

OPENING THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR:

PROMOTING CURRICULUM TRANSPARENCY



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“I want my children to embrace our country, while recognizing their heritage and the opportunity that the United States provides,” said Scarlett Johnson, a Hispanic American parent in the Mequon-Thiensville School District. “Parents like myself are at a disadvantage when school districts are not forthright about philosophies like critical race theory being taught in the classroom. More transparency is vital for parents to ensure that our students are not being taught propaganda that denies the fundamentals of the U.S. Constitution or losing precious learning time in critical topics like math, science, and reading.”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Increasingly, it is impossible for families to avoid the creep of political agendas into the classroom. Contrary to conventional wisdom, controversial materials like the 1619 Project¹—which makes the case that much of American history is about preserving slavery and racism—are not just being used in cities like Milwaukee, but also in suburbs and small towns across Wisconsin as well.

According to open records gathered by WILL, in Racine, students read the assertion that, ***“Our founding ideals of liberty and equity were false when they were written.”*** In Middleton-Cross Plains, the Superintendent has stated, ***“We believe the following: Our education system is inherently racist and we must purposefully choose antiracist and unbiased actions in order to address the structural inequities that exist.”*** Even our most rural school districts are not exempt. At Sparta High School², one teacher informed her students that ***“The more ignorant we make you, the more poor we make you, the more likely you are to vote Republican.”***

Despite the pervasiveness of such stories, families (and taxpayers) don’t always feel that they have the necessary information to respond. Classrooms are very much a black box—with information only getting out when students decide to inform their families of what has gone on. The pandemic provided families with a peek into the classroom for the first time—and parents were concerned.³ Fortunately, there is a solution. This policy brief will explore an intriguing solution, first put forth by the Goldwater Institute, to create transparency of classroom materials.⁴

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Political Agendas in the Classroom Are Pervasive

In addition to examples mentioned in text, this report will include an appendix with a number of items across the state gathered from WILL's open records requests.

Gathering Information About What is Being Taught is Expensive

To fulfill our request for teaching materials, Madison Metropolitan School District requested more than \$5,000. Other districts were extremely slow to comply, and required extensive prodding to do so. The average parent or taxpayer cannot be expected to go through this process.

Gathering Information About What is Being Taught is Difficult to Access

Open records requests were sent to school districts and even after over two months we are still waiting on invoices or waiting on materials from many of the school districts. Table 1 details the cost to fulfill our open records requests so far and the status of the individual school districts.

Parents Are Concerned About Culture Wars in the Classroom

In both national and state polls, parents expressed opposition to components of the 1619 agenda, and the creep of politics into schools.

A Simple Change Can Help Remedy the Problem

Under this proposal, school boards would be required to publicly post a list of the material that is used in the classroom by the end of each school year. This includes references to the overall curriculum used in the class, the syllabus, as well as supplementary assignments.

Politics has infused every aspect of life in modern America, including schools. Parents are concerned about the growing advocacy focus of many teachers, but often lack access to learn what is being taught in local schools. The model legislation proposed here would require that schools put material that is being taught in the classroom online for everyone to see. This would empower parents to have a greater say in what material is taught in

their local schools. It would also better inform decisions about when to utilize alternatives, such as the private school choice programs, public charter schools, and open enrollment. We believe this proposal represents a middle ground between those that are concerned about the increasing pervasiveness of political agendas in schools and concerns about preserving local control of schools.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF THE CULTURE WAR

In the United States today, many aspects of life that once existed largely outside of politics are becoming absorbed by it. Professional sports, once a place to go for a break from the political world, are now regularly taking sides on controversial topics.⁵ Actors who take positions that are counter to the most prevalent ideologies of Hollywood are losing their jobs,⁶ and may find themselves removed from social media platforms.

But perhaps nowhere is the growing prevalence of politics in our lives more problematic than in our schools. Political activism among teachers is on the rise. Galvanized by issues such as labor union reform, school choice, and COVID-19-related reopening plans, teachers have regularly engaged in public protests in recent years in an effort to influence education policies. According to a 2018 survey⁷ by scholars at Columbia University, more than one-third of teachers reported having engaged in some form of political activism during the previous year. Many teachers are not able to keep this political activity from seeping into the classroom. For instance, one Madison-area school included an assignment for ninth-graders on “How to be a Good Activist” last fall.⁸ Students across the country are regularly subjected to controversial materials that may or may not align with the values of their families. The Director of Equity & Student Achievement for the Middleton Cross Plains Area School District (MCPSD), Percy Brown, spent a full class hour discussing the importance of **student activism**. He states, “[that] activism isn’t something that begins when you’re an adult.”



And the agenda being pushed tends to be relatively one-sided. A 2016 analysis by Verdant Labs⁹ found that the vast majority of teachers fall on the left side of the political spectrum. According to this research, there are about 79 teachers who identify as Democrats for every 21 who identify as Republicans. These margins are even worse when we consider teachers in the years with the greatest potential for political indoctrination—the high-school years. Among high-school teachers, the ratio grows to 87:13. The concern isn't necessarily an individual teacher's personal political philosophy, rather it is the pervasive effort to push liberal ideology onto children and openly shame or mock those who disagree.

