



2023

A CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO
**SCHOOL
PRIVATIZATION**

BY MAURICE CUNNINGHAM

When I wrote [*Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization*](#), the attack on public education came mostly from billionaire-funded neoliberal fronts. In the two years since its publication, radical right billionaires have pivoted to create anti-public education operations like Moms for Liberty (M4L) and Parents Defending Education (PDE). This guide will introduce neoliberal and right-wing groups working to privatize public education in America. You may not see the name of a group active in your state. Rest assured, though, the elements of these organizations are similar across the board, even as particular groups serve distinct functions. They are deeply entwined, so following the thread of who is funding what can be quite confusing...which is to their advantage.

These groups are highly networked, centrally conceived and managed, and they hide their true donors. They have to — when the public understands who they are and what they want, people reject them. That is because they are out to destroy public goods, including schools, and the rights of us all to join unions and fight for our rights, and as Nancy McLean has titled her essential book, place [*Democracy in Chains*](#). We'll look at Networks, Organizations, and Donors. Then, because many of you are facing toxic organizations in your communities, we will look at a few state and local operations.

Many of these networks, organizations, and donors are also involved in other campaigns that enrich their donors while harming our communities. A short list would include climate change denialism, anti-science, vaccine alarmists, masking opponents, public health critics, and January 6 funders, activists, and supporters.

Networks

Throughout the anti-public education campaigns, we will repeatedly find the Koch Network and the Council for National Policy. For more on pro-charter networks, see my prior report for the Network for Public Education, [Merchants of Deception: Parent Props and Their Funders](#).

The **Koch network**, now known as [Stand Together](#), was established by billionaire



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Charles Koch and his late brother David and meets twice a year at Koch seminars. Much of what goes on is secret, and attendees are expected to contribute to Koch political causes. The entry fee typically is \$100,000. Political figures seeking the backing of deep-pocketed right-wingers present themselves for approval. *Politico* [recently reported](#) the January 2018 meeting offered an important draw: Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was there to attend “a private dinner for the network’s donors.” At that same January 2018 meeting, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that the network would pivot to “melding the minds of the next generation by making massive, targeted investments in both K-12 and higher education.”

Leonard Leo was a key conduit in delivering Thomas to the Koch gathering. Leo was then a leader of the radical right legal operation, The Federalist Society. The six conservative Supreme Court justices are all current or past members of The Federalist Society. Leo is also involved in the school wars, contracting with the Koch-tied Parents Defending Education, as exposed in a report by TrueNorth Research’s Lisa Graves and Alyssa Bowen in [Tax Docs Link Right-Wing “Parents Group” to Leonard Leo’s Dark Money Network](#).

Leo is a [member](#) of the Board of Governors of the **Council for National Policy (CNP)**. The CNP is a secretive right-wing directorate consisting of wealthy conservative donors, Christian nationalist leaders commanding large media empires, and the heads of far-right organizations including the Heritage Foundation, the Leadership Institute, and Turning Point USA. Heritage is perhaps the most powerful think tank on the right. It has released a [blueprint](#) for policies to be pursued by the next Republican president, including privatization of public schools. Heritage president Kevin Roberts is a [CNP board member](#). Leadership Institute (LI) was founded by Morton Blackwell over forty years ago to train conservatives in the arts of political combat. Blackwell also [co-founded CNP](#). In 2017, the CNP [urged the incoming Trump administration](#) to advance toward abolishing public education to be replaced by “free-market private schools, church schools, and home schools as the *normative American practice*.”

Anne Nelson, author of [Shadow Network: Money, Media, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right](#) reports that while Koch is not a CNP member, his associate and [Koch network member](#) William Walton, a [Heritage trustee](#), was [chosen](#) in 2019 to serve as president of CNP.

Funders

Neoliberal donors purport to represent underserved families and support “school choice” options like charter schools and vouchers. Right-wing donors support white

backlash and anti-LGBTQ operations that are responsible for book banning, school board disruptions, and back home schooling and religious schools. In terms of the end game of destroying our public education system, there is little difference between neoliberal billionaires and right-wing billionaires. They simply take different paths to the same goal. Neoliberals seek to undermine public education from within the liberal coalition, calling “school choice” the “civil rights issue of our time.” Right-wingers appeal directly to racial and gender grievances.

Selected Right-wing Funders

The **Koch network** has gone all-in on privatization since its January 2018 Koch seminar when network oligarch Stacy Hock, co-founder of Texans for Educational Opportunity, “The lowest hanging fruit for policy change in the United States today is K-12.” Koch network money suppliers **Donors Trust** and the **Snider Foundation** fund Parents Defending Education. Donors Trust is a donor-advised fund that allows wealthy patrons to hide their donations while still directing them to favored interests. Parents Defending Education’s president is Nicole Neily, a long-time Koch network political operative. Parents Defending Education has multiple ties to the Koch network.

