



Merchants of Deception: Parent Props and Their Funders

by Maurice T. Cunningham, Ph.D., J.D.

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The Network for Public Education is an advocacy group whose mission is to preserve, promote, improve and strengthen public schools for current and future generations of students.

No outside organization contributed to, reviewed, or influenced the findings of this report.



Introduction

Political interests use crises to turn politics and policy their way. This has happened during the Covid pandemic as right-wing “parent” groups came out of nowhere to protest health measures such as masking and vaccine requirements in schools, then moved on to Critical Race Theory, then LGBT issues, book banning, and an endless stream of other ginned up culture war issues.

In truth, the Right has been massing its forces for years to undermine public education, but the sudden proliferation of “parents” and “moms” groups has signaled a new and more virulent turn—witness the victory of Glenn Youngkin as governor of Virginia. Parents, educators, administrators, and school boards face a barrage of new parent groups in their communities, insisting that curriculum, policies, and practices match their beliefs regardless of community norms. This report will lay bare some of the most prominent conservative and neoliberal groups and suggest clues by which those who cherish public schools can identify and expose the phonies hiding under the guise of parent power.

There is a worthwhile distinction to be made between neoliberal and conservative education reformers who use parents as a front. Neoliberal groups have been around longer. They include groups like Stand for Children, The City Fund, and Democrats for Education Reform, which serve as bundlers of donations to neoliberal Democratic candidates who support charter schools. These and similar groups masquerade as representing parents of color, but behind the scenes, the real power is held by billionaire funders. As I show in *Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization*, they also exist to siphon off Democratic constituencies—the “inside job” as Democrats for Education Reform puts it.¹

Conservative groups have exploded since 2021 and include operations like Parents Defending Education (PDE) and Moms for Liberty (M4L). They draw on white backlash politics and resentment. What neoliberal and conservative groups have in common is shared goals: to undermine teachers unions, protect their wealthy donors from having to contribute their fair share in taxes to strengthen public schools, and provide profit opportunities through school privatization. This is why you’ll find Charles Koch behind both neoliberal and conservative education reform organizations and Rupert Murdoch donating to Democrats for Education Reform. The Vela Education



Fund, a joint venture of the Charles Koch Institute and the Walton Family Foundation, donated \$700,000 to the neoliberal National Parents Union. Nicole Neily, president of the conservative Parents Defending Education, is a veteran Koch operative who has held numerous positions within the Koch network.² Murdoch has donated to neoliberal privatization groups Students First and the related organizations Education Reform Now and Democrats for Education Reform, including at least \$1,000,000 to Education Reform Now.³

Education privatizers rely on a network of dark money donors and their front organizations, and it can be difficult, sometimes impossible, to identify the true sources of funding. We're going to look for "tells" they leave behind. We'll use two of Seton Hall University Professor Daniel Katz's four tests for identifying Astroturf groups and several of my own.⁴

Katz recommends we look to see "Growth at a pace that only a corporation's monetary resources could manage." To that we'll add not just our target organization's assets but the resources available to it from allied organizations. When we can identify the allies, we can get a better idea of the real powers behind our target. Katz also urges that we determine "Who is funding the group and for how much?" Privatization organizations often operate as nonprofits, and disclosure of their true donors is always difficult and sometimes impossible, but there are some methods available to help unveil the true sources. We'll use another tool to draw telling inferences about these fronts: identification of their key vendors, such as law firms, pollsters, and public relations firms, which we'll see are often instruments of conservative or neoliberal networks. Another recurring clue that helps evaluate a new group is the "creation story." A new non-profit group bursts forth with some version claiming that two or three moms began talking over what they see as problems in schools and resolve to start a nonprofit to take on the teachers' unions, administration, or school board. By some form of miracle, they almost immediately receive hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in funding from billionaires. Next, they find themselves gaining favorable coverage on right-wing media—Daily Caller, Breitbart, and Fox News, then on to mainstream media outlets. The media coverage is so fundamental that we'll consider it separate from other resources that accrue to these groups.

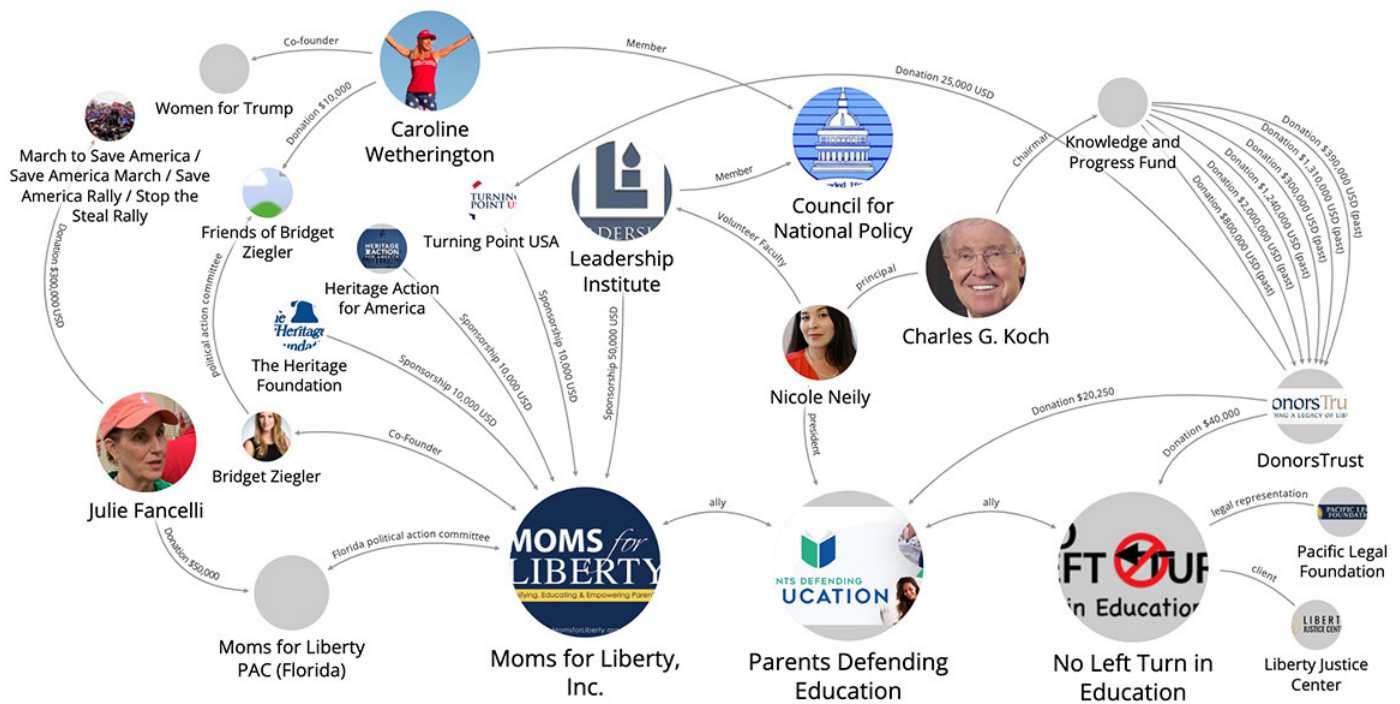
One additional note on the recent rise of conservative groups. In March 2020, Parents Defending Education announced its launch on Twitter.⁵ Shortly thereafter, I reviewed PDE's website and alliances and found that most of what it claimed as allied groups were local units of two other new operations, Moms for Liberty and No Left Turn in Education (NLTE), but none of them had more than a handful of members.⁶



