

Behind “parental rights”—billionaires and bigotry

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A right-wing conspiracy to destroy public education and undermine democratic rights has gained momentum in 2023, as US capitalism descended further into crisis. The two parties of big business have careened sharply to the right, expressing the fear of the ruling elite of the escalating class struggle and a broad turn by young people towards socialism.

Using the deceptive term “parental rights” to camouflage their assault on culture, on the principle of social equality, and on the conditions and democratic rights of educators and students, right-wing officials have adopted authoritarian policies and enacted repressive legislation in states across the US. This includes state backing for the censorship of books, bans on certain curriculums and punitive attacks on teachers.

Over the last two years, over a hundred “parental rights” bills have been introduced. This year, lawmakers across at least 24 states introduced 63 such bills. In 2022, Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education Act,” known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, was signed into law, soon followed by the “Stop WOKE” act.

The chilling implications of these bills were illustrated when Florida’s Manatee County school officials instructed teachers to cover all their books. Educators were told they could be charged with a third degree felony should they share a book deemed illegal. Don Falls, a Manatee County history teacher speaking to ABC News, said this included not only volumes deemed “obscene” by the bigoted authorities, but also books that supposedly made students “feel uncomfortable.”

He said, “I was doing a couple of lessons on civil rights, looking at the Albany movement, Birmingham in 1963. And, of course, some of those images of those periods can be quite upsetting: dogs turned on little girls, fire hoses. I’m showing them some of these images, in the back of my mind, I was saying, ‘Well, if a student here gets upset about these, have I violated the law?’”

In other words, this censorship is primarily directed against historical truth and left-wing views. It is no surprise, therefore, that the main funders of the “parents’ rights” movement are extreme right-wing groups. They include the American Legislative Exchange Committee (ALEC), Donald Trump, Hillsdale College, The Cato Institute and others. Historically, “parents’ rights” was invoked to oppose school integration, science and sex education.

Although the Republicans have authored most of the current bills, the Democrats laid the groundwork. For decades, the Democrats have carried out massive cuts in state and federal budgets, opening the schoolhouse doors to parasitic Wall Street interests via “education reform,” and overseeing the vast expansion of charter schools. At the same time, the Democrats have either stood by or partnered with Republicans in the shredding of fundamental democratic rights, including the right to an abortion, voting rights, the rights of immigrants and the due process rights of the accused.

This bipartisan assault on public education is part of the attack on all democratic rights. It expresses the subordination of all social rights and

the allocation of public funds to the priorities of the ruling elite—first and foremost, war and the preparation of future wars for American hegemony—but also including intensified exploitation of the working class and reprisals against critical thinking, culture, internationalism and socialism.

The “parental rights” movement goes hand in hand with the effort to create an entirely class-based system of education, in which the working class is relegated to mere work-ready training, while the rich are afforded access to the best education money can buy.

“Parental rights” is not an expansion of rights, but an Orwellian term for the destruction of the right to free, high-quality public education and culture.

As noted in a report published by PEN America in August, existing law allows parents some discretion over the education of their own children in public schools, including the ability to “review” instructional materials for their children and “opt” them out of sexual education. The current wave of laws, by way of contrast, allows a right-wing minority to dictate the school curriculum for all children.

To this end, the bills include enhanced curriculum and library inspection provisions; expanded powers of parents to demand an “à la carte” curriculum catered to their specific beliefs or religion; anti-LGBTQ bans; expanded definitions of material deemed “obscene” and “harmful to minors”; classroom surveillance provisions; parental rights “enforcement” provisions; and provisions requiring schools to monitor and report on students’ gender identity.

Such provisions are being widened to include not only the parents of students, but the public at large. Many of the bills add requirements for already resource-strapped districts to publicize on their websites the “rights of parents,” school curriculum and library inventories, and detailed procedures for parents and members of the public to object to educational materials.

Should teachers or districts violate the “parental rights” or state curriculum bans, they face the threat of monetary fines, civil suits and loss of credentials. One of the purposes of these laws is to create an atmosphere of educational intimidation in which educators and students engage in self-censorship.

The following is a selection of the dozens of state bills that have either been enacted this year or are currently under review.

In May, Iowa Republicans enacted a bill that:

- Threatens librarians, school workers and administrators who violate the state’s standards related to “age-appropriate” library material with hearings and unspecified “disciplinary action.”

- Forces administrators to report to parents if their child expresses a change in his/her gender identity.

- Requires districts to publicize instructions on how parents or residents of the school district can request copies to “review” instructional materials.

- Prohibits instruction related to gender and sexuality in grades K-6.

- Strikes language from existing laws specifying that health curricula in

grades 7-8 related to sexually transmitted diseases include teaching about HPV, the HPV vaccine, and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

In August, North Carolina lawmakers overrode a veto by Democratic Governor Roy Cooper and enacted a “Parents’ Bill of Rights.” Very similar to the Iowa bill, it prohibits instruction related to gender identity and sexuality in grades K-4, even though these topics are not part of the K-4 curriculum; requires schools to establish procedures for parents to “inspect and review” all instructional materials and to establish a process for parents to “object” to material; and requires school personnel to inform parents of changes to a student’s preferred name or pronoun.

