

What We Need to Know Now to Respond to Right-Wing Attacks on Public Schools: A Research Agenda



The Freedom to Learn Collective

November 2025

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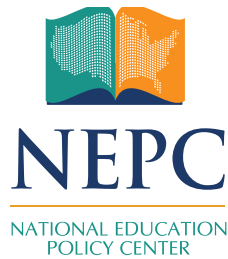
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Introduction

Progress toward educational, social, political, and economic equality has inevitably faced backlash. At times, this backlash has been explicit and violent. At others, it has been subtle and buried deep in institutional practices.¹ Against a backdrop of economic decline, politicians are once again harnessing fear and resentment to erase history; stifle discussions of “controversial topics”; and roll back diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.² The political attacks are backed by well-financed, networked organizations such as Moms for Liberty and Heritage Action.³ These organizations are intent on implementing right-wing education policies across all levels of the system, from local school libraries to the federal government.⁴

We asked a group of educational researchers, litigators, legislative advocates, educators, teacher union leaders, and community organizers to identify the kind of research-based knowledge needed to best understand how to oppose right-wing extremism and, in support of public education, buttress progressive litigation and advocacy efforts.⁵ What follows is a summary of what we learned.

The Work Ahead

Understanding the Right

The current resurgence of right-wing extremism in public education requires a renewed focus on defining and differentiating the various actors within these movements while mapping their interconnections and divisions. Researchers have studied the right’s influence on educational policy for decades.⁶ There is already solid scholarship on the rise of a new alliance between religious conservatives, neoliber-

als, authoritarian populists, and the managerial class, beginning in the 1990s,⁷ and how this alliance led to the weakening of support for public education and provided a foundation for efforts to privatize public education.⁸ In addition, research on the current surge of right-wing extremism in education examines policy debates fueling the passage of anti-CRT and anti-LGBTQ policies in education.⁹ These studies begin to map the ideological connections between key movement actors, shifting public views on curriculum, and white Christian nationalism.¹⁰

Given the current resurgence of right-wing extremism, we require new scholarship that examines the evolving structural dynamics and organizational relationships in this movement.

Understanding the Right: Key Research Questions

Who or what is the "right," the "moderate right," or the "far right" in education?

What are the alliances, networks, and fissures among the current alliances of the right in education? How have these shifted over time?

What are the tactics of rightist movements influencing public education, and how have they shifted over time?

Research should distinguish between traditional conservative and neoliberal education advocates, moderate-right actors, and right-wing extremists, examining how they coordinate efforts, compete for influence, and sometimes conflict over strategy. For example, researchers should examine the connections and fractures between school-choice advocates and advocates focused on culture-war issues. It is also critical to understand the complex role of churches in sometimes aiding and sometimes resisting right-wing movements.

While research outside of education describes intricate webs of dark money funding far-right networks,¹¹ the systematic study of these far-right networks *in education*, particularly *down to the state level*, where much of the policy advocacy is taking place, is underdeveloped.¹² Research could illuminate how these groups are organized (e.g., which organizations form intellectual or collaborative clusters, what organizations act as boundary spanners or gatekeepers between clusters, how centralized or decentralized these networks are). Understanding these funding networks will reveal the coordination and strategic priorities behind seemingly disparate educational policy battles, from anti-CRT legislation to school voucher programs.

Deep Listening to Build Solidarity

To defend public education and imagine new possibilities, we need to understand the underlying values and worldviews that shape contemporary educational conflicts. Research outside the field of education is beginning to examine how communities, especially in high-poverty White contexts, become susceptible to the grievances and solutions articulated by right-wing extremists.¹³ Less studied are the *educational experiences and priorities* of communities targeted by right-wing extremism. This requires intensive listening and is especially important in regions that have experienced economic decline, under-resourced schools, school closures, and community disinvestment. This research can help us understand the allure of right-wing extremism in some communities, encourage deep reflection, and help build solidarity across communities.

Deep Listening to Build Solidarity: Key Research Questions

How and what do people want their children to know and learn, and for what purposes?

*What specific grievances do they have with public education in its current forms?
What benefits or potential do they see in their schools?*

What contexts make people sympathetic to right-wing extremism? How do race, class, gender, religion, immigration status, and other intersecting identities matter?

What policy stances and narratives can bridge seemingly disparate concerns about education?

We have much to learn about the fundamental beliefs and concerns that drive how parents and communities engage with educational institutions. Researchers should examine what different groups believe about the purpose of education, what is taught in schools, and how it is delivered. For example, we need to understand what specific aspects of contemporary education create anxiety or opposition, as well as how racist school practices and policies¹⁴ affect the commitment to public schools among some communities of color. Understanding these foundational concerns can tease apart legitimate educational debates and extremist manipulation of parental and community fears. Research should also trace how people's personal experiences, media consumption, social networks, and cultural backgrounds intersect to create worldviews that then drive educational policy perspectives.

Documenting Harms to Schools and Students

Researchers need to document the harms of the latest right-wing extremist attacks on public education. Emerging research already suggests that right-wing attacks have created confusion, led to a narrowing and degrading of curriculum, advanced privatization, undermined support for marginalized students,¹⁵ and driven schools to expend an inordinate amount of resources in response.¹⁶

Educational leaders and advocates need more research that systematically documents the other harms of right-wing attacks on public education, especially their curricular, programmatic, organizational, and psychological impacts. Specifically, participants called for research that examines the following core questions.

Documenting Harms: Key Research Questions

What educational resources, programs, and opportunities are eliminated or modified as a result of recent federal, state, and local policy changes or pre-emptive compliance and self-censorship?

What are the short- and long-term consequences for schools, staff, and student well-being and civic engagement?

