

Conservatives want California schools to ban CRT, are LGBTQ rights next?

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They might have been two moms talking about their kids over coffee.

It was a sunny morning in Yorba Linda, like most spring mornings in Orange County suburbia are, when Shani Murray sat down with Leandra Blades in an empty Starbucks in a strip mall. Murray would have preferred a phone call, but Blades had suggested coffee — and Murray was thankful that Blades, a Placentia-Yorba Linda school board trustee, who had run and won her seat in 2020 on a platform that included banning critical race theory, was making time for her at all.

Murray, whose son is a sophomore in one of the well-regarded district's high schools, didn't support the ban, which, as she understood it, would prohibit any discussion of systemic racism in classes. She asked Blades, a Republican, about what she'd read on the subject of critical race theory. Blades referred her to an e-book by conservative commentator Candace Owens. Murray offered up her own sources, pieces written by academics — and a civil, if not entirely productive conversation ensued.

"I could have sat there all day, and we could've talked about our kids, and, you know, had a great conversation," Murray said. But, when it came to critical race theory, "It was clear she wasn't going to change her mind. I even asked her if she, you know, believed in systemic racism. And she said, 'No.'"

A week later, this past April, the Placentia Yorba-Linda Unified School Board voted 3-2 to ban critical race theory — one of the first, and most high-profile, of such bans in California.

Many believe this ban probably represents just the beginning of a "parental rights" movement in California schools that aims to ban discussion of systemic racism and, in some cases, topics around both LGBTQ people and sex education.

While these sorts of topics are dominating statewide education debates in red states such as Texas and Florida, conservative groups and actors in California, who have found themselves boxed out at the state level, are hoping to establish a political foothold by way of local, nonpartisan school board elections, particularly in the southern part of the state.

In Riverside County, a conservative pastor, who has described public schools as "the devil's playground," has launched a political action committee he is using to promote school board candidates.

A former San Diego City Council member is using his own PAC to endorse candidates there and beyond, with the explicit goal of banning critical race theory. Elsewhere, such as in the Orange County suburbs of Tustin and Los Alamitos, conservative organizers have started recall campaigns and are gearing up to support “parental rights” advocates for school board seats in November.

It’s an open question as to whether these candidates will find success in November, let alone success in influencing curriculum and classroom culture. In practice, the state has considerable power over what is taught and how schools operate.

Last year, for instance, the Legislature passed a bill requiring students to take a one-semester ethnic studies course in order to graduate. Earlier this year, state Superintendent Tony Thurmond spoke out when a school board member in Chino Valley proposed a resolution that would bar transgender students from using the restrooms and locker rooms corresponding with their gender identity, calling the measure a violation of the state’s education code. The resolution ultimately failed on a vote of 3-2.

Still, the fact these policies are being discussed in California at all is concerning, Thurmond said in an interview. “I think they encourage people to act with hate towards young people.”

Allyson Muñiz Damikolas, one of three trustees in the Tustin Unified School District to survive a recall attempt, said, “I think this is absolutely part of a larger political agenda. Do I think they really had the best intentions for the children’s education in mind? No. School boards, locally, have a lot of influence on our children, our families and our communities, and they understand that.”

Nationally, there are efforts in 36 states to restrict public education on “racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics,” according to an analysis by Chalkbeat, a nonprofit news organization. Several states have also banned classroom discussion of LGBTQ topics or moved to limit the restrooms and locker rooms that transgender students may use or the sports they may play.

But while anti-LGBTQ legislation and bans on critical race theory have little purchase in Sacramento, local efforts to promote such policies appear to be on the rise, said Troy Flint, a spokesman for the California School Board Association.

Though COVID response was a driving factor in many of the school board recall attempts during the past year, in at least six cases, recall supporters cited support of critical race theory and ethnic studies as a motivating factor.

“In reality, they’ve always been politicized to an extent, but the past several years have seen a dramatic increase in the level of politicization in school district elections,” Flint said. “You have groups with a defined political viewpoint (focusing) on school boards as a mechanism

for political change in a much more formal way than we've seen in the past."

The California School Board Association is itself nonpartisan, but Flint does worry "these adult debates and partisan struggles" get in the way of what should be a focus on supporting students and improving student outcomes.

Samuel Garret-Pate, a managing director at Equality California, the nonprofit that advocates for LGBTQ rights, has been monitoring the fight over education policy in recent months. He sees hard-right conservative activism, particularly as it applies to limiting access for trans students, as a move to "activate their political base."

"In some states it (looks like) getting Republican governors like Greg Abbott (of Texas) and Ron DeSantis (of Florida) to target kids using the power of the governorship," he said. "Here in California ... what these groups do instead is target our schools, our local school boards and local school board members."

The most coordinated effort to win influence at the California school board level is playing out in Riverside County, which lies east of Orange County and extends all the way to the Arizona border. There, a conservative pastor is running a slate of six candidates across three school districts, with a primary focus on Temecula Valley Unified School District.

In an email response to a list of questions from The Chronicle, Tim Thompson, the pastor of 412 Church Murrieta, said he referred to public schools as "satan's playground" because they "create an environment that reduces the value of family, and very clearly seeks to usurp the authority of parents in their children's lives."

Online, in vlog-style YouTube videos, posts on Instagram and text on his political action committee's own website, he is much more direct. His concerns include schools forcing "LGBTQ+ acceptance," encouraging "transgenderism" and promoting "perverted sexual training" and critical race theory. Neither Thompson nor any of the six candidates he has endorsed would sit for an interview, but in his email, the pastor confirmed that during the PAC's endorsement process "we did the very best we could to ensure the candidates line up with the values held by the majority of our community."