One of the bill’s primary sponsors, Amy Gale, is also a leading sponsor of a vast school voucher expansion bill, expected to pass soon, which will universalize eligibility to all students, thereby funneling millions of dollars behind private education for wealthy families. It is estimated that the proposal will cost taxpayers \$500 million by 2031.

A current bill under review in Massachusetts, along the same lines, was sponsored by two Republicans and one Democrat.

Alongside these repressive laws, legislation is being introduced to vastly expand the diversion of public funds to private and religious schools. This year, FutureEd has identified 137 such bills in 42 states, 12 of which have been enacted.

One of multiple bills under review in Texas explicitly lumps “parental rights” together with the establishment of an “educational savings account” program—a thinly veiled legal ruse that provides a workaround to legalize state support for private and religious schools.

“Parental rights,” like “school choice” and “parent-triggers,” was designed by the financial oligarchy as a weapon against public education, which the capitalist oligarchs consider an unacceptable deduction from private profits.

ParentalRights.org (and its co-organization, the Parental Rights Foundation) is calling for a Parental Rights Amendment to the US Constitution, and is intimately involved in many of the state legislative efforts.

This group was founded in 2007 by Michael Farris, a Christian fundamentalist lawyer and creator of the Home School Legal Defense Association, which has played a leading role since the 1980s in legalizing and deregulating home schooling. He is also the former president and CEO of the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a fascistic Christian legal advocacy group, which the Southern Poverty Law Center describes as a hate group, with a particular focus on opposing abortion and LGBTQ rights.

Farris, who has made millions working with ADF, according to tax filings, is a well connected Republican implicated in Donald Trump’s coup attempt. Farris drafted the original version of the lawsuit that Ken Paxton, then-attorney general of Texas, filed against multiple states in order to invalidate Biden’s victory, according to the *New York Times*.

In 1995, Harris helped draft a piece of federal legislation, the “Parental Rights and Responsibilities Act,” which sought to put “parental rights” in the federal code and create a framework for aggrieved parents to take their complaints to federal court. The basic premise of the legislation, that parents “have a fundamental right to direct the upbringing of the child,” underlies the laws being pushed through today.

Many of the contemporary state bills draw from model legislation published by ParentalRights.org, drafted by William Estrada, president of the organization until June 2023 and now senior legal counsel at the Home School Legal Defense Association. Estrada himself was home-schooled as a child and also home-schools his own children.

In a detailed report on the parental rights initiatives in the 1990s, Deanna Duby of the liberal advocacy group People for the American Way, identified two main groups behind the national campaign. These were Of the People (OTP) and the American Legislative Exchange

Council (ALEC).

From 1996 to 1998, OTP was co-chaired by billionaire oligarch Betsy DeVos, secretary of education under Trump, whose entire political history has been marked by an effort to privatize education, a mission into which she and her family have poured tens of millions of dollars.

OTP was founded in 1993 explicitly to amend all state constitutions to include “parental rights.” In the early-to-mid-1990s, OTP and ALEC attempted to introduce such amendments in 28 states. Most significant was a ballot campaign they initiated in Colorado, which voters ultimately rejected. Highlighting the top-down genesis of this initiative, 97 percent of the money used to put the issue on the ballot in Colorado came from Virginia-based Of the People. It was based on funding from right-wing billionaire-controlled organizations, including the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Scaife Family Foundation.

OTP was not secretive about its goals. Duby cites an interview with the *Washington Post* in which OTP founder Jeffrey Bell (former aide to presidents Nixon and Reagan) explained that the legislation would scare teachers and districts with the threat of lawsuits, thus making them “more likely to accommodate parents’ requests.”

More fundamentally, however, as he revealed in OTP’s magazine *Voice*, only under conditions where “public schools deteriorate further, perhaps to the point of breakdown,” would the primary obstacle to voucher programs—deep-rooted opposition to diverting public funding to private and religious schools—be overcome.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) remains a powerful network linking corporations, legislators and private foundations. It produces model legislation for a broad range of extreme right-wing agendas, including “school choice” expansion, “stand your ground” laws, and restrictions on voting rights. ALEC’s website states it has 2,000 members, including 300 major corporations.

During the same time, the mid-1990s time period, it was the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton that championed the formerly fringe right-wing call for “school choice” and the marketization of public education, with the support of billionaire Bill Gates. This culminated in the 1998 passage of the Charter School Expansion Act. The “school choice,” anti-public school agenda was vastly expanded under both Bush and Obama, with the latter overseeing massive budget cuts and “school reform,” resulting in the loss of 300,000 educators’ jobs.

