



These PACS are funding 'parents' rights advocates' running for local school board positions

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Across the country, new right-leaning [political action committees](#) are pouring money into school board races, [aiming to flip control of who governs schools](#) in favor of self-proclaimed parents rights advocates in a way that rivals the role that [teachers unions](#) have historically had in these contests.

For much less than [what it would cost them to influence a seat in the House or Senate](#), these PACs are putting thousands of dollars at a time – sometimes just hundreds – into races for local school boards and as a result, changing education on a national scale.

A super PAC called the 1776 Project PAC is leading the way, emphasizing opposition to lessons related to racial and social justice. With a war chest smaller than what some congressional candidates in competitive districts are raising, the group has supported and opposed school board candidates in a dozen states.

Political action committees, or PACs, and super PACs pool donations from many different people and entities and use that money to try to elect candidates who represent their interests. They may be registered at the federal or state level.

Ian Vandewalker, senior counsel for the democracy program at New York University's Brennan Center for Justice, said the involvement of these major PACs in local elections is a sign that politics at large have become nationalized and more partisan.

"This sort of hyper-partisan, disinformation-based electioneering seems to be happening at all levels now," Vandewalker said.

Other PACs are focusing on specific states and races. A grocery store heiress is behind a PAC spending to influence school board races across the state of Florida, and a federal PAC that typically focuses on federal policy got involved in one Florida county. In Texas, a PAC is raising big money to flip school board seats statewide.

Candidates with the most money in their campaign accounts tend to be the ones who win. [Analyses by the watchdog group Open Secrets](#) have regularly shown that the House and Senate candidates with the most money tend to win.

At the school board level, that effect has the potential to be larger because the races are often so cheap.

In a 2018 [survey by the National School Boards Association](#), 75 percent of respondents said they spent less than \$1,000 on their election; 16 percent said they spent between \$1,000 and \$5,000; and only 9 percent said they spent more than \$5,000. Most stayed in their positions for long periods of time, and most were volunteers. A recent study from the group School Board Partners showed a changing picture.

The influence of these PACs is sweeping: In an election season that at the national level is considered a referendum on whether Democratic President Joe Biden's party should keep its majority in the House and Senate, Nov. 8 ballots in more than two dozen states will also contain school board races.

A nationwide effort to change the classroom

The 1776 Project PAC, started by a longtime Republican campaign operative and named in response to [The New York Times's 1619 Project](#), is one of the main forces upending that longtime trend. The 1619 Project frames slavery and the contributions of Black Americans as central to American history.

The group's main focus has been to ban the teaching of what they call critical race theory — a graduate-level legal theory that is not taught in public schools — but in reality the group targets almost any teaching about racism and diversity. The group also dabbles in attacking topics related to transgender rights.

“Radical left-wing ideologues want to lock parents out of the classroom as they teach their children they can be a different gender and then take their kids away from them if they object to it,” the PAC [wrote on its Twitter account](#) this month. “We will stop at nothing to remove this crap from our schools.”

Half of the money the 1776 Project PAC has raised — \$1.5 million out of \$3 million — came from people giving less than \$200, according to Federal Election Commission filings. Ryan Girdusky, the group's founder, pointed to the more than 40,000 people who have donated to his PAC.

The largest single donation, \$900,000, came from Restoration PAC, a fund backed by billionaire Richard Uihlein that says it wants to bring the country back to its “timeless foundation” of “turning to God and the enforcement of just laws.”

Uihlein and [Restoration PAC](#) also have funded PACs connected to 2020 election denial and [local races in Wisconsin](#), according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

The 1776 Project PAC has spent more than \$2.6 million, with the bulk of that going to printed mailers, campaign finance filings show. Girdusky said mailers are the best way to target people in school districts because they are so much smaller than congressional districts. Commercials cost more money and influence larger geographic areas, he said.

He said the PAC also has spent money on text messaging campaigns and digital microtargeting, or using online data to reach small groups of people. He said it has paid for commercials in larger races, such as in a statewide race for superintendent in Oklahoma, and a race for an Ohio Board of Education seat that is about the size of a congressional district.

The 1776 Project PAC has candidates on ballots in Texas, Arkansas, Michigan, Indiana, Florida, Maryland and Virginia, too. The races include:

- Five candidates for a seven-member board in Round Rock, Texas
- Four candidates for a seven-member board in Wylie, Texas
- Five candidates for a seven-member board in Bentonville, Arkansas
- Four candidates for a seven-member board in New Buffalo, Michigan
- Three candidates for a five-member board in Carroll, Maryland
- Three candidates for a seven-member board in Brandywine, Michigan
- Three candidates for a seven-member board in Frederick, Maryland

New PACs have potential to outdo teachers unions

The rise of groups such as the 1776 Project PAC have the potential to outflank local teachers unions, whose endorsements and local funding have been the longtime keys to success in school board races across the country.

