

Christian Nationalism and Educational Policy in the United States



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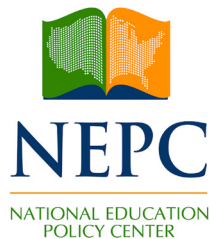
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I. Executive Summary

Although American public education was historically a Christian project, the nature and purpose of public schooling with respect to religion and religious instruction have always been immersed in the push and pull of denominationalism—and, in modern America, secularism. (Denominationalism here refers to differences among different branches of Christianity.) The recent rise in prominence and political power of Christian nationalists threatens this delicate balance. As used throughout this brief, the terms *Christian nationalism* and *White Christian nationalism* are applied interchangeably to refer to a primarily, though not exclusively, Protestant political, religious, societal, ideological, and cultural movement that entwines politics and religion. Others have applied the term *Christian nationalist* to people, groups, and ideas that do not include the same express racial element as here (although that racial element is often implicit in those instances as well).

Christian nationalists embrace four foundational assumptions:

- a. The United States was founded as a Christian nation and is divinely chosen and blessed by God;
- b. A rigid and clearly defined societal hierarchy should be maintained under the dominion of this Christian God (e.g., males above females, adults over children, Whites over other racial/ethnic groups);
- c. Preserving God-given freedom is of paramount importance, but only for the White Christian men atop the hierarchy; and
- d. For all others, authoritarian and at times violent forms of control and governance (rather than deliberative democracy) are needed to maintain proper, God-given order in families, communities, the nation, and the world.

These assumptions lead to a vision of public schooling holding that because education is a powerful social system that shapes national identity and ideologies, public education should actively promote Christianity and/or Christian values. In this vision, “wokeness” in the classroom—whether it is introduced by teachers or through curriculum—is a danger to Christian values, and Christians are the victims of “godless brainwashing” in public schools. In order to make schools prioritize Christian values, then, the end sanctifies the means and nearly any action is permissible, indeed demanded. Christian nationalism has driven recent book ban movements, parental choice campaigns, and school board takeovers. It is undergirded by a legal movement finding increasing purchase at the Supreme Court, in particular. While decisions made by the Warren Court (1953-1969) generally limited government entanglement with religion and the promotion of religious expression in schools, the Roberts Court (2005-present) has been far more favorable toward religion. Recent Roberts Court decisions show a clear turn toward re-entangling state and religious practice.

President Trump’s second term, guided by the Heritage Foundation’s *Project 2025* report, has promoted a Christian nationalist visioning of public education policy. His second election signaled a federal turn toward imagining public education as one battleground in a holy war to prefigure the United States as an explicitly and unapologetically Christian nation. Moreover, for many Republican-controlled state governments, Trump’s presidency and recent Supreme Court rulings have had an emboldening effect when it comes to enacting White Christian nationalist educational policies. Additionally, “grassroots” activism—funded by right-wing political action committees and networks of well-funded conservative organizations aligned with White Christian nationalist visioning for public education—aggressively lobbies school boards to adopt policies favorable to their ideological preferences.

Christian nationalism in its most radical manifestations is an eschatological project tied to a belief that we are in the midst of a battle for the soul of the United States at the end of the world. This is not a variety of unconnected policy debates; it is, rather, a political struggle over whether the United States should be a pluralistic democracy or a theocracy based in a very particular Christian theology. As this struggle rages, state lawmakers can help the public understand the stakes involved by focusing public attention on the concrete effects of Christian nationalist ideology in schools. We recommend that state lawmakers *require that any school receiving public funds publicly detail specifically which groups of people, and what academic content, are not welcome in the school.*



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II. Introduction

Religion, particularly Protestant Christianity, has been linked to education in the U.S. since before the Common Schools movement in the early 19th century. The first public schooling law, the 1647 Old Deluder Satan Law,¹ aimed to create schools to prevent the devil from corrupting idle minds. Before Horace Mann's push for more structured and widespread schooling, education was a mix of church-run, privately funded, Sunday, and informal primary schools operated by women, all of which included some form of Christian (mainly Protestant) instruction. As common schools spread, religion remained central to education, with many believing, as George B. Emerson put it, that, "The Common School is a preeminently Christian institution."² However, the arrival of Catholic, German Lutheran, Jewish, and other immigrants—all with their own ideas of what theological commitments were most important to impart to young people—challenged the prevailing belief that the dominance of a kind of nondenominational pan-Protestantism in these schools in the late 19th century was universally acceptable to all Americans. By the 20th and 21st centuries, debates shifted from which version of Christianity should be taught to whether religion should play any role in public schools at all. While this brief will explore how court rulings on this issue have evolved, we also note that Christianity's influence on American schooling has always been present, shaping both education and citizenship. This influence relates directly to concerns about Christian nationalism today.

