

United States: School Board Meetings Become Violent as Republicans Fight Over Health and Race

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Local school board meetings in the United States have for the last three months become the site of intense arguments and even violence as parents fight—sometimes with their fists—over both health policies and teaching about race.

This wave of fighting began when schools opened in late August or early September as rightwing parents mobilized against vaccine mandates, mask requirements, and the teaching of critical race theory. In some cases, police had to be called to restore order. In late September, the National School Boards Association asked that President Joseph Biden intervene to protect school board members, and Biden's Attorney General has said he will use the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other agencies to prevent violence.

Where Republican governors have issued orders prohibiting mask mandates, progressive parents have gone to the school board meetings to advocate for vaccination, masks, or in other cases to keep education about race and racism in the curriculum. Republican and those on the far right—who are responsible for most of the violence—oppose those policies and use the meetings to promote a rightwing agenda and to mobilize with an eye toward the next national election in November 2022 when 34 Senate seats and all 435 House seats will be up for reelection. The rightwing activists, often behaving riotously, shouting and disrupting, create chaos as some parents come to blows.

School board meetings have in the past usually been rather quiet affairs. The United States does not have a national educational system; rather, each of the 50 states is responsible for its own educational policies. Within the states some 13,800 local school district boards implement state policies and administer the schools and have a great deal of power vis-à-vis teachers and students. Most school boards are dominated by local business with members who come from a major corporation with its headquarters in the city, a small business owner, a local dentist or lawyer, and sometimes the teachers unions run or back candidates. Within that context school board meetings have historically been pretty democratic, with board members, teachers, and parents debating important issues of finances and policies.

Now, school boards are battlefields. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control recommended that masks be worn by teachers, staff and students in all schools. But Republican governors like Greg Abbott of Texas and Ron DeSantis of Florida, have issued orders forbidding school districts from issuing mask mandates. The Republican argument is that parents should have the freedom to decide whether or not they want their children to be vaccinated or wear a mask. Among of the Republican parents are also Q-Anon supporters, who believe that the Democrats, the deep state, and global elites are satanic pedophiles whose call for COVID vaccine is a diabolical plot that is poisoning the American people. Others believe that Microsoft founder and billionaire Bill Gates put microchips in the vaccine to control people's behavior. Q-Anon has called upon Republicans to take control of local school boards

as part of a broader political strategy to fight the Satanists.

The Republicans have also mobilized white parents to demand that teachers be prohibited from teaching critical race theory (an analysis of structural racism) or teaching about race at all, arguing that teachers are accusing all whites of being racist. Eight states have already banned the teaching of critical race theory, while another dozen state legislatures are considering such a ban. Many black parents and progressives have argued that the teaching of the history of race and racism, and role of structural racism in society is an essential part of education.

The school board battles could play a role in determining the 2022 congressional elections and the possible return of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2024.

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P.S.

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