A new crop of organizations has taken the spotlight in the so-called “parents movement” of today, such as Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education (PDE). They all fraudulently claim to be grassroots, but are funded by and politically subservient to the same corporate and Republican-aligned organizations, such as ALEC, the Koch network and the Heritage Foundation. PDE founder and president, Nicole Neily, for example, is a well-greased conservative operative who has worked with the Cato Institute (formerly Charles Koch). The Cato Institute was co-founded by libertarian Murray Rothbard, who opposed “compulsory” education and civil rights, and explicitly repudiated the struggle for equality.

Moms for Liberty, founded in early 2021 to dismantle anti-COVID public health measures in schools, was immediately provided political, organizational and financial support from high within the Republican Party. In 2022, the Heritage Foundation awarded it with a “Citizenship Award,” and its recent summit featured Republican presidential candidates Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Asa Hutchinson, Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy. The organization was given substantial seed money by Publix Super Markets heiress Julie Fancelli, who provided major funding for the “Stop the Steal” rally that preceded the January 6 coup attempt.

The impact of these laws attests to their repressive, anti-democratic character.

In Florida, passage of the “Parental Rights in Education Act,” along

with a series of other right-wing censorship bills, has created a stifling climate of intimidation, which has led the Hillsborough school district (the seventh largest in the US) and school districts in other counties to limit the teaching of Shakespeare, in addition to 357 other books banned statewide as of April. Earlier this year, the state launched an investigation into a first-year teacher after she showed her class a Disney movie, *Strange World*, because it featured a gay character.

On August 17, fifth-grade teacher Katie Rinderle was fired by the Cobb County, Georgia school board after she read her class a children's book about non-binary gender identity. The board justified her firing on the grounds that she violated district policy conforming to state laws passed in 2022—namely, a “parents’ rights” bill and one banning the teaching of “divisive concepts.”

For every teacher who is investigated, disciplined or fired, there will be hundreds or thousands who engage in self-censorship in order to avoid such consequences.

In addition to punitive measures by school districts and the state, teachers face increasing intimidation and attacks from fascistic layers that are whipped up by the rhetoric that often surrounds parental rights, including warnings of “pornographic” books and “grooming” within public schools. One Moms for Liberty member in Arkansas was recorded saying that if she had mental health issues, all the librarians would be “plowed down by a freaking gun.”

But these layers are the small minority. Without the legal and extra-legal encouragement of the bourgeoisie, they would be politically and socially isolated.

A recent report in the *Tampa Bay Times* showed just how few public school parents support the crusade against their children's schools and educators. Out of 1,100 complaints lodged against library material in Florida since 2022, 600 came from just two individuals. The majority of school districts had not received a single complaint, and when Clay County allowed 39,000 parents to limit library access for their children, only six chose to do so.

State government intimidation and repression, and incitement of fascistic layers in the population, will further drive educators away from the profession, exacerbating the nationwide educator and school staff shortage. This, in turn, fuels a vicious cycle: over-packed and under-resourced classrooms, “low performance,” budget cuts and school closures, followed by cynical calls for expanded voucher programs and charter conversions to save children from “failing schools.”

Public education emerged out of the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, which were based on the liberating outlook known as the Enlightenment, whose motto, according to Immanuel Kant, was “Sapere aude!” (“Dare to know!”)

Enlightenment thought asserted that through the application of reason and the scientific investigation of nature, humanity could improve its conditions. This revolutionary idea upended the ideological justification for feudalism and the “divine right of kings,” and inspired the struggles for emancipation and social equality for centuries.

Following the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson introduced the first plan in the United States for a publicly funded national education system, which, in principle, would allow for the realization of the innate potential of every individual. Revolutionaries of this period in Europe and America understood education to be foundational to the defense of democracy and human equality. Jefferson stated that the cost of public education would be “not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests and nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.”

The fight for public, secular education continued throughout the 19th century, with Horace Mann's common schools movement for universal public education, understood to be “the great equalizer of the conditions of men” and the expansion of public schools following the Civil War. In

the 20th century, central to the civil rights movement was the overthrow of the “separate but equal” doctrine and the fight for integrated, high quality public schools for all children.

But world capitalism has undergone a qualitative decline in the last 40 years. The capitalists' defense of their rapacious profit interests, colossal levels of social inequality and decades of imperialist war are incompatible with democracy, and can only be maintained through authoritarian forms of rule. Today, both parties of the bourgeoisie in the US express their hatred for the principles of the Enlightenment and the struggle for social equality, with the Democrats, on the basis of racist politics, leading the charge to tear down monuments to Jefferson and Lincoln and deny the democratic and progressive content of America's bourgeois democratic revolutions.

Under these conditions, public education is no longer tenable for capitalism, which sees it as a drain on profits. Moreover, the bourgeoisie fears a working class that “dares to know” as Washington prepares for direct war against Russia and China and mounts further attacks on social programs. To the extent that public schools aren't completely dismantled, they must be completely subordinated to business and the military.

Since its inception, the fight for public education—as part of the fight for social equality—has been intertwined with great revolutionary struggles. That legacy animates the struggle to defend and expand public education today. The social revolution on the agenda today must abolish the exploitation of man by man and establish socialism.



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