What is Christian Nationalism?

Christian nationalism, while not new and arguably a part of the country since its founding,³ has manifested in unique ways in recent policy and curriculum debates, making it a key issue when discussing U.S. education. As many scholars note, Christian nationalism occurs across a spectrum of beliefs and behaviors. For example, it is not uncommon to see Ameri-

can flags being displayed in churches, and students in classrooms often encounter the words “one nation under God” as part of their daily recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. These are relatively mild examples of Christian nationalism. However, more extreme manifestations undergird authoritarian threats to the United States’ democracy, as in the attempted insurrection on January 6th, 2021. In the current context, Christian nationalism is a term used to describe a political, religious, societal, ideological, and cultural movement that has tied political and religious belief together for the purpose of promoting “nativism, White supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity” while also claiming a “divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism.”⁴ So while alignment with political conservatism is the strongest predictor of Christian nationalism, alignment with Christianity itself does not have the same predictive correlation.⁵ Many Christians reject Christian nationalist ideologies *because* their religious beliefs do not align with the movement’s assumptions and/or goals. However, Christian nationalism *is* a form of Christianity,⁶ and Christian and biblical symbols and beliefs are often used to justify and make religious the political goals of the movement. Scholars often use the modifier *White* with Christian nationalism to highlight the ways in which race plays a prominent, if not preeminent, role in how Christian nationalism functions in the educational sphere. These scholars assert that White Christian nationalism coalesces around several core assumptions that:

- a. The United States was founded as a Christian nation and is divinely chosen and blessed by God;
- b. A rigid and clearly defined societal hierarchy should be maintained under the dominion of this Christian God (e.g., males above females, adults over children, Whites over other racial/ethnic groups);
- c. Preserving God-given freedom is of paramount importance, but only for the White Christian men atop the hierarchy; and
- d. For all others, authoritarian and at times violent forms of control and governance (rather than deliberative democracy) are needed to maintain proper, God-given order in families, communities, the nation, and the world.⁷

This brief will use both “Christian nationalism” and “White Christian nationalism” depending on the source, but even sources that don’t use White Christian nationalism as a term recognize race as a central factor, as seen in Whitehead and Perry’s work, which states, “We would stress how much of what we observe regarding Christian nationalism’s pernicious effects are *racial* in their origin and character.”⁸ There is a great deal of complexity in the way scholars talk about the religious and racial makeup of White Christian nationalist groups. Scholars note that White Christian nationalism is mostly a Protestant Christian movement and is especially prevalent in evangelical communities. However, it is not *exclusively* Protestant or evangelical. White Christian nationalists—and particular theological beliefs that sustain White Christian nationalist thinking—occur across Christian denominations, including Catholicism, mainline Protestant denominations, and Mormonism. Similarly, while Christian nationalists tend to be White, some Christian nationalist religious communities are racially diverse in their makeup. One takeaway here is that there is a great deal of nuance in who these ideas appeal to and do not appeal to that is complicated by multiple factors that

extend beyond considerations of only race or only religion. Historically in the United States, White nationalism and Christian nationalism have deeply overlapped and have rhetorically supported each other almost seamlessly. The relatively racially diverse makeup of some modern Christian nationalist movements means that scholars are only beginning to tease apart these distinctions.⁹

The Influence of Christian Nationalism on Public Education

What does Christian nationalism look like in practical terms for public education? What kind of pressure does Christian nationalism exert on school districts? Individual examples vary: Funie Hsu writes about parental pressure and legal challenges to school-based mindfulness programs, which, often incorrectly, link mindfulness curricula to Buddhist practice and attack yoga as a form of proselytizing Hinduism. Christian nationalist legal organizations have sought to characterize non-Christian religions “as a danger” and a “threat to the religious liberty rights of public-school children.”¹⁰ Similarly, scholars have documented the Christian nationalist roots and practices of parental groups (e.g. Moms for Liberty, Lions for Liberty, Ottawa Impact) that drive politicized school board takeovers,¹¹ book bans, and attacks on Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Certainly, the increasingly visible and legislated broadsides against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in education have their roots in Christian nationalist ideologies.¹² Examples like these make clear that while Christian nationalists may rhetorically appeal to religious liberty rights in their arguments, what they are really interested in is Christian supremacy as educational policy. In the same districts where school-based mindfulness and SEL are vilified as threats to religious liberty rights, parents’ groups, school board members, and state legislators push for displaying the Ten Commandments in every classroom. Fundamentally, a Christian nationalist vision of public education assumes the following:

- a. Education is a powerful social system that shapes national identity and ideologies;
- b. Public education should actively promote Christianity and/or Christian values;
- c. “Wokeness” in the classroom—whether it is introduced by teachers or through curriculum—is a danger to Christian values;
- d. Christians are victims of a secularizing society,¹³ subject to “godless brainwashing” in public schools¹⁴; and
- e. in order to make schools prioritize Christian values, the end sanctifies the means and nearly any action is permissible, indeed demanded.¹⁵

Christian nationalism doesn’t only affect education at the state and local level, of course. Federally, Christian nationalism is particularly evident in movements in the current administration to eliminate the Department of Education altogether, and in the school choice movement that became a cornerstone of Betsy DeVos’ tenure at the Department of Education during the first Trump administration. School choice is a cause that DeVos and her family, in prior decades, had championed in Michigan to great effect.¹⁶ Prioritizing school choice at the federal level had two goals, both in line with Christian nationalist ideologies:

1) transferring public funding for public schooling to private, religious, and homeschooling options, and 2) ultimately, undermining the collective project of public schooling in the United States.

What marks this movement as Christian nationalist are its roots in ideological beliefs that public schools have lost their way in fulfilling their original mission of instilling Christian values in the citizenry and that the government should have no ability to intervene in or influence child-rearing. Thus, the Christian homeschooling movement has long been a beachhead of “militant patriarchal authority” in service of Christian nationalism.¹⁷ Scholars like historian Kobes Du Mez have documented the political groundswell in the 1990s, driven by James Dobson, that successfully undermined certification requirements for homeschool teachers.¹⁸ These requirements were positioned as government overreach that particularly threatened traditional gender roles and upset the authority of parents over their children that Dobson argued was divinely ordained. At the same time, political scientist Chelsea Ebin makes a clear argument, as have others, that justifications for school choice emerged as politically useful during desegregation when it was strategically reframed as centered around “religious freedom” for parents and families.¹⁹

III. Review of Literature: Defining Christian Nationalism Across Fields

Because Christian nationalism has already had such dramatic effects on public and educational policy, scholars across multiple fields of study—including but not limited to sociology, history, theology, and education—have examined the movement’s history, foundation, goals, and impact on American politics, society, and life. In this brief, we outline some of these contributions to establish a robust definition and understanding of how Christian nationalism is affecting public education and what educational policymakers might do about it.

Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry constructed a scale of adherence to Christian nationalist ideals which proposes that Christian nationalism is not an all-or-nothing proposition. That is, there may be many individuals who hold Christian nationalist ideals with varying degrees of internal ideological consistency and across multiple religious traditions. Using the 2007/2017 Baylor Religion Survey, Whitehead and Perry established four categories of individuals based on their scale: rejecters, resisters, accommodators, or ambassadors. While rejecters “generally believe there should be no connection between Christianity and politics,” resisters are less certain and “may disagree that prayer should be instituted in public schools . . . but they may be undecided about allowing the display of religious symbols in public places.” On the other side of the scale, ambassadors are “wholly supportive of Christian nationalism, while accommodators might perhaps agree “that the federal government should advocate Christian values [but] might be undecided about . . . officially declaring the United States a Christian nation.”²⁰ Because these categories are taken from survey data, other patterns can be drawn. Rejecters and resisters tend to be younger and more prominent in the West and Northeast, even though members of all categories can be found in every region and age range. Ambassadors and accommodators tend to be White and less well-educated, and it is important to note that, perhaps surprisingly, non-Christians

are represented in these two groups in significant numbers. The survey data featured in this study makes it difficult to find an easy or direct link between Christian practice and adherence to Christian nationalist beliefs. For religious adherents of White Christian nationalism, the percentage of adherence actually goes down when participants report increased frequency of attendance at religious services. However, data from Robert P. Jones suggested that for “[W]hite evangelical protestants, there is . . . a stronger boost in likelihood of affiliation due to racist attitudes among *frequent* church attenders than among *infrequent* church attenders.”²¹ Thus, Christian nationalism is positioned in sociological survey studies as a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped not only by religious affiliation but also by broader demographic, cultural, social, and ideological factors.