What caught my eye was that PDE seemed constructed on a model of conservative activist groups that had been around for several years with the aim of exposing what they contend is a liberal bias among college professors. For example, Turning Point USA, run by a young conservative named Charlie Kirk, a member of the right-wing Council for National Policy, publishes a Professor Watchlist, which berates professors for their supposed left-wing radicalism. Kirk effectively promotes this, and some attacks are picked up in the right-wing media echo chamber, gaining attention on outlets like the Daily Caller and Breitbart News and, if the story seems juicy enough, Fox News. When that happens, the story accelerates. Professors have come under vicious attacks via emails and social media. In one case, Trinity College in Hartford needed to be shut down for a day. In another case recorded by Isaac Kamola, “On May 25, 2017, Campus Reform (a project of the CNP member Leadership Institute) ran a story about a commencement address given at Hampshire College by Princeton University professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor. Three days later Fox News ran a story about her ‘Anti-POTUS Tirade.’ Based on threats made against her safety, Taylor canceled public talks in Seattle and San Diego.”⁷ Professor Kamola traced the money behind these and similar attacks to right-wing billionaires. PDE has used the same tactics to generate “racist and confrontational” messages to two African American principals in the Newton, Massachusetts public school system.⁸ It’s part of PDE’s modus operandi.

Conservative Groups

Parents Defending Education was launched in March 2021 with a webpage that included a map of allies across the country. It is difficult to track the true money behind these groups, more so when they are relatively new. But let's look at some of the common money ties among these three allies, using the Oligrapher mapping tool at LittleSis.org:



What we see is not just that PDE, M4L, and NLTE are tied in together, but they are all incorporated into a right-wing network that includes Charles Koch, organizational and individual members of the right-wing Council for National Policy, and other extremist funders, including Julie Fancelli, who helped to underwrite the January 6, 2021, Washington D.C. Stop the Steal rally.



Parents Defending Education

Parents Defending Education was incorporated as an IRS 501(c)(3) nonprofit in Virginia on January 21, 2021, with Nicole Neily as incorporator. As such a new organization, little is yet known for certain about funders. But there are clues.

On January 28, 2022, PDE filed its annual report with Virginia authorities. Board members include Edward Blum, Karol Markowicz, Nicole Neily, Kenneth Marcus, and Ian Lindquist. Blum is a legal activist whom the ACLU describes as “the man who wants to kill affirmative action in higher education.” He also was a key strategist behind *Shelby v. Holder*, the Supreme Court case that eviscerated Voting Rights Act protections for minority voters.⁹ Markowicz is a conservative columnist for Rupert Murdoch’s *New York Post*. Neily, a board member and president, is an established political operative with Koch-affiliated non-profit interest groups. According to Sourcewatch, a project of the Center for Media and Democracy, Neily has previously worked with Koch affiliates, the Franklin News Foundation, Cato Institute, Competitive Enterprise Institute, Center for Financial Privacy and Human Rights, and the Independent Women’s Forum. She has also served on the boards of Young Voices and Young Voices for Liberty.¹⁰ She is a “volunteer instructor” at the Leadership Institute (which handles trainings and conference activities for Moms for Liberty).¹¹ Neily has a background in public relations and communications work; many of the supposed grassroots education reform leaders have extensive backgrounds in communications. She was also the initial president of Speech First, a Koch-connected legal interest that files lawsuits against universities’ affirmative action and bias response policies.¹² PDE’s director of outreach Erika Sanzi presents herself as a Rhode Island mother, former educator, and ex-school board member. She omits that before joining PDE she was on the books of the pro-voucher and pro-charter Fordham Institute and earning \$120,000 from the billionaire-funded Education Post. For PDE major vendors, Neily immediately turned to contractors who had worked for Speech First: the Republican law firm Consovoy McCarthy, paid \$950,000 by Free Speech in 2018, and the communications firm Creative Response Concepts, paid \$106,000 in 2018.¹³ From the start, PDE was promoting itself as a grassroots volunteer organization. Affording such contractors right away belies that.

“We just all work from home,” Neily told the Columbus (OH) Dispatch. “We’re all working moms.”¹⁴ PDE announced its launch via Twitter on March 30, 2021, and immediately took up Christopher Rufo’s anti-Critical Race Theory campaign. The very next day, its emergence was reported by Fox News. PDE’s announcement quickly reverberated through the right-wing media echo chamber with coverage in the



Wall Street Journal, Washington Examiner, and the Federalist. By May 3, the moms working from home were getting coverage in the Washington Post. In June 2021, Neily explained to the conservative Daily Caller how PDE thrusts (usually anonymous) parent complaints into right-wing media: “Maybe they don’t know how to get it in the right hands, but we do. We know a lot of reporters, and we’re happy to share those things.”¹⁵

Real grassroots groups often struggle to get space in their community newspapers.

