

This Bucks County man spent \$500,000 on the last Pa. school board races. Here's what we know about his involvement this year



The Philadelphia Inquirer



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Paul Martino, photographed at his Doylestown home in October 2021, plans to again be involved in this year's school board races, two years after he gave \$500,000 to a PAC that backed mostly Republican ... [Read more](#)

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Two years ago, Paul Martino poured \$500,000 into Pennsylvania school board races in what the Bucks County venture capitalist and GOP donor billed as a bipartisan effort to ensure pandemic school closures wouldn't happen again.

This year, with school board seats again on the ballot in Pennsylvania, Martino isn't claiming any political neutrality. The Back to School political action committee he started is now branding itself as a conservative super PAC seeking to "stop the liberal left."

Martino, who founded the new [Bankroll sports bar](#) near Rittenhouse Square and has two children in the Central Bucks School District, is also speaking out in favor of policies approved by the school board's Republican majority, and his wife, Aarati Martino, a Google engineer, is running as a Republican for a seat on the board.

Martino declined an interview request but answered some questions by email. Here's what we know about Martino's current interests and involvement in school board races.

His PAC aims to counter those 'indoctrinating our children'

In July 2021, [Martino announced that he had committed \\$500,000 to a newly formed PAC](#), Back to School PA, that would make \$10,000 donations to 50 slates of candidates across the state. It was likely the most money a single donor had ever committed.

The PAC's formation came as school boards were at [the center of tense debate around topics including critical race theory](#), an issue being pushed by Republican politicians.

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Martino said at the time that he was solely focused on opposing pandemic school closures and had given money to some Democrats. But most of the PAC's money went to Republicans, and Martino — who previously described himself to the Inquirer as a “hardcore Republican” — had framed the effort as an attempt to counter teachers' unions, traditional allies of Democrats.

The PAC now has a broader — and explicitly partisan — focus.

Back to School USA “is taking the fight directly to the liberal teachers' unions and special interest groups that are responsible for indoctrinating our children,” its website reads.

Clarice Schillinger, who previously worked for Back to School PA and ran in the Republican primary for lieutenant governor, is the federal PAC's executive director.

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In an email, Schillinger said the PAC “plans to invest in the races across the U.S. where the public school unions are backing candidates ...The system set within our democracy should not be owned by one side or another.” The budget, number of candidates, and locations will be “determined by the support we get from concerned citizens across the country.”

Jeff Yass donates to his PAC, and James O’Keefe will feature at its fundraiser

Records show the PAC — which registered as a federal super PAC in June 2022 — took in \$58,000 last year, including \$25,000 from [Jeff Yass, the Main Line billionaire investor](#) and school-choice proponent. (In 2021, Back to School PA received \$145,000 from PACs that have received significant funding from Yass.)

It donated \$9,900 last year to a Virginia PAC that backs candidates with “conservative principles” for school board and other offices, and \$3,000 to a school board candidate in Georgia.

Back to School USA had been planning to host an April 7 fundraiser at Mar-a-Lago with Project Veritas founder James O’Keefe, who was removed as leader

of the right-wing group that secretly films people to expose supposed liberal bias.

An invite for the event — aimed at “flipping woke school boards Nationwide!” — listed a host committee that includes former Mississippi governor Phil Bryant, U.S. Reps. Mark Alford of Missouri and Dale Strong of Alabama, and Sheriff Mark Lamb of Arizona. (Lamb has partnered with Brave Books, a children’s book company that promises that it “will never go woke. We are committed to providing your family books with Biblical and patriotic truth.”)

The event was removed from the PAC’s website over the weekend. Martino said that “all events at Mar-a-Lago were postponed recently,” but the PAC expects to hold the event in the future.

It’s a fight against ‘porn,’ not an LGBTQ bias

In Central Bucks, where rival campaigns are mobilizing as the district and Republican-led school board face allegations of anti-LGBTQ bias, Martino says he’ll be backing Republican candidates.

“We have not set any limits or targets on how much money will be spent to support our slate of candidates,” he said, referring to Bucks Families for Leadership, the Martino-founded PAC that served as the primary funding source for the district’s Republican slate in the 2021 election.

Martino recently has spoken out on social media in support of recent school board policies, including a [policy targeting sexualized content in library books](#) that was adopted over the outcry of the ACLU — which has since [filed a federal discrimination complaint against the district](#) — and others who warned of censorship and worried LGBTQ-themed books would be at risk of removal.

Since the district enacted rules accompanying the policy, district employees say [more than 60 books have been challenged](#).

“This is again not about gay rights, this is about PORN,” Martino wrote on his Facebook page. “Yes it is about PORN and you can find PORN in many school libraries because its there now.”

In his email, Martino said “the books issue is not a top priority for me and will not be in the future. That said, I felt compelled to comment as the misinformation on this topic is absurd.” He noted that if a book is removed, the district says it “shall be replaced with a book from the same genre or with a similar pedagogical purpose.” (Lawyers with the ACLU say the language is an attempt to justify removals and have questioned how alternatives would be decided.)

“I am sure there are better books to be in our library than ‘Gender Queer,’” Martino said. “This doesn’t make me a book banner”

Martino also defended Central Bucks' [ban on staff advocacy](#) — which prohibits Pride flags and other displays in classrooms — calling it a “nonsensical narrative” that the policy was anti-LGBTQ. “It's not the school's job to create safe spaces — it's the school's job to educate our kids,” he wrote online, later adding that he wasn't talking about physical safety, but safety from ideas that people might disagree with.

His wife is running for school board ‘to positively lift’ the district

Aarati Martino declined an interview request. On a newly launched campaign website, she said she was running “to positively lift our kids, our district, and our community!” and aimed to “teach kids grit, compassion, respect, responsibility” and tackle pandemic learning loss.

Martino — who is also a GOP donor and gave money last year to U.S. Senate candidate Mehmet Oz and in 2021, to candidates Kathy Barnette and Jeff Bartos — recently [told the Delaware Valley Journal](#) she and Paul moved from Silicon Valley to Doylestown “so our kids could grow up somewhere normal, with good schools and great hoagies.”

Silicon Valley has a “huge divide,” she said: “You either send your kids to a very expensive, elite private school with all the other well-compensated people's kids, or you could send them into public school where your kids are going to school with gangsters.”

On Facebook, she elaborated on the “gangsters” comment, saying she had asked a colleague “what was so bad” about the schools in Mountain View, Calif., where Google's headquarters are located.

“They said that when you invited kids from the class over for birthday parties, you would usually invite everyone (as any inclusive parent would do)” she

wrote. “However in this case you actually did have to be careful, because some of the parents were dangerous criminals!”

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