Political scientists, too, are reckoning with the way that Christian nationalist rhetoric has animated and influenced American politics. Chelsea Ebin constructs a twofold taxonomy of Christian nationalist political organizing that considers political engagement. The first is the construction of an imagined halcyon Christian past to which America must be returned. This reframing of reality functions to establish a victimization narrative whereby Christian nationalists and supremacists can claim to have had something wrenched away from them. Rather than thinking of Christian nationalism as functionally about backlash—against desegregation in schooling, for instance—Ebin suggests a second function: prefiguration. This is a move by radical right-wing Christian nationalists to reconstruct in the future an American past that never existed, around which their (largely imagined) victimization narrative is justified. This vision is rooted in Christian, male, and White supremacy and creates a fictional “before and after” such that “the past can be constructed and reconstructed as necessary to assert a tradition of Christian supremacy and warn of a future of Christian victimhood.”²² Political analyses like Ebin’s, which center the utility of Christian nationalist rhetorics in driving political engagement to enact a specific and future vision of America, highlight the bidirectional relationship between religious rhetoric and political engagement—which is to say, politicians understand that if they can tie political issues with religious issues, as was the case with abortion in the 1980s, they can then leverage that issue to engage religious people in politics.

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Any understanding of Christian nationalism as chiefly a political and cultural movement is not uncontroversial. Paul Miller draws clear distinctions between Christianity as a religion and the politics of Christian nationalism when he states that Christianity is a belief system about “ultimate things,” while

Christian nationalism is fundamentally about asserting “a political ideology about American identity” where “Christian nationalists invoke Christian rhetoric to justify their political views.”²³ However, some recent work by historians, theologians, and religious studies scholars explicitly aims to trace the theological frameworks that support Christian nationalism. If theology is understood as religious beliefs and practices that focus on the divine and humanity’s relationship with divinity, then it follows that these beliefs and practices also shift and change to reflect humanity’s changing understandings of the divine. Historically, such arguments posit that theology is neither fixed nor singular. Luther’s 95 Theses marked an

explosion of multiplicities of Christian theology that reinterpreted humanity's relationship with the divine. In this vein, then, scholars who trace the theological frameworks that animate the Christian nationalist movement examine what Christian beliefs have been repurposed, reframed, and reinterpreted to make nationalism or racism or Christian supremacy both religious beliefs *and* political beliefs. For example, Matthew Taylor chronicled the rise of Christian nationalist theologies within charismatic,²⁴ nondenominational congregations, which he sees as an animating force in the current marriage of conservative politics and Christian nationalism in the United States. Charismatic religious beliefs about prophecy, deliverance, and healing have been reformed and reshaped within many charismatic nondenominational congregations using a militaristic discursive frame that positions Christians as engaged in spiritual warfare to establish dominion²⁵ over every aspect of American life: religion, family, education, government, media, business, arts, and entertainment. These charismatic nondenominational congregations' most prominent symbols—the Appeal to Heaven flag, for instance—have played especially prominent roles in signaling to believers across the spectrum of Christian faiths that their actions are sanctified.²⁶

Historians have been particularly helpful in tracing the connection between Christianity and White nationalism in American politics by pointing to the historical use of Christianity as a bastion for Whiteness and White supremacy in the United States. For example, they outline the role played by many evangelical congregations in fighting against the desegregation of public schools after *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling.²⁷ Such religious beliefs and practices paired with political power had material consequences for public education, as private Christian schools—often called segregation academies—sprung up across the South in response to the ruling. Indeed, Anthea Butler has asserted that “evangelicalism . . . is a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support the hegemony of White Christian men over and against the flourishing of others.”²⁸ Other denominations have faced similar if less withering critiques.²⁹

Finally, the rapid spread of Christian nationalist ideology and symbology has certainly benefitted from the proliferation of politically conservative and far right media outlets, social media sites like TruthSocial and X, and the growth of partisan media generally after the repeal of the Federal Communication Commission's Fairness Doctrine. As such, Christian nationalist and other alt-right conspiracy theories are easily accessible to most Americans, whether they watch cable television or spend most of their time online. Manifestations of this phenomenon abound: the Manosphere (a loose collection of misogynistic streamers, websites, and forums), the alt-right's co-opting of the wellness movement to discredit medicine and science more broadly, and the increasingly popular tradwife (traditional wife) content creators. Taken together, such culturally significant media influences both reflect and spread White Christian nationalist insecurities around race, gender, nationality, religion, and sexuality.

