Court. (Parents for Defending Education filed [an amicus brief](#) supporting the challenge.)

How much money is it spending?

As a 501(c)3 charitable organization, the group is required to file with the IRS. However, because it incorporated in 2021, tax forms aren’t yet available through public search tools. The group did not respond to a request Thursday to share its filings.

According to [a report](#) by Maurice Cunningham, a retired associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts at Boston who says he received a copy of the group's 2021 tax filing, the group received more than \$3 million in contributions and grants that year.

A spokesperson for Parents Defending Education did not respond to a question Thursday about the group's donors.

Is the group targeting other Pennsylvania schools?

The group didn't address a question about whether it had filed other complaints against Pennsylvania schools.

On its "[IndoctriNation Map](#)," however, the group lists 30 "incidents" in Pennsylvania, including administrative regulations discussed last month by the Upper Moreland School Board [regarding transgender and gender diverse students](#), and [a diversity, equity, and inclusion calendar](#) promoted on social media by an elementary school in the Upper Dublin School District that included "Transgender Day of Remembrance, memorializing those killed due to anti-transgender prejudice."

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Neily, in an interview Wednesday, said most of the information the group receives comes through tips.

"We have parents, grandparents, people who see articles in their local newspaper," she said. She said most people submit anonymously because they "fear retaliation."

What are affinity groups?

Some schools offer affinity groups for students or teachers of color who are minorities in their school communities. The intent, proponents say, is [to create a supportive space](#) to share concerns and experiences. Lower Merion says that two of its high school programs for students of color — Becton Scholars and POWER Scholars — "help cultivate academic excellence and leadership."

In [objecting to the groups](#), Parents Defending Education says they "teach children that our sameness and our differences are found in our immutable traits like skin color" and may violate the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection Clause.

Where else is Parents Defending Education targeting?

In January, the group filed complaints against education agencies in Portland, Maine, Santa Cruz, Calif., Shelburne, Vt., and Ashland, Ore., alleging discrimination based on racial affinity groups.

Neily said the Office of Civil Rights has launched investigations into similar complaints the group filed against schools in New York and South Carolina. The office still needs to decide whether to investigate the complaint against Lower Merion.

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In [a fact sheet](#) published Tuesday — the same day the Lower Merion complaint was filed — the office said that “activities intended, in whole or in part, to further objectives such as diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion are not generally or categorically prohibited” under the Civil Rights Act.

It also said that “determining whether an activity or program of a school or college — including diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts — results in prohibited Title VI discrimination requires assessing the totality of the circumstances in each particular case.”

Parents Defending Education settled a lawsuit last year with the Wellesley School District in suburban Boston, where it had also challenged racial affinity groups created as part of a diversity, equity and inclusion plan. Wellesley [agreed to make the groups open to all students](#), according to the Associated Press. In that case, Parents Defending Education represented parents who said their children were “highly conscious of race during their interactions with their teachers and fellow classmates” and felt “they were part of the ‘problem’ solely because of their skin color.”

In its complaint against Lower Merion, the group cited [a 2015 decision by the Office of Civil Rights](#) finding that a suburban Chicago high school erred in hosting a “Black Lives Matter” assembly specifically for Black students to talk about their experiences. The district agreed that all programs and activities would be open to students of all races going forward.

Staff writer Ryan W. Briggs contributed to this article.