

EDUCATION BRIEFING

The Conservative School Board Strategy

Republicans are trying to use suburban fights over critical race theory and pandemic restrictions to energize their voters.



By Amelia Nierenberg

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This is the Education Briefing, a weekly update on the most important news in U.S. education. Sign up here to get this newsletter in your inbox.

Today, we're looking at how Republicans are trying to use school boards and critical race theory to mobilize their voters. And we explore a free speech debate that is dividing the world of science.



Volunteers collect signatures to recall members of a school board in suburban Wisconsin. Morry Gash/Associated Press

A new conservative strategy

Once upon a time, school boards were sleepy backwaters of local government, where concerned community members volunteered their time to debate things like budgets and calendars.

Those days seem long, long ago.

The change began with the coronavirus pandemic. For more than a year, angry parents have crowded meetings to shout down mask mandates or remote learning.

Now, the conversation has turned toward race, specifically fears that school boards are introducing critical race theory to the curriculum. Some conservative activists and politicians are using these worries to drive school board recalls and to rally their voters in statewide elections.

In 2021, Ballotpedia, a nonpartisan political encyclopedia, said it had tracked 80 such efforts against 207 board members. That's the highest number since it began tracking in 2010. The parents then run for the seats, and often win.

Many elections are next week, on Nov. 2.

In Virginia, Republicans are making the schools the focus of their final push to capture the governor's office, hoping to rally conservatives around both their frustrations over mask mandates and mandatory vaccinations and their fears of what their children are being taught.

Republicans see school board races as a way to take back white suburban districts, which have shifted toward the Democrats in the past eight years. In Wisconsin, a pivotal swing state that President Biden won by just over 20,600 votes, critical race theory could be an important swing issue.

My colleague Stephanie Saul reports that some Republican activists and politicians are hoping to use a school board election in the Mequon-Thiensville district, an affluent Milwaukee suburb, to lay the groundwork for the 2022 midterm elections.

Traditionally, school board elections in Wisconsin have been nonpartisan. But with midterms on the horizon, prospective statewide Republican candidates are drilling down, including the former lieutenant governor Rebecca Kleefisch, who is running for governor, and Senator Ron Johnson, who has not announced whether he will run for re-election.

Both have emphasized their opposition to critical race theory, and both have championed local school board races.

Johnson recently urged constituents to "take back our school boards, our county boards, our city councils."

And a political action committee associated with Kleefisch recently contributed to about 30 candidates around the state. Kleefisch's campaign has also helped at least four school board members campaign in Mequon-Thiensville.

Chris Schultz, a retired teacher in Mequon, is one of the four school board members facing a recall there. She relinquished her Republican Party membership when she joined the board. Now, she thinks nonpartisanship is over.

“The Republican Party has kind of decided that they want to not just have their say on the school board but determine the direction of school districts,” Schultz said. “The fact that this is being politically driven is heartbreaking.”



“We’re not going to do the best science we can if we are constrained ideologically,” said Dorian Abbot, a geophysicist. Nolis Anderson for The New York Times

A free speech fight at M.I.T.

The sometimes heated conversation about speech and academic freedom on American campuses usually docks in the humanities and social sciences.

That debate spilled over to the sciences this month, when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology canceled a prestigious public lecture by a prominent geophysicist after faculty members and students raised concerns about his views on affirmative action.

Here’s the background.

Dorian Abbot, a professor at the University of Chicago, studies climate change and whether distant planets might harbor atmospheres conducive to life. Abbot, who is white, has previously said that diversity programs treat “people as members of a group rather than as individuals, repeating the mistake that made possible the atrocities of the 20th century.”

He favors a diverse pool of applicants selected on merit, and supports doing away with legacy admissions — which give preferred admission to the children of alumni — and athletic scholarships.

Although his lecture would have made no mention of his views on affirmative action, his opponents in the sciences argued he represented an “inappropriate” and oppressive choice.

So after protests, M.I.T. canceled the talk. Cue: another firestorm.

First, an influential program at Princeton invited Abbot to speak on the same day as the canceled lecture.

Then, the director of the Berkeley Atmospheric Sciences Center at the University of California, Berkeley, announced that he would resign from his post. He had tried to persuade colleagues to invite Abbot to speak, and thus reaffirm the importance of separating science from politics.

Understand the Debate Over Critical Race Theory

An expansive academic framework. Critical race theory, or C.R.T., argues that historical patterns of racism are ingrained in law and other modern institutions. The theory says that racism is a systemic problem, not only a matter of individual bigotry.



“There are some institutional principles that we have to hold sacred,” said David Romps, who is also a professor of climate physics.

Questions about what those institutional principles are — and how sacred they may be — have started to roil STEM.

Already, a few fields have purged scientific terms and names seen by some as offensive. There is also a rising call for “citational justice,” which means both intentionally footnoting the work of more scholars of color and not citing the research of those who hold distasteful views. Some departments have taken stock of their own racial diversity, or lack thereof.

And while some faculty members still believe STEM should be held apart from cultural debates, a growing number believe conversations about identity and racial inequities are more urgent than questions of muzzled speech.

Abbot, unsurprisingly, disagrees with that take.

“There is no question that these controversies will have a negative impact on my scientific career,” he said. “But I don’t want to live in a country where instead of discussing something difficult we go and silence debate.”

It's masks up at this elementary school in Texas. LM Otero/Associated Press

Virus news

- A key F.D.A. advisory panel recommended that regulators authorize Pfizer-BioNTech's coronavirus vaccine for 5- to 11-year-olds, bringing about 28 million children closer to becoming eligible for shots.
 - My colleague Sarah Maslin Nir spoke with several public school employees in **New York** who lost their jobs after they refused vaccination.
 - A federal judge ruled in favor of a mask mandate in a **Tennessee** school district.
 - **Ohio** will adjust its quarantine recommendations in an effort to keep more students in classrooms.
 - After **Minnesota** recorded the first student death from Covid-19 this year, members of the state's teachers union are calling for more protections. Two staff members also died the same week.
 - School bands are practicing again, though sometimes in masks.
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What else we're reading

College

- **Amherst College** said that it would end its legacy admissions policy, which favored the children of alumni.
- Democrats have abandoned a push for free community college in favor of expanding existing tuition assistance.
- The **University of Southern California** suspended a fraternity chapter after reports of drugging and sexual assault.
- A record number of students graduated from **California State University** in the 2020-21 academic year, but gaps grew for low-income students and students of color.
- Some colleges are instituting mandates for flu vaccines.

Race and equity

- A **New Jersey** town is divided over whether a teacher intentionally tried to remove a 7-year-old student's hijab.
 - The Education Department's new assistant secretary for civil rights faced Republican criticism over her views on transgender students' rights and how to address sexual assault on campus.
 - A teacher in **Riverside, Calif.**, was placed on leave after wearing a headdress and mimicking Native American dances.
 - The Justice Department said that a school district in **Utah** ignored “serious and widespread” racial harassment for years.
 - **From Opinion:** Jay Caspian King took a close look at California's plan to make ethnic studies a high school graduation requirement.
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Tip: Homework strategies

Thank you all so much again for your thoughtful reflections on beloved children's books. We'd love to hear from you again. What are some of your family's most successful homework strategies?

If you'd like to contribute, you can find the link here. Thank you!

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And if you have questions you'd like to crowdsource to this newsletter community, don't hesitate to write me with a suggestion. I'm at educationbriefing@nytimes.com or amelia.nierenberg@nytimes.com. See you next week!

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