The **Charles Koch Institute** and the Walton Family Foundation formed a joint venture called the **Vela Education Fund** in 2021 with Koch oil and gas executive Meredith Olson as president. Vela’s [first grants](#) went to the neoliberal and Walton-created National Parents Union, a Koch-Waltons joint venture called 4.0 Schools, and the right-wing Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA). **4.0 Schools** claims to fund education innovators. In 2019, it [received pledges](#) of \$5 million each from the Charles Koch Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation. From 2012–2016, it got over \$1.9 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

HSLDA’s founder, Michael Farris, is a Christian Right activist who, in 2017, became president of the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a legal shop that the Southern Poverty Law Center has [identified](#) for hatred against the LGBTQ community. ADF was behind the [Dobbs](#) decision that reversed [Roe v. Wade](#) “on the road to becoming a pro-life nation.” ADF’s goal is “to [take down the education system](#) as we know it today.” Farris is a long-time member of CNP. His [influence](#) on groups like Moms for Liberty is obvious, though downplayed by M4L.

Yes. Every Kid (YEK) founded in 2019, is also a weapon in Koch’s drive to privatize public education. YEK’s first chairperson was Meredith Olson, the oil and gas manager who also founded and now runs the Vela Education Fund. YEK purports to transform education toward a family-centered model, but as Peter Greene [shows](#), it is run by

political operatives, not educators. “There is nowhere in sight anyone with real experience or expertise in education.” YEK is a 501(c)(4) advocacy group (allowed substantial leeway for political involvement), and the Yes Every Kid Foundation is a 501(c)(3) advocacy group that can be involved in policy, education, and advocacy. As Sourcewatch from the Center for Media and Democracy has [found](#), both are dependent on Koch network funding, especially from elements of Koch’s own Stand Together.

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez argues in [State Capture: How Conservative Activists, Big Businesses, and Wealthy Donors Reshaped the American States—and the Nation](#) that the Koch-tied **American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)**, **State Policy Network (SPN)**, and **Americans for Prosperity (AFP)** are a powerful “troika” that does the bidding of corporate and far-right interests. [ALEC](#) is a corporate bill mill feeding prefab legislation to conservative state lawmakers. It has been funded by Koch, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and a host of far-right donors. SPN is a [network of think tanks](#) in all fifty states that support ALEC and pump up its model legislation. AFP is the [Koch network’s political organization](#). The troika has combined to debilitate unions, attack climate change science, fight for school privatization, and pursue far-right legislative and regulatory goals in the states. These organizations present an ongoing danger to public education.

This account only scratches the surface of Koch’s investment in school privatization. His network is nicknamed “the Kochtopus.”

The **Council for National Policy**, exposed in Anne Nelson’s [Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right](#), brings together wealthy conservatives, many from the oil and gas realm; Christian evangelists with vast communications networks; and groups that can turn out groups like the National Rifle Association. CNP is a central directorate passing down plans to “obedient franchises” like Moms for Liberty. The key CNP members that oversee M4L are the **Leadership Institute** and **Heritage Foundation**. They run the annual summits, provide the training and literature, and even sue the Biden administration on M4L’s behalf.

As Adam Laats recounts in [The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education](#), Heritage entered the school wars when it provided legal representation to protesters in the Kanawha County, West Virginia upheaval in 1974 where “shootings, bombings, and violence became near-daily occurrences.” Original M4L co-founder Bridget Ziegler, who is married to Florida Republican Party chairman and paid M4L consultant Christian Ziegler, left the M4L board early and was replaced by CNP-trained Marie Rogerson.

M4L co-founder Tina Descovich is also trained by CNP. After Ziegler was re-elected to her school board seat with a \$10,000 donation from a CNP member, she was signed on by Blackwell to run LI's school board training. Heritage gave M4L its Salvatori Prize for American Citizenship (and \$25,000) in 2022. CNP member **Turning Point USA** is deeply embedded in Christian nationalist politics and a sponsor of M4L's national summits. TPUSA runs a [School Board Watchlist](#), which generates threats and harassment against school board members.

Betsy DeVos and her American Federation for Children are [leading privatizers](#) who have made significant inroads in state legislatures and school boards. DeVos supports charter schools, religious schools, vouchers—almost anything that will end public schooling as she pursues schools that will “advance God’s kingdom.” She has backed anti-LGBTQ rights groups, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the State Policy Network, and multiple Koch initiatives. After her tenure as Donald Trump’s Secretary of Education, she advocated for the department’s abolition at the 2022 Moms for Liberty national summit.