IV. Recent Developments in Education

Much of the current backlash against public education by Christian nationalists can be traced to Supreme Court decisions from the Warren Court era (1953-1969). During that

time, the Court dramatically redefined the relationship between public schools and the First Amendment. The Roberts Court (2005-present) has since wielded a jurisprudence that is far more favorable toward religion, at the expense of entanglement concerns. Because most of the cases that legislate religion's role in public education and the government's role in private education rely on the First Amendment, it's worth recalling the relevant text from the religion clauses: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Until landmark cases like *Abington v. Schempp*³⁰ and *Engel v. Vitale*,³¹ American public schools often promoted Protestant religious content as part of both the curriculum and daily school practices.

In the early 1960s, the Court, for the first time, ruled that devotional Bible readings and mandatory Christian prayers in schools violated students' First Amendment rights. Shortly after Chief Justice Earl Warren's retirement, *Lemon v. Kurtzman*³² introduced a three-part test to determine when government involvement in religion, especially in schools, became excessive. The test aimed to balance two goals: avoiding the establishment of religion and protecting individual religious freedom, including the right to abstain from religion.³³ While this balancing test held for roughly half a century, it has recently been rendered moot.

Supreme Court Jurisprudence

Recent decisions in *Kennedy v. Bremerton*,³⁴ *Carson v. Makin*,³⁵ *Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue*,³⁶ and *Trinity Lutheran v. Comer*³⁷ show a clear turn toward re-entangling state and religious practice. In *Kennedy*, the Court upheld a public-school football coach's right to pray at midfield after games, despite the potential for coercion such an act by an adult representative of a public school might have on students, and particularly student athletes on his team. In its decision, the Court dismantled the *Lemon* test. *Trinity Lutheran*, *Espinoza*, and *Carson* ruled that religious schools should be treated like public ones in terms of state funding. A recent case, *Oklahoma v. Drummond*,³⁸ further tested these boundaries. The Catholic Archdiocese of Oklahoma proposed a religious charter school that explicitly taught Catholic doctrine as part of its curriculum. The Supreme Court was equally divided, largely because Justice Barrett recused herself, and thus, the lower court's ruling against it stood. Still, it's an open question as to how a similar test case might be decided with the Court at full strength.

Another ruling, in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*,³⁹ expanded parental religious rights in public education, particularly around the availability of LGBTQ+-themed books in schools. These recent and pending cases portend a reassertion at the Supreme Court level for certain kinds of Christian prerogatives in public schooling through religious belief and practice, parental choice, and public funding. That these are all priorities of White Christian nationalism is no coincidence.

White Christian Nationalism and the Federal Government

President Trump's second term has brought about a resurgent White Christian nationalist visioning of public education policy, largely because he has appointed cabinet members who

understand public education as one of the key battlegrounds for reestablishing traditional (White and male) authority. Two appointments will likely hold particular significance for the future of education: the appointment of Russell Vought as the head of the Office of Management and Budget, and the appointment of Linda McMahon as the head of the Department of Education.

Vought is a self-described Christian nationalist⁴⁰ and one of the architects of the controversial *Project 2025*, which laid out a sweeping policy blueprint for restoring “conservative” values to American life. This 900+-page document has recommendations that would fundamentally change the federal government’s involvement in public education by strengthening the impact of White Christian nationalism on public schools at a national level.⁴¹ Vought’s recommendations in the document include:

1. dismantling of the Department of Education so that its only function is to become a “statistics-gathering agency that disseminates information to the states”⁴²,
2. eliminating Title 1 funding earmarked for high-poverty schools and districts and replacing that funding with block grants to states that require no spending oversight,
3. ramping up censorship and book banning at the national level by leveraging federal funds to ensure compliance with censorship,
4. codifying discrimination against LGBTQ+ students,
5. increasing funding for private school vouchers, and
6. dismantling workers’ rights (including teachers) by limiting the ability of unions to bargain collectively.⁴³

Such a vision of public education has already begun to be enacted within the Trump administration, and Vought has played an important role. Even during Trump’s first term, Vought used the power of the Office of Management and Budget to instruct agencies to stop training on critical race theory or White privilege and to cancel contracts that did not comply with the directive. Vought’s ability to tie federal funding to compliance with censorship and demands to erase diversity initiatives has proved devastatingly effective in Trump’s second term, especially for higher education institutions that receive grants from the federal government to conduct research.