PDE has no problem initiating sophisticated attacks on school boards, either. It provides instructions on how to anonymously report on anything a person might find troubling about school personnel, including social media posts by educators and administrators. It offers instructions in its “How to Create ‘Woke At’ Pages.” PDE provides detailed instructions for how to set up “an anonymous, safe Instagram page.” Would-be activists are advised to set up a Gmail account “that can’t be tied to you.” Gmail is recommended because the site creator will also need to set up “an anonymous Google Form . . . which allows you to receive anonymous tips” that shields the informant’s identity, even from the Woke At administrator. At all times, “we recommend erring on the side of secrecy.” The Woke At instructions encourage PDE’s local spies to check out the social media pages of educators, which may reveal woke attitudes. The “Understanding Woke Jargon” page catalogs terms like “social justice” or “antiracism” that the group finds offensive. “Questions to Ask School Officials” offers gotcha questions that can be asked of woke school officials “with cameras rolling.” Why the advice to always act with hidden identities? Because of the terrifying disposition of those “woke activists” who talk about “inclusion, equity, justice” but are really “divisive, toxic, and extreme.” Concealment is especially important, “given how angry and retaliatory many woke activists get when criticized.”¹⁶

Another method used by PDE is to attack experts retained by school districts especially concerning diversity, equity and inclusion, and social and emotional learning. According to PDE’s attacks, these consultants are nothing but leeching grifters diverting district funds away from the three Rs. This tactic is nothing new from the Right. It was used to undermine scientists who exposed the tobacco companies and to attack experts who tell the truth about climate change.¹⁷

With the legally required disclosure of Form 990 tax returns for 2021, information has begun trickling in about the real powers behind PDE, and it isn’t “working moms.” PDE took in \$3,178,272 in contributions and grants in 2021. Neily’s



compensation for her “work from home” job was \$195,688. PDE paid Consovoy McCarthy \$800,000 in 2021 and \$106,938 to CRC Advisors, with an additional \$690,090 in reported payments to three other prominent right-wing consulting firms in fundraising, digital advocacy, and polling. Donors Trust, a dark money donor associated with the Koch network, donated \$20,250 to PDE in 2021. The Achelis & Bodman Foundation, which funds voucher and charter school programs and targets public education, contributed \$25,000. Searle Freedom Trust, another right-wing donor with ties to Donors Trust, contributed \$250,000 in 2021.¹⁸

We don’t know all the names on the checks, but we do know that those checks had to be pretty large, that the attorneys and consultants sit at the hierarchy of right-wing operatives, and that the board members and staffers are connected to the highest levels of conservative donors including the Koch network. Note that we can follow the evidence trail by consulting publicly available databases including corporate filings, tax records, newspapers, Sourcewatch, LinkedIn, and others. We’ll return to these sources often.

Moms for Liberty

The Moms for Liberty “Who we are” webpage states “Our founders are Tiffany (Justice) and Tina (Descovich)” and the press often accepts the two founders’ story but it is not entirely true. When M4L filed its incorporation papers as an IRS 501(c)(4) corporation with the Florida Secretary of State on December 9, 2020, to commence operations on January 1, 2021 there was a third incorporator and board member, Bridget Ziegler. Ziegler left on February 8, 2022, pleading a busy schedule. But her involvement has continued, and her status with M4L is important because her husband, Christian Ziegler, is vice-chair of the Florida Republican Party.

Other than founding with and then dropping Ziegler, the creation story is a familiar one with the twist that both Descovich and Justice are former school board members. (Ziegler retained her position on the Sarasota County School Board in 2022). Descovich’s LinkedIn page describes her as “A creative senior communications professional with experience in Strategic Message Delivery, Media Relations Management, Brand & Graphic Development, Stakeholder Engagement, Government Relations, Corporate Relations, Crisis Management, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving.”

They claim to have grown the organization by starting up a Facebook page where they sold M4L t-shirts for a fifty percent profit to fund operations and calling around to



conservative talk programs to generate publicity. By April 2022, they assert they sold \$300,000 worth of t-shirts.¹⁹ (A check from the M4L online store in October 2022 shows a number of items, with most t-shirts going for \$20.) That would mean Descovich and Justice sold and processed about 15,000 t-shirts between January 2020 and April 2022. For the first nine months, Descovich asserted in a Facebook post, this occurred out of her back bedroom with family managing the shipping and handling.²⁰

The t-shirt story evokes an image of two plucky moms banding together, one short step from a bake sale, to raise funds to protect their kids. Descovich told that creation story in a November 1, 2021 interview with The74. As late as 2022, Descovich was skirting the funding issue in an interview with ABC Action News in Tampa Bay, suggesting that M4L's 2021 Form 990 tax return (not yet released) would show the group's money came primarily from t-shirt sales.²¹

M4L's Form 990 tax return for 2021 tells a different story. In 2021 gross receipts were \$503,848. Contributions and grants constituted \$256,674, program service revenue \$85,346, investment income \$7, and Other Revenue \$28,002, for Total Revenue of \$370,029. A closer look at the details on Other Revenue shows Gross sales on inventory, less returns and allowances of \$161,821, less cost of goods sold of \$133,819, leaving Net income from sales of inventory of \$28,002. It is not known for certain that the inventory is t-shirt and related merchandise, and an email seeking confirmation from Descovich went unreturned, but it is quite likely merchandise inventory. This is not a fifty percent profit, as the co-founders told Newsweek. Schedule B shows individual (anonymously reported) donations of \$100,000, \$20,000, \$15,000, \$10,000, and \$5,000. M4L was not running its operations on what it cleared on -shirt sales; it was dependent on large donors and its relationship with the right-wing Leadership Institute.

The Leadership Institute has been training conservative activists for over forty years. It is a member of the Council for National Policy, and LI's founder and president, Morton Blackwell, is also a co-founder of CNP. LI was a \$50,000 sponsor of M4L's 2022 National Summit.