Dick and Liz Uihlein have become [known as](#) “the Koch brothers of Wisconsin politics,” but they have also funded privatization efforts in [Illinois](#) and elsewhere. They are GOP “megadonors” who have [underwritten](#) election denial campaigns and in favor of a ballot initiative that would have placed a roadblock in the path of citizens trying to legalize abortion in Ohio.

Farris Wilks and Dan Wilks are billionaire [Texas brothers](#) called “the Koch brothers of the Christian Right” who fund some of the jewels of Koch’s political empire, including SPN, ALEC, and Heritage. They are virulently anti-LGBTQ and among the largest donors to PragerU, which is not a university at all but rather a video operation that produces far-right instructional videos. The Florida Department of Education recently accepted a PragerU [video for instruction](#) that features a cartoon Frederick Douglass soft-pedaling slavery. The Wilks brothers also contribute to climate denial operations.

Jeffrey Yass, a Pennsylvania billionaire, spent over \$1 million to defeat pro-teacher mayoral candidate Helen Gym in a race for mayor of Philadelphia. He is Pennsylvania’s biggest advocate for charter schools. He has donated elsewhere, including \$600,000 in dark money to support a charter school initiative in Massachusetts. He [sunk \\$15 million into a Super PAC called School Freedom Fund](#). Yass is [dedicated](#) to destroying public schools. He funds numerous [cash awards](#) to privatizers. Billionaire funders like to create prizes and then award them to the organizations they have created as a means of generating cachet. In 2023, he gave \$5 million to public school enemies in Arkansas, Iowa, and Oklahoma and \$12 million in Sustainable, Transformational, Outstanding,

and Permissionless (yes, STOP) awards in addition to what Yass describes as “the esteemed \$1 million Yass Prize” a bequest bestowed all the way back to 2022 and which Yass bashfully calls “the Pulitzer Prize of Education Innovation.”

The Yass prizes are managed by the [Center for Education Reform](#), an associate member of the State Policy Network, and a member of ALEC’s Task Force on Education and Workforce Development. Center for Education Reform has also gotten funding from Gates, Bradley, and the Waltons.

Selected Neoliberal Funders

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation are the “Big Three” of neoliberal privatizers. They support political organizations like Stand for Children and the National Parents Union. They fund Democrats for Education Reform, Educators for Excellence, Teach for America, and others. They underwrite pro-privatization publications like The74 and EdPost. And they generate research from anti-public school think tanks. (One such think tank employee [admitted](#) to Professor Megan Tompkins-Stange that they were uncomfortable with “the willingness on our part to make stuff up.”)

The **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation** has made such sizeable bets on its favored education reforms (such as Common Core) that it has dragged along public investment behind. Many of those investments have been for nought. Melinda Gates [admitted](#) in 2020 that “We certainly understand why many people are skeptical about the idea of billionaire philanthropists designing classroom innovations or setting education policy.” But no one should underestimate the Gates Foundation’s impact, [including](#) major investments in Stand for Children, Educators for Excellence, Teach for America, Center for Education Reform, Manhattan Institute, and others. In 2022, the Gates Foundation [lists grants](#) of \$290 million for K-12 education and \$38 million for U.S. charters.

The **Eli and Edythe L. Broad Foundation** is a major donor to charter schools and privatization fronts like National Parents Union. The late Eli Broad created the Broad Academy, which Diane Ravitch [notes](#) is “an unaccredited program that trains would-be superintendents in his top-down management philosophy of closing public schools and opening charter schools.” Broad was a [key figure](#) in creating Education Post (EdPost), an online publication that puffs up charter schools. Other EdPost funders include Michael Bloomberg, the Walton Family Foundation, and Laurene Powell Jobs.

The Broad Foundation has underwritten numerous privatization organizations, including Educators for Excellence, KIPP Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, and the online publication The 74, also funded by the Dick and Betsy DeVos Foundation, Gates

Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, Jonathon Sackler, the Doris and Donald Fisher Foundation, and the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative.

The **Walton Family Foundation** (more a right-wing donor and placed here in recognition of its “Big 3” status) [boasts](#) that it has put more than \$407 million into charter school development since 1997. It also has contributed to [conservative non-profit privatization advocates](#) such as the Heritage Foundation, American Legislative Exchange Council, American Prosperity Foundation, the [Cato Institute](#), [American Enterprise Institute](#), the [Manhattan Institute](#) (home of anti-Critical Race Theory propagandist Chris Rufo), and the [Independent Women’s Forum](#) (tied to Independent Women’s Voice). IWF and IWF leader Heather Higgins in 2020 was a [gold circle member of CNP](#).