A [study published in January](#) by Hoover fellow Michael Hartney at Stanford University showed that "teachers' unions reliably win 70 percent of the school board races in which they make an endorsement." That's the same success rate that the 1776 Project PAC advertises now.

"The local union affiliates will make endorsements, not even the state union," Hartney said in an interview. "But the local union affiliates in many states can tap into the funds of the state union's political action committee."

In the race for one school board seat in the San Diego Unified School District, for example, the local San Diego Education Association Political Action Committee spent \$96,000 this month on things including mailers and other advertisements, according to

campaign finance filings with the county registrar of voters office. More than half of that went to oppose candidate Becca Williams, who on her website says students deserve an "agenda-free" education.

Early in her campaign, Williams' campaign team sent a mailer to local constituents reflecting sentiments against CRT, and for parent choice. Williams said in an interview she is running in part because the school board needs representatives who, like her, are not backed by the teachers union. "The unions continue to put up candidates who cave to the labor movement as opposed to providing quality education for kids," Williams said.

Her opponent Cody Petterson said that while he fully supports the union and encourages their support, he's running a pro-public education campaign and wants to enforce district policies that will help kids recover from pandemic-related achievement loss.

The scale of local involvement by national teachers unions is hard to quantify. The federal PACs affiliated with the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers largely get involved with federal races for the House and Senate. Neither group provided a list of candidates they have endorsed.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, said her group does not usually get involved in local races unless its local affiliates request help. She played down her group's influence, saying they only have about one one-thousandth of the power that many of the union's critics say it does.

"In 12 years as president of AFT, I can count on two hands the ones we were seriously involved in," Weingarten said. "These are local affairs and local issues that they are bringing to the national level."

She referenced the former adviser to President Donald Trump [who declared on his "War Room" podcast in 2021](#) that the path to victory for Republicans was through school boards.

"It's Steve Bannon and part of his MAGA game plan," she added.

The group's federal PAC, the AFL-CIO Committee on Political Education, raised \$10.6 million and spent \$15.3 million through the end of August, [according to filings with the Federal Election Commission](#). The money largely has targeted federal races, and its [biggest contributions](#) have been to federal PACs the Democrats are using to win seats in the House and Senate.

The NEA's super PAC raised \$24.7 million and spent \$16.1 million through the end of September, [federal filings show](#).

Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association, said in an email that parents and educators have turned out in record numbers to support and elect pro-public education school board candidates.

“At the same time, parents and voters in rural, suburban, and urban communities alike have rejected extreme candidates “running to politicize classrooms, ban books about Martin Luther King Jr. and Anne Frank, and use students as pawns in culture wars,” she said.

Girdusky, of the 1776 Project PAC, said his aim is to make sure kids don’t end up in situations like his godson, who Girdusky said was taught about white privilege through a children's book at school.

“This is something that I do because I think it is important and the demand is so great,” Girdusky said.

Revved up efforts at the state and local level

At the local level, PACs and other interest groups are getting involved in ways that have never been seen before.

In Texas, the state’s Republican Party announced in June 2021 it would create a committee to help capture seats in local elections, including school boards. In a statement, party chairman Matt Rinaldi listed 10 districts where the party helped elect what he called “anti-indoctrination candidates” in elections this past May.

One of the most active PACs in the state working to elect parents' rights advocates is the Southlake Families PAC, which spent nearly \$137,000 from July 1, 2021 to June 30, 2022, according to filings with the Texas Ethics Commission. At the end of June, the PAC reported having \$128,000 in cash on hand.

In central Florida, a federal super PAC that [raised \\$4.8 million](#) from the end of 2020 to the end of September, American Principles Project, got involved in its one and only school board race.

Terry Schilling, the group’s president, said he saw an opportunity when he saw a slate of three candidates running for the Polk County School Board on a parental rights platform. American Principles Project PAC spent \$25,000 on advertisements there ahead of an August primary, he said.

“You can get more bang for your buck with these races,” he said, “but also I think that they’re attractive because we can win.”

One of the races is headed to a runoff Nov. 8 and will define control over the district, [the seventh-largest in Florida](#). Schilling said he plans to spend between \$10,000 and \$25,000 to support their candidate, Jill Sessions.

Moms for Liberty Florida, a political action committee affiliated with a nationwide network of dark money groups of the same name, gave \$250 donations to 56 candidates running in 24 county districts, according to records with the Florida Department of Elections. The group spent another \$21,000 on texting services. Moms for Liberty Florida is funded almost entirely by a \$50,000 donation from Julie Fancelli, heiress to the Publix super markets fortune.

Many of the 56 candidate won elections early this year, and a remaining few are going on to runoff races Nov. 8, Moms for Liberty co-founder Tiffany Justice said.

The group's Florida-based PAC is funding candidates that "respect fundamental parental rights," Justice said. The term, she explained, is a catch-all for any candidate that does not want to "co-parent with the government."

"2022 is the year of the parent revolution," Justice said.