A posting by a staffer on LI's website states that M4L "got advice from my boss, Morton Blackwell, and used Leadership Institute trainings." The staffer continued: "I'm proud to say Leadership Institute partnered with Moms for Liberty and supported the Summit as the top sponsor, official photographers/videographers, trainers, and all-around support. LI held training for attendees on Candidate Vetting, Grassroots

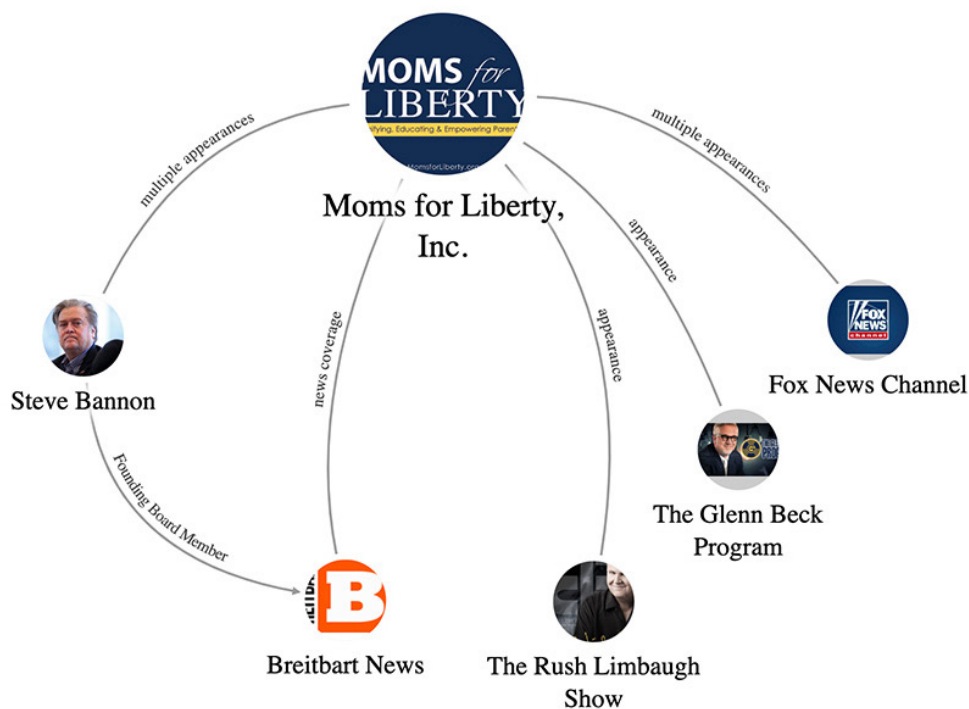


Lobbying, Communications, Running for Office, Strategic Research, Vote Goals, and four hours of Media Training.”²² These are valuable resources.

M4L was an immediate darling of conservative media. As Olivia Little of Media Matters for America reported, right-wing media built M4L. Tina Descovich first appeared on the Rush Limbaugh Show on January 27, 2021. By the end of February, M4L was getting press from Breitbart, and a “shout out” on Tucker Carlson Tonight. Soon Descovich was a guest on The Glenn Beck Program and several segments on Fox News. By the time of the Media Matters report on July 28, 2022, M4L had been featured on “Fox News at least 16 times and Steve Bannon’s War Room at least 14 times.”²³

As Media Matters and my own investigation of M4L’s early days confirms, the group initially had very few members. M4L claims its national membership exploded as it gained right-wing media attention, but Media Matters sees those claims as exaggerated. Moreover, Media Matters found that M4L has wiped many of its right-wing media appearances from its website, just as it has tried to downplay the continuing involvement of Bridget Ziegler.²⁴

Based on Media Matters reporting and using the LittleSis.org Oligrapher mapping tool we can see how Moms for Liberty was propelled to prominence by right-wing media:






As New Yorker reporter Paige Williams wrote, “In late October, a spokesperson for the Moms told me that the organization—ostensibly a charity—is a ‘media company.’”²⁵ And so are other conservative and neoliberal fronts.

We don’t know who is funding the 501(c)(4) Moms for Liberty or the 501(c)(3) Moms for Liberty Foundation but since M4L has quickly become a multi-tentacle interest group empire, we have intriguing insights. Press is being handled by Calvary Strategies, headed by a former chief of staff to Republican Florida Senator (and former governor) Rick Scott.²⁶ M4L has organized three federal political action committees (one a SuperPAC) and a Florida political action committee. In order to funnel money into 2022 state school board races the M4L Florida PAC took in a \$50,000 donation from Publix heiress Julie Fancelli, who also donated \$300,000 to the January 6, 2021 Stop the Steal rally in Washington, DC, reportedly at the urging of Alex Jones.²⁷ M4L has held a fund raiser with former Fox News celebrity Megyn Kelly and another with Council for National Policy member Carol Swain.

There are additional CNP connections, and they are important because CNP is a powerful right-wing directorate whose members include conservative billionaires, Christian right media moguls, and activist groups like the National Rifle Association. CNP member the Leadership Institute was a \$50,000 Presenting Sponsor at M4L’s September 2022 “National Summit,” with CNP members Heritage Foundation and Heritage Action for America donating \$10,000 each as Silver Sponsors, and CNP member Turning Point USA and Parents Defending Education as \$5,000 Bronze sponsors.²⁸ Leadership Institute (“Training conservatives since 1979”) also provided training and, according to an LI aide, has been involved in M4L since its early stages. LI trainee Marie Rogerson succeeded Bridget Ziegler on the M4L board, and after her re-election was secured, Ziegler accepted a job with LI training school board candidates. CNP member Caroline Wetherington donated \$10,000 to Ziegler’s re-election political action committee.²⁹

On October 15, 2021, Washington Post reporter Tim Craig did a piece on the rise of M4L, including comments from Christian Ziegler. Almost in wonderment, he stated that “I have been trying for a dozen years to get 20- and 30-year-old females involved with the Republican Party, and it was a heavy lift to get that demographic. But now Moms for Liberty has done it for me.” Craig wrote that “Ziegler also expects the group’s members will become foot soldiers for Gov. Ron DeSantis’s (R) reelection campaign next year.” This came to pass with Christian tweeting on October 19, 2022, about a “Mamas for DeSantis” rally featuring Florida first lady Casey DeSantis and his wife, M4L founder Bridget Ziegler.³⁰ According to The74 Microtargeted Media, Christian