The **City Fund** underwrites charter schools and other entities in the charter industry. InfluenceWatch [reports](#) that City Fund’s donors include “Hastings Fund, the [Arnold Foundation](#), the [Dell Foundation](#), the [Gates Foundation](#), the [Walton Family Foundation](#), and the Ballmer Group.” Arnold has [also funded](#) efforts “to gut public pensions.” Hastings has [advocated for](#) the abolition of elected school boards.

Additional wealthy backers of charter schools include Michael Bloomberg, Daniel Loeb, Kenneth Langone (Home Depot), Roger Hertog, Stanley Druckenmiller, Paul Tudor Jones, and the Robin Hood Foundation of New York; Doris Fisher, John Fisher, and Bill Bloomfield of California; Michael and Susan Dell of Texas; Steve Ballmer of Washington state; the late David Koch and his estate; and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation of Wisconsin (funders of many far-right causes). Rupert Murdoch has put at least \$1 million behind Democrats for Education Reform. As I showed in [Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization](#), a handful of Boston oligarchs funded the bulk of the 2016 charter schools ballot initiative; they lost 62 percent – 38 percent. Many of them defended themselves against a state regulatory investigation into their violations of state campaign finance law. They did not appreciate the attention — that’s why they use dark money in the first place!

The Network for Public Education has additional publications exposing the billionaires who attack public schools. Billionaires pay for university research (George Mason, Stanford), think tanks (Manhattan, Heritage, Cato), community organizations (National Parents Union, Moms for Liberty), legal shops (Parents Defending Education, Alliance Defending Freedom), and the media that offer them fawning coverage (The74, EdPost). Because billionaires have far different policy priorities than the public and because their involvement brings suspicion, they must hide behind these upbeat-sounding front groups. The point here is not to name them all but to reiterate that the drive for privatization is almost wholly an oligarchic pursuit without mass approval.

Key Privatization Organizations

Neoliberal operations purport to be champions of the disadvantaged, out to rescue students through charter schools. Conservative fronts appeal to white backlash and discrimination against the LGBTQ community and, shamefully, attack transgender teens.

Selected Right-wing Organizations

The **1776 Project** raises money to dispense to right-wing school board candidates, often working alongside Moms for Liberty. A recent [online funding appeal](#) included entreaties from such extremist luminaries as Donald Trump Jr., Tucker Carlson, Glenn Beck, Laura Ingraham, and others. Like M4L it has had mixed success in school board races, but its ability to raise funds and promote havoc should not be underestimated. It endorsed over 100 school board candidates in 2022 (including Bridget Ziegler in Sarasota County, Florida) and draws major [funding](#) from right-wing billionaire Dick Uihlein.

Gays Against Groomers is one the more bizarre allies of Moms for Liberty. It apparently formed in 2022. As Media Matters has [reported](#), Gays Against Groomers is led by two former Trump operatives. They have become darlings of far-right propaganda media. According to the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), Gays Against Groomers has allied itself with the Family Research Council, an anti-LGBTQ hate group.

Moms for America (M4A), as [reported](#) by TrueNorth Research's Alyssa Bowen, has been a major player in "pushing voter suppression, election denialism, attacks on public schools and [COVID-19 misinformation](#)." Moms for America leaders were deeply involved in the January 6 "Stop the Steal" rally and other aspects of Trump's Big Lie.

Unlike many of the other "moms" and "parents" groups, M4A has been doing the right-wing's dirty work for some time, having formed in 2005 under a different name. M4A has held training on how to disrupt school board meetings and run for school board. It is also tied to the Council for National Policy. [Funders](#) include the Rush and Kathryn Adams Limbaugh Family Foundation, Freedom Works Foundation (the 501(c)(3) component of a Tea Party operation), the George Jenkins Foundation (Julie Fancelli), and the Edgar and Elsa Prince Foundation (the mother and late father of Betsy DeVos).

Moms for Liberty (M4L) is a [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) designated anti-government extremist group embedded in far-right politics. It has been identified by [PENAMERICA](#) as leading the country's book-banning movement and called out by the [Human Rights Campaign](#) in declaring a national emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans. M4L was born and nurtured in the far-right politics of Ron DeSantis's Florida. After an M4L

chapter in Indiana caused a furor by quoting Hitler in a newsletter, Christian Ziegler [advised](#) M4L members never to apologize for such an outrage. Co-founder Tiffany Justice [told](#) 2023 summit participants, “One of our moms in a newsletter quotes Hitler. I stand with that mom.’ The crowd cheered.”