It's too early to tell how effective the candidates will be, but Thompson said in his email that the PAC has so far pulled in \$100,000 through grassroots fundraising.

Parents, teachers and sitting school board members say, at the very least, Thompson has succeeded in poisoning the discourse, turning school board meetings into charged political events where he and his supporters rail against critical race theory and LGBTQ indoctrination, often while students look on.

“It is emotional, and it’s horrific to watch,” said Barbara Brosch, a Temecula Valley school board trustee, who recently served as the board’s president. “There were times I had to actually close the meeting because we couldn’t get the crowd under control.”

Moreover, she said, it doesn’t seem they have any interest in the “real work” the school board does, like sorting out the logistics of getting underserved students access to the internet at home or supporting students in foster care. When asked if there were other topics the PAC was focused on, beyond those listed on the website, Thompson included only one: Making sure schools were a place where law enforcement felt “appreciated and supported.”

Two community groups in Temecula say they’re organizing to support the current school board members and make sure voters reject Thompson’s candidates. But it will be an uphill battle — neither have the sort of funding the pastor said his PAC does.

“What they are proposing, the Family PAC, is not freedom,” said Jeff Pack, who recently started another effort called Temecula has a Heart. “It’s fascism.”



Blades decided to run for the Placentia Yorba-Linda school board in 2020 because, she said, the kids had stopped singing.

“I have two children who were in a choir class and sometimes they wouldn’t sing because the teacher would be arguing politics,” she said. And it didn’t stop there. During the pandemic, she would sometimes listen in on remote class discussions — she had two students in middle school and another in high school. “It was just strange how politics were in science class, politics were in choir. Politics were kind of everywhere.”

Though, when pressed, Blades could offer little in terms of specifics. Instead, she mentioned teachers playing up “COVID hysteria” and supporting socialism and communism.

Eventually, Blades said, a group of parents citing similar concerns, asked her to run for a spot on the school board. They found her, in part, through her work on the Gavin Newsom recall campaign.

Blades, who campaigned on banning critical race theory and “keeping politics out of the classroom” in a district made up of more than 70% students of color, won her seat, beating her closest challenger by 5% in a field of four candidates.

Soon after, she found herself at the center of controversy when it became public that she had attended former President Donald Trump’s “Stop the Steal” rally in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6, 2021. Blades was not among the group of rioters who broke into the Capitol — she says she left the rally early when she heard about the violence unfolding there. But her presence at the rally was enough to concern many parents and community members. More than 9,000 people signed a petition calling on her to resign. A competing petition supporting Blades received nearly 7,000 signatures.

Blades resisted the calls to resign and, on April 6 of this year, she made good on her promise to ban critical race theory. The final resolution is somewhat vague. The document describes critical race theory, in part, as a practice that “acknowledges that racism is embedded within systems and institutions that replicate racial inequality — codified in law, embedded in structures and woven into public policy” and resolves that “The Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified School District will not include Critical Race Theory as a framework in any course offerings.”

Much like in Riverside County, the school board meeting leading up to the ban quickly became acrimonious.



Abigail Lee, a junior this year at Yorba Linda High School, had never been to a school board meeting until last year.

In the summer of 2020, after George Floyd's murder, she helped found a district-wide chapter of Diversify Our Narrative, an organization that advocates for racial equality in education. The first big project was to make sure every language arts course included at least one author of color in its required reading list.

Last November, when the group heard the board would be discussing a critical race theory ban, it organized students to attend and speak against the measure.

Soon, Lee said, the club itself became a target for the ban's supporters. A fundraiser the students were planning was canceled; the restaurant where it was to be held cited safety concerns after a flood of angry phone calls from people threatening to protest the event. "I just felt such shock, like my heart just dropped."

Ryan Lin, a junior at Valencia High School and one of the chapter's district leads, remembers being approached by a parent after a school board meeting. The man told him and his friend that they were wasting their time and that they were "being brainwashed."

Lee was heckled once, as well, by two women sitting next to her at a meeting.

“I expect adults to handle these kinds of situations with a level of respect and maturity and politeness,” said Clarisse Curameng, a junior at Valencia High School. “Being met with parents who are harassing us ... it’s upsetting.”

Without critical race theory on the agenda, Placentia-Yorba Linda school board meetings are quieter affairs. Fewer parents come to speak and the students from Diversify Our Narrative are taking a break, for their “own personal well-being.”

Still, there’s a sense this isn’t entirely over. In July, one man came to speak about critical race theory — and a few other subjects.

“Teachers are teaching CRT even after we banned it,” he said, ignoring that classes hadn’t yet begun. “Teachers and staff are using SEL (social and emotional learning) to push political and inappropriate lifestyle and sexual ideas. Teachers and staff are promoting and pushing LGBTQ ideology instead of just simply educating about it.”

In the August meeting, one mother encouraged them to take action before more students were “persuaded into the transgender lifestyle.” Murray, the parent who had met Blades for coffee, was in the audience. She’d come to admonish one trustee for ignoring dozens of her emails, for his support of the critical race theory ban and for his “lack of respect for LGBTQ students.”

“Just from what I’ve heard ... I’m very concerned that the next attack will be on LGBTQ students,” she’d said in the weeks leading up to the meeting. “I’m just very concerned about that.”

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