Ziegler's business, was paid \$21,357 for 2022 school board campaign work by the Moms for Liberty Florida PAC.³¹

At the National Summit, Justice declared that she had spoken to M4L members from across the country who “cannot wait to vote for him (DeSantis) for president.” According to an IRS search, seventy-nine nonprofits have registered across the country as Moms for Liberty affiliates. They would be useful foot soldiers if DeSantis runs for president.³²

No Left Turn in Education

No Left Turn in Education registered as a 501(c)(3) non-profit in Pennsylvania in 2020 and in 2021 had assets of \$387,778.³³ It lacked much of any web presence throughout 2020 and by February 27, 2021 finally had built out the website but showed few signs of any membership.³⁴

According to founder Elana Yaron Fishbein, she decided to pull her children out of public schools and send them to a private school in fall 2020. In June, after the murder of George Floyd, her children's school principal sent a message to parents that the school would “offer explicit lessons on equity and race for our students,” which, according to Fishbein, “shocked me.” Her account of how she decided to start NLTE then relies, she says, on fidelity to the principles of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., outrage at “woke” doctrines, and the terrifying dominance of leftist parents who intimidate conservative parents into silence.³⁵ Conservatives like Fishbein quote Dr. King's statement that he looks forward to the day when his children will be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin; they use that line to denounce any teaching about racism, past or present.

Despite its modest start, NLTE was already listed on PDE's “Indoctrination” page as a “grassroots” ally, as was M4L. The only affiliate links were Facebook pages formed in February and March 2021 with few members. Every NLTE state affiliate linked to PDE was using the identical stock photo of a diverse group of teenagers. Three conservative organizations in Florida, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, in their telling, independently started by concerned “moms,” were already networked. By March 5, Fishbein had put together a Resources pages with “Information by State,” “Understanding Indoctrination,” “Understanding Critical Race Theory,” “Understanding the 1619 Project,” and “Understanding Man-Made Climate Change.”³⁶ It seems like a lot of work for one angry mom.



NLTE got its Fox boost on September 16, 2020, when Tucker Carlson Tonight hosted Fishbein in a segment titled “PA Parent Says School’s ‘Cultural Proficiency’ Curriculum Turns Martin Luther King’s Teachings ‘Upside Down.’” Carlson vigorously agreed with her characterization of King’s teachings and went along with her as she described other parents’ disagreement with her Facebook post about the school as “like lynching me.”³⁷ According to the Washington Post, the day after the Carlson appearance, NLTE’s Facebook page exploded from fewer than 200 followers to more than 30,000, rising to 30 chapters in 23 states. Fishbein said of the Carlson appearance, “He launched our movements — he doesn't know it, but he did.” Even though the Carlson segment had supposedly brought in thousands of new NLTE members in April of 2021, I couldn’t find them. Here are some of the membership numbers for No Left Turn in Education affiliates on Facebook linked to by PDE from April 2021: Alabama, 7; Arkansas, 3; Delaware, 6; Iowa, 2; Idaho, 4; Indiana, 8; Michigan (Betsy DeVos’s home state), 13; Mississippi, 3; Montana, 2; North Dakota, 2; Massachusetts, 17; Hawaii: 1.³⁸

NLTE’s board of directors includes Fishbein, who, according to Media Matters, has compared “the efforts of educators to that of Pol Pot, Vladimir Lenin, and Adolf Hitler,” complained that “black bigotry towards whites” is a “very real problem,” and pushed “anti-LGBTQ rhetoric such as telling people to go “back to Trans-sylvania.”³⁹ Also on the board is Sheriff David Clarke, perhaps best remembered as a prominent African-American backer of Donald Trump. As sheriff, he cast doubt on the capacity of the county to respond to 911 calls and suggested citizens arm themselves.⁴⁰

Local Groups

It would be unproductive to identify all the local groups that have sprung up—perhaps as many as 160, and M4L has registered seventy-nine branches with the IRS—but it is important to identify local groups in your area. They are likely to parrot the far-right script.

Fight for Schools and Families (prior to June 1, 2022, Fight for Schools)

One local group with an outsized budget and media presence is Fight for Schools and Families (FFSF) of Loudon County, Virginia. It follows a familiar pattern: a creation story (or stories), explosive resource growth, a communications professional at the top, and embedded in Republican politics.

FFSF founder Ian Prior is an established Republican communications operative who has recited two different creation stories to the media. On July 16,



2021, Loudonnow reported that Prior stated FFSF “was started by a group of parents gathered in a backyard.” In November 2021, he told the New York Times a different story--without backyard parents. Instead, Prior said he had found out that his name had been included on what he termed an “enemies list” by an anti-racist Facebook group in Loudon County and “The list, he said recently, led him to form Fight for Schools, a political action committee.”⁴¹

For an organization that sprung either from parents in a backyard or Prior’s pique at a Facebook post, FFSF proved immediately popular with small-dollar donors while it also attracted \$10,000 in its first reporting period from “businesswoman and GOP mega-donor Sharon Virts Mozer.” Her donations have risen to \$25,326, according to the Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP). On September 24, 2021, 1776 Action gave \$10,000. The Daily Beast describes 1776 Action as “a ‘dark money’ nonprofit led by former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Dr. Ben Carson.” FFSF “also coordinated local events in Virginia with The Heritage Foundation, an influential conservative think tank with connections to the Koch empire and Tea Party organizing efforts.” VPAP records \$9,320 in donations to FFSF from American Majority Action (AMA). A 2021 complaint from the Campaign for Accountability alleged that a 2015 \$500,000 donation to AMA from right-wing leader Leonard Leo and a 2016 \$500,000 contribution from Donors Capital Fund were misreported in order to hide the true source of the funds. Conservative billionaire Richard Uihlein of Illinois also donates to AMA.⁴²

Prior is a GOP political and communications professional with extensive ties to Republican and conservative politics, as shown in an OpenSecrets article about a dark money group named Citizens for Sanity. “Citizens for Sanity shares at least three operatives with the America First Legal Foundation,” including Prior. AFL was “founded by former Trump White House

By a four-to-one margin, more voters want investments in public schools rather than more school choice.