Fancelli is not the only M4L-connected individual who traffics in election denial. Christian Ziegler [attended the January 6 Stop the Steal rally](#) in Washington. Bridget Ziegler’s largest campaign contributor is a [CNP member who traffics in election denial theories](#). M4L’s legislative director [helped form](#) a Florida group (with Roger Stone) to pressure Senator Rick Scott to vote against certifying Joe Biden’s Electoral College victory.

M4L’s creation story is that two moms, former school board members, joined together to form an organization as the Covid crisis alerted them to the terrible things happening in schools. The truth is that M4L is entrenched in far-right Republican politics. Immediately upon launching M4L became a darling of right-wing media, getting [signal boosting](#) from the Rush Limbaugh program, Steve Bannon’s podcast, Fox News, and others. Mainstream media is almost worse. Christian Ziegler [gloated](#) on a *Washington Post* headline about M4L’s 2023 national summit: “Probably the best headline I’ve ever seen.” *The Post* runs M4L stories presenting co-founder Tina Descovich in a [Superman pose](#).

Heritage produces defenses of M4L when it [cozies up to Hitler](#), is identified for [leading book bans](#), or is called an [anti-government extremist group](#). Those defenses will be amplified in right-wing media and allied right-wing think tanks like the [Koch-tied American Enterprise Institute](#).

No Left Turn in Education is another operation I detailed in [Merchants of Deception](#). In 2020 it took in just over \$3,500, in 2021, it received over \$483,000, including \$150,000 from the Israel-based [Underground Family Foundation](#) and \$50,000 from the Marcus Foundation, the philanthropy of right-wing donor Bernard Marcus. No Left Turn in Education also gets money from Koch network affiliated [Donors Trust](#) and the [Snider Foundation](#). (Snider and Marcus also fund PragerU). The organization’s growth has been boosted by right-wing media, including Fox News. Founder Elana Fishbein relates her moment of truth came as she reacted with horror to public school efforts to stress social justice following the police murder of George Floyd.

Parents Defending Education was launched in March 2021 and as I wrote in [Masters of Deception](#), it was immediately suspicious. By then, thanks to Isaac Kamola and Ralph Wilson’s [Free Speech and Koch Money: Manufacturing a Campus Culture War](#), I had

learned much about billionaire fronts deployed to attack professors. PDE's approach of filing Department of Education civil rights complaints against teachers echoed what Koch-supported groups were doing to professors. PDE's complaints are often based on flimsy "evidence," such as a column by a right-wing radio host. Claiming a fear of the "woke mob," they hide their complainants' names. They don't contact the school district first, as would anyone seeking to rectify a complaint honestly. Instead, they go to the right-wing press. While a few of their complaints have proceeded through the DOE process and even succeeded, the major result has been to promote fear among educators. To PDE and allies, chaos is a success.

Turning Point USA has a broad portfolio in the far-right with conservative youth. As Kyle Snyder shows in *Raising Them Right: The Untold Story of America's Ultraconservative Youth Movement and Its Plot for Power*, its president, Charlie Kirk, is a prolific fundraiser and a member of the Council for National Policy. TPUSA's funders include "the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the Ed Uihlein Family Foundation, Foster Friess, Michael Leven and various Koch brothers-affiliated groups, such as the Foundation for Economic Education, Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund."

Selected Neoliberal Organizations

Neoliberal "reformers" share the goal of the extremist Alliance Defending Freedom—to take down public education. Charter school teacher Florina Rodov left and became an education reform critic when she saw that billionaires were funding charter school campaigns to hasten the demise of public schools. When St. Louis parent and education reformer Gloria Evans Nolan presented her ideas for improving public schools to Empower America CEO and funder Eric Scoggins he replied "That won't work. We have to burn it down." She left the organization.

Democrats for Education Reform (DFER) is a pass-through to obscure billionaires' contributions to privatization campaigns or, as former president Joe Williams explained in 2012, "We're essentially bundlers." The press has politely averted its eyes from this confession. Instead, it regurgitates polls and op-eds generated by DFER and its sister organizations, Education Reform Now Inc. and Education Reform Now Advocacy. Hedge funder Whitney Tilson has explained the organization's purpose as an "inside job" to use the Democratic Party (or at least some of its donors) to attack unions and expand charter schools. At one time or another, Democrats for Education Reform claimed branches in twenty states and the District of Columbia, plus an organization called DFER for Teachers or Teachers for Education. Today, DFER lists eight state affiliates on its website.

