

Michigan's Hillsdale College set to expand far-right charter schools

Genevieve Leigh
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Hillsdale College, a private Christian liberal arts school in southern Michigan, has emerged as an ideological think tank for the far right, playing an outsized role in national government policy. The tiny, rural-based school enrolls only about 1,400 students a year.

Behind the school's small numbers lie powerful ultra-right-wing interests and politicians. January 6 coup plotter Ginni Thomas was the associate director of Hillsdale's Washington D.C. Operations between 2008 and 2009. Her husband, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, was a featured graduation speaker, as were a litany of ruling class figures and right-wing ideologues, including former CIA director and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Vice President Mike Pence, former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, and far-right Canadian academic Jordan Peterson.

Hillsdale boasts an unheard-of endowment of over \$700 million for a school of its size and is lavishly funded by well-heeled donors across the US. It is now looking to expand its national footprint more deeply into K-12 education, promoting its right-wing patriotic and pro-war curriculum to young people through publicly funded charter schools.

Under an umbrella of "classical education" and patriotism, Hillsdale serves as a laboratory and political advocate for fascistic ideas. These include: "herd immunity" in the COVID pandemic, massive US military rearmament and preparations for war with China, anti-immigrant xenophobia, abolition of the separation of church and state, the claim that diversity is "unpatriotic" and threatens "national unity," opposition to "radical gender ideology," claims that global warming is a hoax, and the abolition of public education through charter schools and vouchers.

It was largely considered a "feeder school" for the Trump administration and its supporters during his four years in office. Hillsdale president, Larry P. Arnn, for example, led former President Trump's "1776 Report," a fascistic document promoting "cultural and linguistic homogeneity" and advocating for the further obliteration of the separation of church and state.

Since 1972, the school has published a theoretical journal, *Imprimis*, which claims a readership of over 6 million and provides analysis on topics such as "National Defense," "Economics," "Culture," "Education" and more.

In 2013, Hillsdale was accused of discriminatory admissions practices. At the time, President Arnn gave unforgettable testimony to the Michigan legislature, summing up the proceedings in his own words: "We didn't have enough dark ones, I guess, is what they meant."

Despite its combination of deep political connections and dangerous ideas, Hillsdale College has flown largely under the radar until recently.

Since 2010, the school has been quietly expanding its operations into K-12 charter schools under its "Barney Charter School Initiative" (BCSI). BCSI now has a network of 24 "classical education" member charter schools in 13 different states. They claim to have trained "thousands of teachers" and reached "tens of thousands of K-12 students," according to their website.

During the initial phase of the pandemic in 2020 (which Hillsdale refers to as "national unrest"), BCSI opened three new schools and one affiliated one: Ascent Classical Academy Northern Colorado in Fort Collins, Colorado, Jacksonville Classical Academy in Jacksonville, Florida, Tallahassee Classical School in Tallahassee, Florida, and the Barney Charter-Affiliated Orange County Classical Academy in Orange, California.

Unlike the private college in Michigan, many of these K-12 projects are publicly funded. The college has rejected federal funding for decades in order to avoid compliance with Department of Education anti-discrimination rules, but their K-12 operations are cashing in on public tax dollars. The following examples give a sense of how much federal funding BCSI is beginning to receive:

- Ascent Classical Academy of Northern Colorado: **\$671,000**
- Treasure Valley Classical Academy Idaho: **\$1.25 million**
- Ivywood Classical Academy Michigan: **\$1 million** and managed by a for-profit
- Seven Oaks Classical School, Indiana: **\$899,962**

It is in this context that last February, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee announced plans to partner with Hillsdale to launch as many as 50 such schools throughout the state. Hillsdale envisions this publicly-funded initiative as a prototype for further national expansion.

The political agenda of the Hillsdale curriculum

On COVID-19: In October 2020, the Trump White House officially embraced a policy of "herd immunity" as COVID-19 ravaged the country. This "strategy," spelled out in the Great Barrington Declaration, effectively declared that the mass infection of the population was a positive good; it facilitated the deaths of millions of people. It was authored by, among others, Jay Bhattacharya of Stanford University and Martin Kulldorff of Harvard University and embraced by Trump adviser Scott Atlas. These men constitute Hillsdale's only three fellows for the "Academy of Science and Freedom."