Which should be the higher educational priority today?

Improving the quality of education in the public schools: 80%

Giving parents more choice over which schools their children attend, including private schools: 20%

Hart Research Associates Poll: December, 2022



official Stephen Miller.” Prior served as a spokesman for Trump’s attorney general Jeff Sessions from 2017-2018. He’s worked for the National Republican Congressional Committee, Senate Leadership Fund, “and the Karl Rove-founded American Crossroads super PAC as well as closely-tied 501(c)(4) dark money groups, Crossroads GPS, and One Nation” and on numerous Republican campaigns. Truthout reports that Prior “is also senior counsel for Article III Project, a group launched with funding from Leonard Leo’s Judicial Crisis Network that attacks Democratic judicial nominees.” He is the CEO of Headwaters Media and an official with the Internet Accountability Project. True North Research says, “Prior is also senior counsel and a spokesperson for ‘Unsilenced Majority,’ a right-wing group that has ties to neo-Nazi collaborator and “Pizza-gate promoter Jack Posobiec.”⁴³

FFSF and American First Legal teamed up with Parents Defending Education to sue President Biden’s Department of Education to offer a seat on a parents' advisory council to PDE. The DOE disbanded the parents' council (which included as a member the neoliberal Walton group National Parents Union). FFSF has pushed a Moms for Liberty event on its website.⁴⁴

Right-wing media, including Fox News, has routinely characterized Prior as a concerned parent and not identified him as a Republican operative, a practice common as conservative media cover these political agents masquerading as moms and parents.⁴⁵



Neoliberal Groups

Since national conservative funders and interest group leaders launched their right-wing groups, those loud and well-resourced operations have dominated news coverage with book bans, bounties on teachers, anti-vaccine and mask protests, school board disturbances, and campaigns to take over school boards. But the school privatization space has been filled for years with neoliberal groups, those that project themselves as serving the needs of underserved students while campaigning to undermine teachers' unions and privatize public education. Some media have cast them in hard contrast to the right-wing groups, such as Education Week proclaiming that “left-leaning political organizations including Stand for Children, the Campaign for Our Shared Future, Education Reform Now, along with stalwarts like the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—both teachers’ unions—campaign for candidates that aim to promote educational equity, raise funding, and increase teacher pay.”⁴⁶ This is a mischaracterization. None of the three groups listed by Education Week is “left-leaning.” The neoliberal organizations' crusade is to privatize schools and destroy teachers' unions.

Why would Charles Koch and the Walton family help underwrite “left-leaning political organizations” like National Parents Union? Because at their core NPU and its ilk are agents for attacking unions and privatizing education.

Massachusetts Parents United

Massachusetts Parents United (MPU) is a statewide front that was formed in 2017 by, depending on the creation story, two moms or three strong women or a group of parents in a library with a couple of hundred dollars. Before long, the couple of hundred dollars had mushroomed into millions—the Walton Family Foundation alone chipped in \$2,666,000 from 2017-2021.⁴⁷

MPU's president is Keri Rodrigues, who was state director of Families for Excellent Schools, Inc (FES) for FES's 2016 losing charter school ballot proposal to expand the number of charter schools in Massachusetts. She has been on Walton-dependent payrolls since her 2014 job with Democrats for Education Reform, the sister outfit of Education Reform Now. Her LinkedIn profile shows her B.A. in Broadcast,



Telecommunications, and Media Management, with over twenty years of experience in communications.

National Parents Union

Apparently, the Waltons were pleased with the progress of Massachusetts Parents United because in 2020, they promoted Rodrigues as the president of a new venture, National Parents Union. The creation story is that “two Latina mothers”—Rodrigues and Alma Marquez of California—joined together to create a new model in parent activism based on the labor movement. (On her old radio program in heavily Portuguese Fall River, Massachusetts, Rodrigues had been known as “the pint-sized Portuguese pundit.”). Marquez is also a communications professional, and president of Del Sol Group, a communications and public affairs firm with deep ties to school privatization funders. MPU’s Massachusetts 2020 Form PC tax returns show a \$25,000 payment for consulting services to Del Sol Group.⁴⁸

A concept paper sent to the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) by National Parents Union identified three reasons for the new organization: to be a force in the 2020 presidential election, to foster parent organizations, and to combat teachers’ unions. The first goal fell by the wayside and the second has gone nowhere. NPU has been bashing unions since its inception.⁴⁹

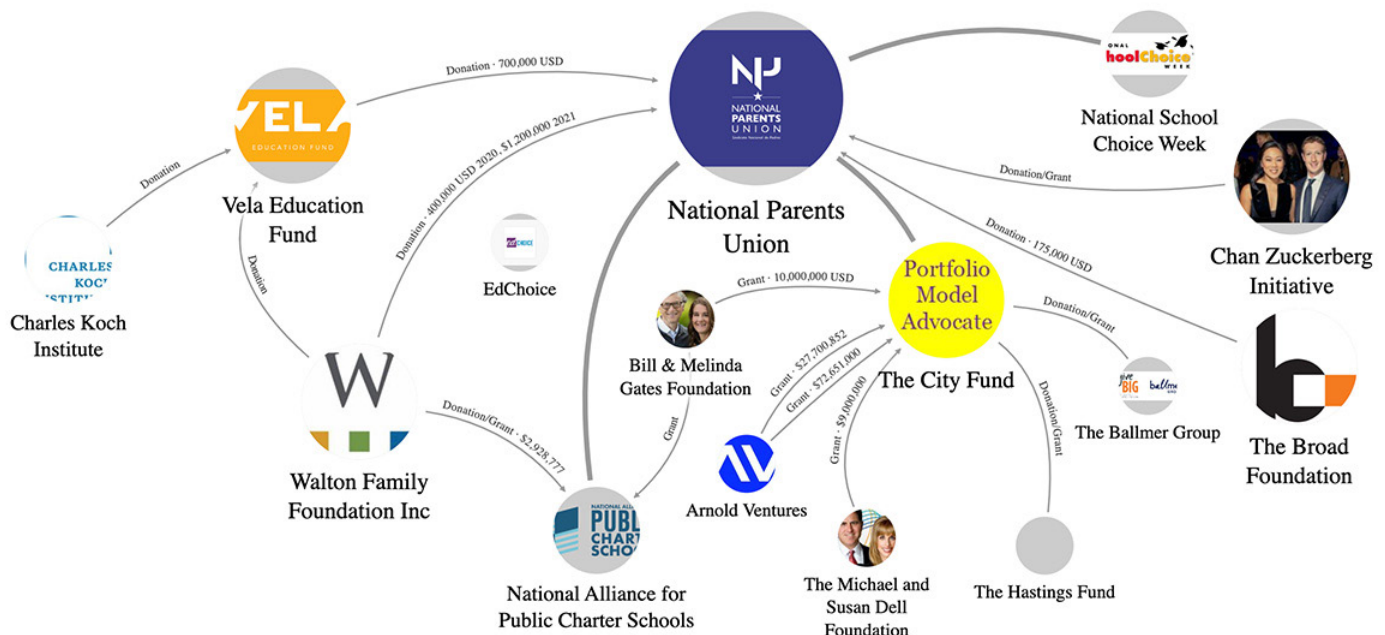
After the two mothers briefly joined forces (Marquez disappeared from NPU shortly after it launched), the organization found itself awash in millions from donors, including the Walton Family Foundation, Broad Foundation, Gates Foundation, and the joint Koch-Walton venture, the Vela Education Fund. The Walton Family Foundation funneled \$400,000 to NPU through Massachusetts Parents United in 2020 and another \$1,200,000 to NPU in 2021.⁵⁰ The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative gave \$260,000 in 2020 and \$1,500,000 in 2021.⁵¹