Educators for Excellence (E4E) is a [Teach for America alumni spinoff](#) with funding from the Waltons, right-wing William E. Simon Foundation, Koch-connected Bodman Foundation, Arnold, and Gates. E4E [purports](#) to promote the voice of teachers while doing the work of privatizers in undermining the authentic voice of teachers unions. Like DFER, it offers a “wolf in sheep’s clothing” approach. Money brings credibility with certain mainstream media, though, as shown when the Boston Globe published op-ed commentaries from the local heads of DFER and E4E (never mentioning that both of them receive funding from the Barr Foundation, which also has donated over \$2 million since 2019 to the Globe’s education coverage).

Latinos for Education was generated by Teach for America alum with an immediate infusion of \$455,576 in 2016, its first year of existence. It aims to place Latino leaders into the education system. The Walton Family Foundation provided \$216,400 in start-up funding and a total of \$1,635,358 through 2022. Latinos for Education has become a billionaire privatizer favorite with funders like The City Fund. Latinos for Education has received \$5 million [from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos’s ex-wife Mackenzie Scott](#).

Leadership for Educational Equity is yet another Teach for America spinoff designed to train TFA alumni to run for school boards and legislative seats where they can promote privatization and neoliberal economic policies.

The Walton Family Foundation created National Parents Union (NPU) after its defeat in the 2016 charter school ballot campaign in Massachusetts. In that race, the public pierced the privatizers’ facade while responding positively to a source they trusted: teachers. So, first, the Waltons manufactured the Massachusetts Parents United and then, with the same leadership, the National Parents Union. NPU follows the script of producing polling and “reports” to garner press attention.

NPU asserts it has over 1,000 affiliated organizations in all fifty states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico, and mainstream media routinely echoes this talking point. There is no evidence for that claim at all. When I reviewed publicly available membership claims in 2020, I found that most “members” were actually components of the charter school industry. NPU is [funded by](#) the Walton Family Foundation and foundations or individual contributions from Gates, Broad, additional Waltons, Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative, Dell, Hastings, Arnold, and through the Vela Education Fund, the Waltons, and Koch.

Stand for Children (SFC) was taken over by what Diane Ravitch has called “the billionaires boys club” and converted from community work to privatization around 2009. SFC is a political organization with some successes, prominently in Illinois. In a 2011 talk to the Aspen Institute, president Jonah Edelman crowed that SFC had nine state

affiliates but would grow to twenty by 2015. Today, it lists eight state affiliates on its website.

Teach for America (TFA), as Diane Ravitch [has written](#), “supplies low-wage temporary teachers for some public and many charter schools.” Donors include the Waltons, Jeff Bezos, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Gates, Broad, and others. Some TFA alums pursue careers as education reporters, others in policy or elected offices. Two years of teaching pales in impact next to a career proselytizing in government, foundations, and journalism.

When assessing these groups, I like to look at the creation story. It goes something like this. Two or three concerned parents/moms/educators get together over coffee at a kitchen table or in a library conference room. They discuss what they see as the shortcomings of the public schools, especially the teachers’ unions. Hearty souls that they are, they form a modest little concerned parents/moms/educators non-profit organization to save the children by promoting vouchers or charter schools or high stakes testing, and before the coffee cools or the library closes for the day, they are sitting on millions of dollars from the Waltons, Gates, and other oligarchs. Miraculous. The concerned parents/moms/educators are professionals in communications or politics with backgrounds in privatization organizations, represented by a costly communications firm, employing an expensive polling company, while proclaiming themselves the people’s voice (with few actual members in evidence). Miraculous. And they rarely get called on this charade by the media. Miraculous.

State Level Privatization Fronts

Across the nation numerous state level organizations have arisen to attack accurate teachings of history, public health measures, teacher unions, school boards, and to promote privatization.

Awake Illinois works with Moms for Liberty on the litany of right-wing issues, including opposing vaccines and masks against the accurate teaching of history, LGBTQ discrimination, and book bans. Awake Illinois is a [“conservative group that warns parents about the indoctrination and grooming of children”](#) and supports conservative school board candidates.

Californians for Equal Rights Foundation was [founded](#) in 2020 and is led by a number of Asian Americans who are veterans of the No on 16 campaign, which defeated a California ballot proposal that would have restored race-conscious affirmative action to the state. “Distinguished Advisors” include Moms for Liberty’s favorite conspiracy the-

orist, James Lindsay and anti-CRT provocateur Chris Rufo. [Donors](#) include the Schwab Charitable Fund and the Fidelity Investment Charitable Gifts Fund, both donor-advised funds that keep the true check writers hidden.