On preparations for war with China: An *Imprimis* article,

“Facing Up to the China Threat” asserts that “Communist China appears to be at war with us.” It decries what it deems US military unpreparedness and alleges that COVID-19 may have been part of a “People’s War” aiming to “plunge America into a ‘mighty sea of coronavirus’.”

The rhetoric, highly inflammatory if not hysterical, claims the US is the target of massive industrial espionage, including “every single one of the Chinese citizens” on US soil including hundreds of thousands of students and many academics. Moreover, they allege that China stands behind Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and various other left-sounding groups. Among the laundry list of nefarious activities they attribute to China is undermining Christianity by lying about Jesus, corrupting the US business elites, and subverting the “American way of life.”

On the January 6 insurrection: The college hosted a lecture by Roger Kimball, editor of *The New Criterion*, claiming January 6, 2021 was an “insurrection hoax.” Kimball, who has also authored numerous pieces in the school’s online publication *Imprimis*, described the attempted overthrow of the 2020 election results aiming to install Donald Trump as dictator merely as “a political protest that got out of hand,” emphasizing that Trump urged his followers to “peacefully and patriotically” descend on the Capitol.

On policing and Border Patrol: *Imprimis* regularly spouts support for the militarization of the US-Mexican border. One article features a lecture given at the school by Mark Morgan, a former FBI agent, chief of the US Border Patrol during the Obama administration, and Trump’s acting Commissioner for U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Morgan argues for a wall on the US-Mexico border and ramped up funding for Border Patrol. “A country that cannot control its borders is not a country, and I’m sad to say that we are facing that eventuality,” he concludes.

On patriotism, “moral virtue” and religious indoctrination: The college mission is to “provide God-honoring leadership in our county,” according to Justice Thomas, who dedicated the newly rebuilt Christ Chapel on campus in 2019. Quoting the architect of a vast social counterrevolution, former US President Ronald Reagan, Thomas warned, “freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.” He urged that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” and so on. The type of “moral virtue” inculcated by the school is indicated by its prominent bronze statues of Reagan and his British counterpart Margaret Thatcher, who jointly plunged millions into poverty and destroyed the post-war social safety nets.

Charter schools, the Supreme Court and the fate of public education

The geyser of right-wing filth spewed from the pages of *Imprimis* could fill volumes of textbooks—and that is precisely what the founders of Hillsdale College have been working on. The school’s foray into K-12 charter schools aims to widely promote right-wing, anti-democratic ideology, paid for by public funding.

The curriculum taught at the Hillsdale Charter Schools in the BCSI is called the “1776 Curriculum,” no doubt modeled after Trump’s 1776 Report. Their website proclaims that the curriculum is designed to educate students to “know what it means to be an American.”

Conservatives have long fought for the proliferation of charter

schools to both cash in on the vast education market and to bypass federal regulations on curricula. Figures like Betsy DeVos and Ginni Thomas have used the Hillsdale College Charter initiative as a spearhead in this well-funded and many-sided battle to erode and destroy public education and democratic rights.

Last month, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas joined the majority in a landmark decision in *Carson v. Makin*. The ruling expands voucher policies to religious schools, violating Thomas Jefferson’s famous “wall of separation of church and state.” The court’s ruling will aid charter schools like Hillsdale to expand operations and further destroy public education. It is no surprise that Hillsdale College filed an *amicus curiae* brief on behalf of Carson.

The fight to defend public education

The defense of public education is at the center of the fight for social equality. The American ruling class, Democrat and Republican alike, has repudiated the democratic principle that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the right to a high-quality education. The success of the Hillsdale Charter School initiative reveals just how advanced the plans are for the destruction of public education altogether. The situation is urgent.

It is necessary for educators, students, parents and all workers to take matters into our own hands in the fight to defend the basic democratic right to a free and high quality education. The *World Socialist Web Site* is fighting to organize educators, parents and students in rank-and-file committees to prepare for the struggle ahead.

Rank-and-file committees are of, by and for the rank-and-file workers, who have a different set of interests in preserving their lives than management, the bosses, the corporate politicians, and the trade union apparatus, who exploit the working class while defending the profits of the ruling elite. The starting point of our fight is not what the ruling elite says is possible or affordable, but what is socially necessary to ensure free, high-quality education for all.

The struggle to defend public education poses the question of who controls society’s wealth and decides how it is distributed. That is why the fight for education, along with every other social right, requires the development of a mass political movement of the working class to put an end to capitalism and institute common ownership of the productive forces and social equality under socialism.

If you agree with this, we urge you to join an Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee near you today.



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