NPU’s two key vendors are notable too. NPU’s launch and communications have been managed by international communications firm Mercury LLC. NPU’s polling operations are by Echelon Insights Inc., a top Republican firm that also polls for the Walton Family Foundation. Both are expensive.

One aspect of NPU’s communications tactics is the claim to be representing parent organizations across the country. However, NPU has never published a list of its member organizations. I examined groups that were individually promoted as

affiliates in 2020 for my book *Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization* and found they consisted largely of organizations within the charter school network. There were few, if any, real parent organizations.⁵²

Since NPU doesn't represent parents, who does it represent? Let's follow the money using the LittleSis.org Oligrapher tool.⁵³



The neoliberal groups appear to be in conflict with the conservative groups, but the differences mask the common goals of destroying unions and privatizing education. For instance, on May 21, 2021, as anti-Critical Race Theory groups like M4L and PDE were gaining steam, NPU issued a statement in favor of teaching CRT. It has tweeted that Congress should restore the Child Tax Credit.⁵⁴ A visit to the NPU webpage will show a Family Advisory Council consisting of people of color but no information concerning NPU's Delegates, also mostly people of color who disappeared from NPU's organization sometime in fall 2022.

Whenever trying to understand an "education reform" operation, follow the money. In this case, the largest known donor to NPU in 2020 was the Vela Education Fund (VEF), a Walton Family Foundation-Charles Koch Institute joint venture run by a Koch oil and gas executive. As the historian Nelson Lichtenstein writes, WFF is "the single largest source of funding for the 'school choice' movement and a powerful



advocate of charter schools and voucher initiatives.” The Waltons’ support for privatization

is an entirely ideological project, based on a desire to enhance the social and cultural value of a free market in which government is weak while public goods like . . . education . . . are the fodder for entrepreneurial transformation. . . . Since public schools are by far the most pervasive of public institutions, and highly unionized to boot, this “\$700-plus-billion-a-year industry”—John Walton’s phrase—has been a good place to start.⁵⁵

Christopher Leonard, author of *Kochland: The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America*, described Charles Koch’s libertarian views on public education on the *Have You Heard* podcast. Leonard confirmed Koch’s intense anti-unionism and continued: “when you have public education . . . one of the biggest problems for the libertarians is that it’s funded through taxes. . . they see taxation truly as a form of theft and robbery.” Leonard continued:

Know what the blueprint is. The Koch influence machine is multifaceted and complex and I am just telling you in a very honest way, there's a huge difference between the marketing materials produced by Americans for Prosperity (Koch’s political organization) and the behind the scenes actual political philosophy. There's a huge difference. And here's the actual political philosophy. Government is bad. Public education must be destroyed for the good of all American citizens in this view.

So the ultimate goal is to dismantle the public education system entirely and replace it with a privately run education system, which the operatives in this group believe in a sincere way is better for everybody. Now, whether you agree with that or not is the big question, but we cannot have any doubt, there's going to be a lot of glossy marketing materials about opportunity, innovation, efficiency. At its core though, the network seeks to dismantle the public education system because they see it as destructive. So that is what's the actual aim of this group. And don't let them tell you anything different.⁵⁶

Small wonder then that Rodrigues reliably bashes public schools and teachers unions, often on Fox News.⁵⁷ The Waltons, Koch and other privatizers benefit from creating chaos within the public education space and that is what conservative and neoliberal organizations attempt.



Spotting Phony Parent Groups and Fighting Back

We can't always identify the real check writers, but we can build a strong case about what interests underlie conservative and neoliberal parent groups, which share the goals of attacking teacher unions, privatizing public education, and seeking profits. Look to the resources these groups suddenly have available to them, and then look at the resources committed by more established allies. Drill in to unveil their key vendors and contractors. Dig out their creation stories, which present a different picture than their resources. Pay special notice to media attention, which is often managed by professional communicators who pose as volunteer founders in addition to elite public relations firms. Remember what the M4L leader told the New Yorker: Moms for Liberty is a media company. So are they all.

Recognize that conservative groups like Parents Defending Education, Moms for Liberty, and No Left Turn in Education are “obedient franchises” of a top-down right-wing movement that includes the Koch network and the Council for National Policy.⁵⁸ It's much more appealing to have Tina Descovich or Nicole Neily as the face of the operation than Charles Koch or Morton Blackwell. The same goes for neoliberal organizations fronting for Koch or the Walton family.