Linda McMahon’s appointment to lead the Department of Education perhaps signals that the current administration is already well on its way to following the blueprint laid out for public education in *Project 2025*. In a speech, she described the department as engaging in a “historic final mission” to effectively transfer oversight of public education to the state level by shuttering the Department of Education.⁴⁴ Before her historic final mission, however, McMahon has already downsized The Office for Civil Rights, which is responsible for ensuring equal access and civil rights in federally funded schools,⁴⁵ and rescinded guidance related to school book bans.⁴⁶ Under an executive order from President Trump, McMahon has been instructed to remove government approval from accrediting agencies that require colleges to demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher educa-

tion.⁴⁷ Further, McMahon’s commitment to the school choice movement—what she terms “educational freedom”—runs parallel with White Christian nationalist goals of strengthening religious schools by reducing funding for public education. This pays out in the passage of H.R.1, the Big Beautiful Bill Act—signed into law on July 4th of 2025—which establishes a “permanent and uncapped” federal, national school choice tax credit.⁴⁸

White Christian Nationalism and State Governments

President Trump’s reelection signaled a federal turn toward imagining public education as one battleground in a holy war to prefigure the United States as an explicitly and unapologetically Christian nation. For many state governments with predominantly conservative constituencies, Trump’s presidency and recent Supreme Court rulings have had an emboldening effect when it comes to enacting White Christian nationalist educational policies. We offer a few examples here, many of which are being challenged in court, and simultaneously, inspiring other state legislatures to bring forward similar legislation. It is worth noting that the environment in the states is changing rapidly, and what is referenced here represents only a snapshot in time:

1. In June 2024, Oklahoma State Superintendent Ryan Walters issued a directive requiring all public schools to teach the Bible, including the Ten Commandments, as part of the curriculum. This mandate positions the Bible as a “cornerstone of Western civilization” and a foundational influence on American legal and ethical systems. Walters also requested \$3 million in state funds to purchase Bibles for classrooms.⁴⁹
2. Louisiana’s state government enacted a law in June 2024 that required the display of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom. The law mandated that the display include a King James Bible version of the Ten Commandments, accompanied by a context statement explaining their role in American education and government.⁵⁰
3. In June 2023, Texas passed a law allowing public schools to hire religious chaplains to provide support for students’ mental health and well-being, functioning in the same capacity as a school psychologist or counselor might to provide student support services. Under the law, districts can use school safety funds for chaplain salaries under the law.⁵¹
4. North Carolina’s House passed a bill in April 2025 that facilitates book banning in public schools by establishing mandatory review committees for library materials and allowing school districts to be subject to lawsuits by parents, guardians, and residents if school libraries violate book bans.⁵²
5. Multiple states—including Florida, Iowa, Indiana, and Tennessee—have LGBTQ+ education laws that limit classroom instruction or discussion about gender identity and/or sexual orientation in public school classrooms. Montana’s senate passed a bill that allows schools to misgender and forcibly out transgender and non-binary students. Such bills often use “parent choice” or “parent rights” as the primary concern while downplaying concerns about the safety and well-being of LGBTQ+ students and youth.⁵³

6. Legislation in Indiana, Tennessee, Texas, and other majority-Republican states would allow public schools to deny enrollment to students who cannot prove lawful immigration status.⁵⁴ Although these bills either have not passed as yet, or were tabled for the most recent legislative term, they speak to the ways that some conservative state-level lawmakers work to legislate public education to promote White Christian nationalist goals of exclusionary access to societal resources for those who are not at the top of the White Christian nationalist hierarchy, which privileges White, straight, Christian men.

V. Discussion and Analysis

These legislative actions, and others like them, highlight how conservative lawmakers have pushed to reshape public education into a tool for advancing White Christian nationalist ideology. By mandating religious instruction, restricting inclusive curricula, empowering religious ideology to overlap with public education, and targeting already marginalized students, these policies aim to shape public schools in ways that teach an exclusionary cultural vision of America and Americans to students. While many of these laws face legal challenges, the proliferation of such laws being proposed, advanced, and legislated signals a broader movement to weaken the democratic and pluralistic foundations of public education. State constitutions differ from one another, in interesting and important ways, in how they approach public education. Though so-called Blaine Amendments, named after James G. Blaine who sought to encode a formal federal ban on financial support for religious educational institutions, exist at the level of state charters, they have been significantly complicated, and weakened, by recent Supreme Court jurisprudence. Still, they remain on the books in many states, often restricting educational funding to public schools.

