



## SCHOOL CONTROVERSIES DOMINATED THIS CONTENTIOUS ELECTION CYCLE



Schooling and culture wars played an outsized role in last week's elections.

The Mequon-Thiensville School Board in Wisconsin, where incumbents **convincingly** held off a recall challenge from activists ostensibly opposed to teaching critical race theory, was one of 84 school board recall efforts lodged against 215 board members in 2021. This is a level of activity that the **website** [Ballotpedia](#) says is roughly four times higher than usual.

Meanwhile, in **Douglas County, Colorado**, a slate of conservative school board members swept the ballot after raising more than \$300,000 from local millionaires and national donors such as the **1776 Project PAC**, a national effort to shut down instruction on racial injustice.

And in the **hotly contested Virginia governor's race**, polling results suggested that education was the top issue for voters who narrowly elected Republican Glenn Youngkin over Democrat Terry McAuliffe.

Youngkin, a former private-equity executive at the Carlyle Group whose own children attended private schools, shot ahead of McAuliffe at the tail end of the campaign in part by **promising parents more control** over public school curricula, with an eye toward banning instruction related to racial inequities and justice. His campaign famously released an ad at the tail end of the campaign featuring a mother who **complained** that the inclusion of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in a public high school's AP English class shocked her son (a senior) by painting too vivid a picture of the evils of slavery.

The Virginia victory in particular resonated with Republicans, with House minority leader

Rep. Kevin McCarthy [calling education](#) a major means of reclaiming power in next year's midterm elections and beyond. McCarthy promised to create a "Parents' Bill of Rights" that would give parents more control over what is taught in school.

Yet NEPC Fellow [Jack Schneider](#) of the University of Massachusetts at Lowell questioned the degree to which some of these promises can be fulfilled, noting that schools are governed by school board members elected to represent the entire community and not by governors or, for that matter, by individual parents. Also, as Schneider told *The Washington Post*, "If parents alone are deciding what happens inside schools, what it would mean is unmaking public education and instead having each individual family pursue their own self-interest in a free market."

In addition to protesting instruction on critical race theory—which in reality is rarely if ever taught in K-12 schools—Republican challengers tapped into their base's opposition to mask mandates, vaccines, pandemic-related school closures, and quarantines. Controversy surrounding these issues has created a toxic brew at recent school board meetings to the point that the National School Boards Association sought federal assistance with handling harassment. (In the wake of protests from some members, the association subsequently backpedaled, apologizing for characterizing some of the threats as "domestic terrorism.")

NEPC Fellow and UCLA professor [John Rogers](#) attributed the victories of school board member slates to messaging (surrounding issues such as [critical race theory](#) and mask mandates), as well as to the infusion of larger-than-usual pots of money into typically sleepy school board races—many of which are officially nonpartisan—and to organized groups of parents and others dissatisfied with the way schools have handled the pandemic.

"It was those . . . dynamics together," he told [NBC News](#).

The money, and the institutional supports that aligned with that money, mattered. The messaging was quite effective. And the underlying stress and discontent with the fact that conditions have not returned to 'normal' led people to want to take action. . . . Clearly there's a strategic effort to push actions at the school board level and it does seem to have had some success.

Rogers expressed concern about what will happen next in school districts where conflicts dominated this month's elections.

"If all you bring to your school board is conflict and anger," Rogers said, "it's going to be difficult to get the day-to-day done."

## NEPC Resources on Politics

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

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