California Policy Center is a right-wing operation [formed](#) in 2010 and an affiliate of the State Policy Network. In 2020, CPC helped to engineer a ghostwritten “report” that the Orange County Board of Education relied upon to reopen schools during Covid without masks or social distancing guidelines. CPC’s “Parents Union” held a rally outside teachers’ union offices urging a reopening of schools during Covid. The “Parents Union” was a pro-charter operation. CPC recently teamed up with Moms for Liberty, Moms for America, Christian-right school board member Sonja Shaw, and others for “A Rally for Parental Rights” in Simi Valley.

Coalition for TJ in Virginia has been at the forefront of legal battles and protests against what it claims is discrimination against Asian American students. It recently [filed a petition asking the Supreme Court](#) to hear a case alleging discrimination at the Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology. New admissions policies at the high school “led to the most diverse class in recent history, boosting Black and Latino enrollment, as well as adding more low-income students, English-language learners and girls than prior classes” as well as “a dip in Asian American representation.” The Coalition for TJ is being represented by the [Pacific Legal Foundation](#), which has recently specialized in anti-affirmative action litigation but previously represented tobacco interests and climate change denialists. A co-founder of Coalition for TJ is Asra Nomani, a former vice-president of Parents Defending Education. After being fired by PDE, Nomani landed at [The Federalist](#) and [Independent Women’s Network](#), a project of Independent Women’s Voice.

Denver Families Action is the recently formed [political arm](#) of another new organization, Denver Families for Public Schools. It is an arm of the charter school industry and is funded by The City Fund. It is tossing around money in the Denver school board race in 2023.

Fight for Schools and Families also formed in Virginia. As I wrote in [Merchants of Deception](#), Fight for Schools and Families “follows a familiar pattern: a creation story (or stories), explosive resource growth, a communications professional at the top, and embedded in Republican politics.”

Idaho Freedom Foundation is a [good example](#) of an operation that tries to crush public education on the road to crushing democracy. IFF’s president Wayne Hoffman, has stated “I don’t think government should be in the education business. It is the most

virulent form of socialism (and indoctrination thereto) in America today.” IFF’s biggest known subsidizers include Donors Trust and Donors Capital Fund, [both vehicles](#) for hiding money donated by Charles Koch and other anti-public education oligarchs. IFF is a member of the Koch network-allied State Policy Network. The Charles Koch Institute has donated [directly](#) to IFF.

Invest in Kids is one of the privatizers exposed by [Illinois Families for Public Schools](#). DeVos’s American Federation for Children hired a lobbyist in Illinois named Nate Hoffman, who has pushed vouchers for the Invest in Kids scholarship granting operation and is a board member of another upbeat sounding privatization front named the **Foundation Against Intolerance and Racism (FAIR)**. Illinois Families for Public Schools reports that “The main beneficiaries of Invest in Kids include the [Archdiocese of Chicago](#) and other organizations that run or support religious schools.”

The **Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy** and Koch’s Americans for Prosperity have agitated for vouchers in New Hampshire. Conservative legislators passed vouchers through the state budget because they knew it was so unpopular with the public it would endanger them as a stand-alone vote. Key voucher support came from a report by the SPN affiliate Bartlett Center, a think tank with funding from [Donors Capital Fund](#). Koch’s political operation, Americans for Prosperity, conducted a [mail and door-to-door campaign](#) that contributed to an increase in applications in the first year of the voucher program, draining about \$8 million from public schools. Moms for Liberty’s local branch was not to be outdone. After a law forbidding the teaching of divisive concepts passed, Education Commissioner Frank Edelblut, an AFP favorite who home-schooled his seven children, launched a [website](#) for anyone to snitch on a teacher. Moms for Liberty, NH offered a \$500 bounty to whoever first reported a teacher.

Let MI Kids Learn was the most recent Betsy DeVos front employed to attempt school privatization in her home state of Michigan. Her [most recent failure](#) was an effort to pass vouchers through a ballot question process that in a usual twist of state law, would only have to pass the Republican legislature while avoiding a certain veto by the Democratic governor. It also would have avoided being voted on by the people. DeVos’s scheme failed as the legislature turned from red to blue. The DeVos family and dark money allies funded the ballot committee called Let MI Kids Learn. DeVos’s measure was also praised by the [Mackinac Center for Public Policy](#), an SPN member with funding from DeVos, the Bradley Foundation, the Koch network, and others.