White Christian Nationalism and School Districts

Local school boards and district policies have become another battleground that has drawn enormous amounts of “grassroots” activism that aligns with White Christian nationalist visioning for public education. However, much of the grassroots activism is funded and resourced through political action committees and networks of well-funded conservative organizations. By far the most prominent example of this kind of “grassroots” organizing is Moms for Liberty. Moms for Liberty started in Florida in 2021 and, by the beginning of 2024, had grown to 310 chapters across 48 states with more than 130,000 members.⁵⁵ Moms for Liberty works to reshape local educational policies in alignment with Christian nationalist values through concerted efforts to a) elect school board members who advocate for policies, such as book bans and the promotion of religious teaching in schools (coded as Christian); b) influence curriculum content to reflect White Christian nationalist anxieties about race, gender, and sexuality; and c) challenge established educational standards, particularly those related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and including educational goals that involve socioemotional learning concepts like empathy. Moms for Liberty local chapters flood local school board meetings and actively engage in email and phone campaigns to local school board members and social media campaigns that sensationalize the contents of chal-

lenged books to galvanize community members. Given the largely sparse historical attendance at most school board meetings, such concerted efforts overrepresent the prevalence of these ideas within their local community to educational policymakers. And while Moms for Liberty uses grassroots rhetoric to describe its spread and appeal, it is financially backed by establishment organizations like the Heritage Foundation, which published *Project 2025*.⁵⁶ Moms for Liberty has also formed its own PAC, which it uses to help fund candidates' campaigns in order to "flip" local school board elections for policymaking that aligns with the group's goals for public education.

A deeper dive into one specific school board race in Pennsylvania, as examined by Prins, et al.⁵⁷ illustrates how a slate of candidates, aligned with a PAC, advanced White Christian nationalist ideals through sophisticated rhetorical strategies to appeal to a broader electorate. Candidates on this slate appropriated the language of inclusion and equity to position themselves as "underrepresented" or "silenced" voices and as persecuted minorities within the school district, while criticizing existing diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts as politically motivated. Additionally, candidates used euphemistic language like "common humanity" to promote colorblind ideology around race and "viewpoint diversity" to legitimize religious and conservative ideologies as equally valid perspectives—regardless of content or accuracy—which needed to be represented on the school board. Further, they called on parents' rights rhetoric to promote "opt-in" rather than "opt-out" policies for topics like gender, sexuality, and race, which was a challenge to established educational practices within the district. This strategic rebranding of exclusionary ideologies under the guise of inclusivity and parental empowerment reveals how White Christian nationalism is rhetorically masked and mainstreamed in local education policies.

School Choice and Parental Rights

The school choice and parental rights movements are also part of the larger, concerted effort to take America's schools back for God—understanding, of course, that it is a White Christian nationalist conception of God. Couched euphemistically as prioritizing educational "choice," the school choice movement aims to redirect funds toward private and religious schools while undermining funding for the public education system. By promoting voucher programs,⁵⁸ education savings accounts, charter school expansion, and the flow of public funds for religious schools, these efforts help fund religious institutions that teach Christian doctrine. Such schools operate with minimal oversight, without accountability to national and state educational assessments, and without risk of governmental challenge to discriminatory policies, including those against LGBTQ+ students and families.

There is robust opposition to these policies. In Texas, a relatively unlikely coalition of religious leaders and rural public-school advocates had, for years, resisted state legislative voucher policies. These groups gathered under an umbrella that sought to maintain separation of church and state, but also understood that public schools were civic community anchors.⁵⁹ Though the legal context is shifting in the direction of funding for religious schooling in some form or fashion at the Supreme Court, it's important to note that individual states often have strong and explicit language prohibiting such funding.⁶⁰ The Court seems ambivalent about religious charters, at least for now.

Simultaneously, the parental rights movement⁶¹ has been leveraged to challenge inclusive curricula, particularly those addressing race, gender, and sexuality. This movement is responsible for bans on books, surveillance of educators, and the marginalization of LGBTQ+ and non-Christian students with the rhetorical framing of “protecting children.” In practice, these efforts reassert a narrow, often White and Protestant, cultural supremacy within public education. Taken together, these movements reflect Christian nationalists’ view of public education as a threat to their vision of a Christian America, but they also reflect a broader strategy to reshape schools, using legal and legislative tools to roll back pluralism and reestablish and reinforce religious and racial hierarchies.