Don't be intimidated. Yes, these groups have had some successes, trumpeted by their powerful communications teams. But independent media analyses of right-wing 2022 school board campaigns show very mixed results. Real gains for Moms for Liberty and other right-wing based candidates in Florida and other conservative jurisdictions, but defeats elsewhere. A conservative Brevard County,

Voters believe that candidates who focus on stopping schools from teaching certain topics related to race and gender are doing this mainly for their own political benefit (64%) rather than to improve our public schools (36%). By overwhelming margins, voters and parents reject the contention that teachers are promoting a “woke” political agenda. (65% to 27%)

Hart Research Associates Poll: December, 2022



Florida candidate for re-election received endorsements from the 1776 Project and Moms for Liberty, and both groups provided mailers and digital ads. M4L brought volunteers, but the candidate, Katy Campbell, told them not to wear M4L t-shirts while canvassing in order not to “polarize voters.”⁵⁹

Most parents don’t want book bans and inflammatory politics. They want a good education for their children, one that will prepare them for the world and teach accurate information. The reason for all the secrecy is that the billionaire backers know that the public disagrees with their policy preferences.

Don’t go it alone. Organize, seek out allies, and prepare to stand up. Red, Wine, and Blue has a useful guidebook for parents to use for help in standing up to right-wing bullies. True North Research has more insights and good advice in “The Disinformation Playbook Targeting Our Public Schools and Elections.” My favorite piece of advice from True North Research: “When these groups appear at a school board, PR event, or reach out to the press, they should be asked to name who their biggest funders are.”⁶⁰

Dark Money never sleeps. Follow the money.



Resources

There are publicly available and free resources you can use to help you determine if a conservative or neo-liberal education privatization group is a front for big money. Here are a few.

Form 990s

IRS 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations must make their Form 990 tax returns available to the public. Neither is required to make their donors public, but ask for Schedule B and you may see the large donations redacted for donor names. Private foundations file Form 990-PF and must make their donors and donations public. You can request the Form 990s directly from the non-profits. There are also some good free resources to access the returns. I like the Full Text Search at ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer because it not only makes returns available but also may provide links to tax returns that have contributed to your target. Another good free source is Guidestar.org.⁶¹

I don't want to oversell Form 990s—they are woefully delayed and not detailed, but they do provide some clues. Take National Parents Union—supposedly started by two moms. The Form 990 for its first year of operation reveals NPU with \$1.4 million in revenues. Schedule B doesn't identify donors but does reveal donations running from \$700,000 down to \$75,000. It had twenty-three employees with salaries, compensation, and benefits worth over \$634,000. Not your typical parent group.

Internal Revenue Service

At the IRS website you can look up organizations to find out if they have gotten their determination letter (confirming their tax status) and filed any Form 990s. Search the IRS website for Moms for Liberty and you'll find at least seventy-nine Moms for Liberty chapters, mostly 501(c)(4)s spread throughout the country.

The Organization's Website

In Massachusetts Parents United's first year of operation its website revealed



some donors. It turned out they were foundations of wealthy individuals including the Waltons who had donated hundreds of thousands of dollars in dark money to the state's 2016 privatization ballot initiative to increase the number of charter schools without limit.

If one combed through Parents Defending Education's website, you would find sophisticated instructions on how to inform on educators and remain anonymous—quite a lot for a few moms working from home. You could also see PDE's staffers and a bit more research would show that PDE's president is a long-time Koch network political operative and the director of outreach has been on privatizer payrolls for years. The Form 990s of their prior organizations show that neither comes cheap.

Also, on PDE's website, you'd find information on lawsuits it has filed and press releases. That would lead you to its law and PR firms, both pricey conservative vendors. (And if you consulted the Form 990s for Speech First, Neily's last stop, you'd find she hired both of those firms there at a healthy price tag).

Get on their mailing lists too—they'll lead you to their public relations consultants.

LinkedIn Profiles

The leaders of privatization groups depict themselves as concerned moms (and the occasional dad) who come together in a David vs. Goliath contest to take on the education establishment of unions, administrators, and school boards. Consult the LinkedIn profiles of these perturbed parents—like Descovich, Prior, Neily, or Rodrigues—and you'll find experienced political and communications professionals.

LittleSis.org

LittleSis is a website that follows the money and lets us see the interactions between groups through power mapping.

Sourcewatch

Sourcewatch is a project of the Center for Media and Democracy and is an invaluable source for understanding the forces behind right-wing non-profits.



Corporate Filings

You can find incorporation papers for 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) non-profits, usually at your state's Secretary of State Corporations Division. You can find out when they incorporated, any changes in structure, and who is on the board of directors. You can tell that even though Moms for Liberty likes to say it had two co-founders, it really had three—the third being the wife of the vice chairman of the Florida Republican Party. And you could find out that the board of directors on National Parents Union's webpage doesn't match the board members at the Massachusetts Secretary of State's office.

Federal and State Offices of Campaign Finance

The Federal Election Commission and your state's campaign finance agency will have important information about who is running a campaign committee or political action committee, who is donating to it, and who is getting paid. Fight for Schools and Families is a political action committee as is Friends of Bridget Ziegler.

OpenSecrets.org

Opensecrets catalogs federal campaign finance data in a fashion that is more accessible than the FEC website. And, Opensecrets has excellent reporting on campaign finance issues.

Google

Google will provide plenty of clues, especially Google News. Set Google Alert for an organization you follow. Otherwise, I might have missed a 2021 New Yorker article reporting that the Vela Education Fund, a Koch-Walton joint venture, had donated to National Parents Union. You'll also get updates—nearly daily at times—of right-wing media promoting the group you are following. And you'll get notices of more mainstream media following them—sometimes embarrassingly naïve, other times penetrating.

Pay attention and take action. Our democracy is under siege and we need to protect it.



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- 60** “Parent Playbook,” Red, Wine, and Blue, May 26, 2022 <https://redwine.blue/parentplaybook/> ; “The Disinformation Playbook Targeting Our Public Schools and Elections,” True North Research, September 14, 2022 <https://truenorthresearch.org/2022/09/dark-money-buys-school-board-races-for-gop-2022/>.
- 61** “Nonprofit Explorer-Full Text Search,” ProPublica https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/full_text_search; GuideStar, <https://www.guidestar.org/>.