Despite several legal successes fending off right-wing attacks, many educators and local administrators are pre-emptively self-censoring and over-complying (so-called *obeying in advance*)¹⁷ with right-wing policies that have already been (or are very likely to be) defeated in court. Advocates at the meetings requested research that could be used in court battles and legislatures to show the impacts of pre-emptive compliance, document where it is taking place, and reveal how it creates pressure to accede to right-wing advocacy (e.g., through political pressures and surveillance tactics). They also expressed the need for systematic documentation of what specific courses or curricular units are being eliminated, what books or texts are being altered, and what information teachers are self-censoring. To challenge these efforts, advocates expressed the need to identify which restrictions or prohibited concepts are vague and how teachers are responding to unclear guidance. They also wanted to know how teacher censorship and program eliminations affect teacher and school-leader turnover.

Finally, advocates requested research that shows the impact of restrictions on curriculum and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and programs on student attendance, harassment and bullying in schools, mental health, rates of suicide and

self-harm, sense of belonging, and civic identity and engagement.¹⁸

Informing Resistance

Research is needed to study and to inform the responses to right-wing policy advocacy. This body of research is already developing. Existing research documents how teachers resist “divisive concepts” bans by drawing on state curriculum standards that often contradict such bans,¹⁹ how principals resist by speaking up at school board meetings,²⁰ how districts can best use social media to respond to targeted attacks,²¹ and how progressive advocates have created new state-level policy networks.²² However, more research is needed.²³ Scholars might, for example, analyze how pre-existing conditions in schools and school districts²⁴ influence the capacity to mount resistance and the types of strategies used.²⁵

Beyond classrooms and schools, new organizations of concerned parents and individuals have sprung up in many communities, and new state coalitions are forming. Research should document the organizational alliances and progressive advocacies that are having an impact and should detail their narrative, legal, and mobilization strategies.²⁶ Advocates need information on the role research is playing in resistance efforts—what research is being cited, how research is being used, and how best to present research evidence to different audiences.²⁷

Informing Resistance: Key Research Questions

How are people resisting right-wing extremism in education (in courts, board rooms, legislatures, unions, classrooms, schools, and communities)?

Which of these efforts are effective in which settings and for what audiences?

Conclusion

The work ahead requires sustained and rigorous research that deepens our understanding of the movements attacking public education; explores the worldviews and grievances that draw people to the right; documents the real-world impacts of right-wing extremism on students, educators, and communities; and illuminates effective resistance strategies. These suggestions represent starting points rather than prescriptions. There are many ways scholars can take up these critical questions and contribute to this urgent work. Doing so will help advocates and educators on the front lines to defend public schools, counter extremist narratives, and build the solidarity necessary to advance educational justice.

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as a larger umbrella term that encompasses a spectrum of political views and strategies that move from conservative movements that promote patriotism, religious fundamentalism, free-enterprise capitalism to extreme or far-right movements. Here, we use “right-wing extremism” interchangeably with “the far right” or “the radical right” to describe a global phenomenon of multiple and interconnected political parties, movements, networks, organizations, and subcultures that overlap and extend the “right wing” by promoting varying combinations of nationalist, authoritarian, anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian, supremacist, and exclusionary (xenophobic, racist, anti-LGBTQ) ideologies and that may or may not utilize violence as an explicit strategy.

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- 5 We convened 35 individuals over six months, supported by a Spencer Foundation Vision Grant. After this group identified the research they needed, the researchers on the team compared this research “wish list” to what has already been studied. In this memo, we highlight the key gaps and critical areas for future research. We also encourage scholars taking up these strands of research to communicate with us and with one other to coordinate efforts.
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- 23 For example, members of our collective shared that quantitative research, including experimental designs, could systematically study different forms of interventions in the classroom (e.g., to counter misinformation) and examine their effectiveness. Action-oriented researchers could co-design curriculum with youth or educators to counter susceptibility to right-wing extremism and disinformation. Researchers in education technology could study what online platforms and communication strategies most effectively engage young people in civic education and develop tools to help youth reset their algorithms or identify misinformation.
- 24 Members of the group called for research that examines how the relative development of resistance networks prior to the recent wave of far-right extremism and the political-economic histories and contexts of a place influence local capacity to mount resistance and the variation in approaches taken.
- 25 Importantly, in addition to the topics covered, contributors noted the need for different *approaches* to research and collaboration. They called for more collaborative research, where researchers

learn and strategize alongside or as part of resistance groups. This research is best shared directly in smaller research-resistance partnerships and trusted networks rather than published widely. In addition to new research, real-time syntheses of existing research are necessary. Many want to make use of, or want to know, what research exists on an educational topic, but do not have access to or time to read published research. Educational researchers, including graduate student researchers, can create and disseminate rapid-response research briefs that quickly summarize “What we know about X.”

- 26 Partnerships between researchers, educators, and policy actors could translate legal and legislative wins for local audiences. Given the constantly evolving policy and legal landscape, researchers could develop and share “Know Your Rights” materials, curated resources, accurate and up-to-date policy syntheses by state, online videos, and webinars.
- 27 Historical and comparative international research would also illuminate the strategies and tactics that are effective—then and now—in resisting right-wing extremism and censorship. Many other countries have longer histories of such right-wing movements, and we can learn from them to understand how they have continued to advance justice even under repression. For instance, a multisite study could compare and connect educators resisting right-wing extremism in the U.S. with those in other countries with different histories and contexts of extremism, from Germany to India. Historical analyses could study prior waves of resistance to rightist movements in the U.S., such as earlier waves of backlash to progressive movements. By building on historical work on fugitive pedagogy and the past resistance efforts of Black educators, scholars can glean lessons for the present.