Finally, the rhetorics of Christian nationalism around religious liberty and the free exercise of religion might protect certain rights if the courts are challenged to make sure that it is universally applied across all religious groups. For example, three Jewish mothers sued the state of Kentucky in 2022,⁶² arguing that the state’s near-total abortion ban violated the religious freedom of those who believe life begins at birth, not conception. Although the case was dismissed for a lack of standing, these types of challenges could be made to work to expand jurisprudence being set by the Supreme Court to a vast range of religious beliefs beyond the far narrower Christian nationalist beliefs that are currently being privileged. They might also be linked to arguments in support of reanalyzing state-level Blaine Amendments as, in fact, supporting religious freedom through the protection of secular public education.

Visions of America: The Seven Mountain Mandate and The Founding Fathers

The White Christian nationalist vision of America misses the rich diversity of religious practice and engagement through the centuries of American history. White Christian nationalists purposefully misread the historical American project. Though the Pilgrims may have sought to establish a very particular type of Christian outpost far enough away from their own persecutors in Europe, the majority of the Founding Fathers were primarily concerned in the original documents not with a Puritan separatist god, but rather a thoroughly secularized Deist god of nature. This Deist god was nonspecific, nondenominational, and certainly separated from particular creedal requirements for governmental officials and institutions.⁶³

The White men who seized power from Great Britain *were* influenced by broadly Christian visions for human flourishing. However, there is an easily traced shift in American political religion from markedly Protestant to a more civil religion of Enlightenment reasoning through the 19th century.⁶⁴ Enlightenment reasoning, and the scientific method that it elevated, led to a secularization that, while it does not do away with religious belief, opens and sustains a long tradition of debate around the proper role of religion in the public and educational sphere. These questions have never been definitively settled and thus remain in tension. Christian nationalism is a particularly forceful voice within the current debate around these tensions.

Christian nationalist beliefs take advantage of a victimization discourse to prefigure a future America in which Christians dominate every sphere of influence. This is most clearly manifest in the Seven Mountain Mandate driving the New Apostolic Reformation, a relatively

recent and hugely influential charismatic Christian theological structure. Popularized by Lance Wallnau and others, the New Apostolic Reformation urges Christians to take over the seven spheres of culture—the family, religion, media, arts and entertainment, government, education, and business—to bring about God’s reign on Earth.⁶⁵ Followers of this movement root their beliefs in a prophetic structure that positions Christians as engaged in very real spiritual warfare against real and present demons. These demons include, for example: non-Christians, as well as Christians who are unsympathetic toward CN goals; LGBTQ+ people; minorities; women; and generally anyone who resists the imminent takeover of the seven mountains by Christian Nationalists.

Because no compromise with demons can be tolerated, the only possible approach to any of the spheres of culture, including education, is total domination.⁶⁶ This explains the maximalist approaches taken across the current Trump administration to any number of fields. The call to eliminate of the Department of Education and the full court press of “religious freedom” in schooling cases being brought before the Roberts Court over the last decade are clear examples of how such religious beliefs are working to change the face of public education. If education is a mountain that must be taken, individual and community prayer, and political action, can help take the mountain. The mountain of government, once dominated, can also be used to bring schooling to heel by enforcing Christian nationalist policies. The White Christian nationalist project, then, is a prefigured future linked to a false memory of a past when Christians had total control and weren’t victimized by the dual demons of diversity initiatives and secularization.

Requiring schools to tell the public who and what they won't teach . . . would lay plain the real impact of publicly funding Christian nationalist schools.

The project of dominating mountains of culture with a very particular brand of Christianity is fundamentally at odds with the “Founding Fathers” stated American project of democracy, pluralism, and egalitarianism. It is also not obvious to Americans who do not share the Christian nationalist worldview.

Such Americans might find themselves agreeing with (or at least not actively opposing) individual policy proposals, and they likely incorrectly assume that all parties are working under the same assumptions about the value of the democratic process. They are unlikely to understand that dominating the seven mountains of culture means taking them by whatever means necessary.⁶⁷ Or that in education, it also means “school choice” to fund religious institutions that teach Christian nationalist doctrine; parents’ rights only for *some* parents; discrimination against non-White, non-Christian, and gender diverse students; and a minority faction’s control over the educational institutions that serve the broader public. These goals are being achieved via political and legal action, but policy can make them more apparent. Requiring schools to tell the public who and what they won’t teach, for example, would lay plain the real impact of publicly funding Christian nationalist schools. This knowledge can inform political action.

VI. Recommendations

The struggle over whether the United States is essentially a pluralistic democracy or a Christian nation is essentially a political one. However, lawmakers can bring to light and call

attention to the nature of the movement's effects in schools. To do so, we recommend that state lawmakers *require that any school receiving public funds publicly detail specifically which groups of people, and what academic content, are not welcome in the school.*

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