Southlake Families PAC is a conservative operation written about by Laura Pappano in her forthcoming book [School Moms: Parent Activism, Partisan Politics, and the Battle for Public Education](#). The PAC has agitated successfully against CRT. Pappano relates

the creation story of the Southlake Families PAC. A local activist invited the Texas Republican Party chairman Allen West to an early meeting, and the group immediately raised \$75,000. Halfway through the 2022 election cycle the PAC had raised over \$172,000 and hired national Republican campaign consultants.

Beating the Privatizers

Chaos is the product. It's a lot easier to break something than to build something or to improve upon it.

Let's not downplay the harm caused by book banners and hate spewers like Moms for Liberty or Parents Defending Education. Yes, M4L managed to get five GOP presidential candidates to its 2023 national summit, including Ron DeSantis and Donald Trump. Right-wing propaganda media and mainstream outlets are both willing to build them up.

The story repeated on M4L is of two (Bridget Ziegler often is left out) suburban moms who start up their own group to protect kids from schools and vaccines and reopen schools, and then it explodes into a national operation. That is blindingly naïve coverage. M4L and the other recently launched right-wing groups were carefully conceived in right-wing think tanks and institutions like the Council for National Policy, Leadership Institute, Heritage Foundation, and Koch Network. They are obedient franchises of conservative establishments.

The on-the-ground impact of M4L and the 1776 Project PAC is less than they claim. Numerous independent reports show M4L and 1776 PAC doing no more than break even in 2022 school board races and getting shellacked in 2023. *The Washington Post* [found](#) some school board victories but limited success for culture warriors in the 2022 election. M4L performed poorly even in [Texas](#) and [North Carolina](#). The AP [confirmed](#) that despite M4L and the 1776 Project pouring millions of dollars into school board races, the results were disappointing. *Politico* [reported](#) that culture war candidates were hammered in Wisconsin and Illinois in 2023. M4L's electoral strength has mostly been in the South, but even in Florida, one M4L-supported candidate accepted their help only on the grounds that they did not identify as M4L while campaigning for her. When M4L has taken over school boards, the results have been [chaotic](#).

Professor Heath Brown [points out](#) that M4L's growth has been concentrated in four states, and M4L's "political power is considerable and expanding in some states, but nearly absent and even waning in others." Social media researcher Erin Gallagher [found it](#) nearly impossible to map out M4L's membership claims and concluded it is

not grassroots but astroturf. A [Brookings study](#) finds the impact of M4L mixed—there is little doubt it has generated “noise and controversy.” Its electoral strength seems more muted with most victories coming in red counties.

There is accurate, carefully researched information on these groups from outlets like TrueNorth Research’s [The Disinformation Playbook Targeting Our Public Schools](#). Their work not only reveals the machinations behind the right-wing operations but introduces readers to effective organizations — real parents, teachers, and community members—who are battling for thriving public schools across the nation. One such group is [Red, Wine, and Blue](#) — suburban moms who fight for an honest education for all kids.

Its [Parents Playbook: A Step-by-Step Guide for Mainstream Moms Who’ve Had Enough BS](#) is a toolbox for parents to get organized and win. [Defense of Democracy](#) is another effective organization with state chapters that take on the privatizers and book banners. Look close to home, too — across the country, citizens are coming together to beat the corporate education reformers and MAGA moms. Such groups include Virginia Public Education Partners, Illinois Families for Public Schools, and Save Our Schools Arizona.

Some of the best suggestions come from the Parents Playbook. Find a good place to communicate. Monitor local school board meetings and meet with your elected officials. Be aware of what local conservative operations are up to, and do your research. Message matters! Use social media to communicate internally. Use social media to communicate with the outside world. Attend meetings — if school boards only hear the voices of intolerance, they won’t know that the majority do not support book bans and want accurate teaching of history. Organize, organize, organize. Seek out allies — other parents, teachers, librarians. Christian Ziegler [counseled](#) Moms for Liberty to depend on the press to be “lazy” and uninformed. Do your research, marshal your facts, and educate the media. Write letters to the editor and guest columns, and write independently on social media. Organize, organize, organize.

Community action works. When Moms for Liberty tried to piggyback on the Republican presidential debate in Milwaukee, protests from the teachers’ union and community groups forced their site to cancel them, and the candidates M4L promised to back out, [sending M4L into hiding](#). Bridget Ziegler [boasted](#) that a Leadership Institute run for school board training would draw 80-100 people. A dozen showed up. Fight. Our public schools and our democracy need you.

This guide is intended to be dynamic — so if you see a privatization group getting involved in school politics in your area, send that information to maurice.cunningham153@gmail.com and I'll add the group to this list.

Proper sourcing of information is very important so please send any news articles about the group and links to its website.