Furthering the leftward lurch in education have been a number of initiatives related to racial identity politics. Ignoring decades of traditional rhetoric from civil rights activists, Critical Race Theory (CRT) puts skin color front-and-center as a prism for understanding the world around us. According to some of the founding scholars of the movement¹⁰, white supremacy remains an important component of everyday life:

“The first [common interest] is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America, and, in particular, to examine the relationship between the social structure and professed ideals such as ‘the rule of law’ and ‘equal protection.’”

The remedies for this “regime of white supremacy” include the implementation of discriminatory race-based policies favoring minorities and reparations in an effort to overcome the wrongs committed centuries ago.¹¹

The widespread embrace of this theory has led to the creation of related curricula, like the “1619 Project,” which supposes that America was not created on the tenants of liberty and equality, but rather as a means to advance slavery and racism. While many of the basic facts used as the basis for the project have been derided by many historians, it has nonetheless found its way into many schools across the country.¹² This curriculum makes outrageous claims such as arguing that slavery was the reason for the American Revolution, and distorts Abraham Lincoln's views on equality.¹³ Racine Unified School District is just one example of a district teaching the project. The lesson plan referenced in the executive summary also asks **why this 400-year-old-history is so important**, why it is the subject of criticism, and how that fits into current events today.

Of course, while liberal agendas are likely more pervasive, it is not only conservative families who may take issue with some of the things that are being taught in American schools. In Louisiana, for instance, a 2008 law allowed for teachers to put forward materials that are critical of the Theory of Evolution.¹⁴ In Oklahoma in 2016, a law was passed that required schools to “clearly and consistently teach that abortion kills a living human being.”¹⁵ Parents from all political persuasions deserve the opportunity to learn what is being taught in their schools.

PARENTAL CONCERN

The growing political agenda of schools is of concern to parents and families. A 2021 national poll of parents by the Heritage Foundation¹⁶ asked them to compare traditional conceptions of America's founding with those presented by alternatives like the 1619 Project. In one question, parents were asked whether they preferred that their children be taught one of two alternatives:

A) "That our founding ideals of liberty and equality were false when they were written and we must reframe American history."

B) "That slavery was a tragedy that harmed the nation, but our freedom and prosperity represent who we are as a nation, or offering a beacon to those wanting to immigrate here."

The vast majority of respondents (70%) chose the latter, more fair-minded alternative. Moreover, the majority of parents (59%) did not want students to learn that 1619 was the year of America's founding rather than the true year of 1776. Closer to home, a 2019 poll of more than 1,400 Wisconsin parents by WILL¹⁷ found that 42% of parents overall were concerned about liberal ideology in schools. Among Republicans, this number grew to 66%. When we asked more generally about the creep of politics into schools, a plurality of all respondents (49%) said that they were concerned compared to only 41% who were not.

Perhaps these things would be less problematic in the context of a school where families share the particular set of values being taught. But the bottom line is that families and taxpayers need to have the means to determine what is being taught in their local schools. Recent open records requests by WILL highlight that this is not always the case.

A concerned MCPSD parent wrote to her principal after seeing her 3rd. grade son's homework assignment, which asked him to fill out an "Identity Journal" which teaches students that their identity is fundamentally founded on their race, color, ethnicity, culture, sex, gender, gender identity, etc. The parent wrote:

*"...going forward, **please let me know ahead of time** about any videos/instructional materials/classroom speakers **that will discuss race/racism/equity/diversity/inclusion** in [redacted name] class?"*

The principal responded with communications sent from the district's Superintendent which includes the district's best practices and beliefs relating to racism. The Superintendent states:

*"As a district committed to equity, we seek to disrupt societal and historical inequities and eliminate disparities based on student and family characteristics such as, but not limited to, race, color, national origin, citizenship status, ancestry, religion, sex (including sexual identity), economic status, disability status, and age, so that all students thrive... **We believe the following: Our education system is inherently racist** and we must purposefully choose antiracist and unbiased actions in order to address the structural inequities that exist." The principal also states in another email, "[that the] **entire year we have focused on children and families understanding their own cultures and identities**, while also embracing and understanding other cultures and identities"*

WILL'S OPEN RECORDS REQUESTS

To gain a better understanding of what is being taught in schools, WILL recently conducted open records requests to the nine largest school districts in the state. In the request WILL asked for teaching materials used in a handful of English and social studies classes at one to two of the district's high schools. The request specifically asked for materials which utilized a set list of "woke" terms, including "1619 Project," "White privilege," and "systemic racism."

Somewhat fortunately, after nearly three months we have received materials from five of the eight requests. Two of the requests sent to Kenosha Unified School District and Madison Metropolitan School District, unfortunately, had to be closed due to a high-cost. Madison invoiced an estimate charge of over \$5,000 to receive records from only seven district teachers and Kenosha came in at the "lower" price of over \$1,000. Overall it would have cost WILL over \$8,000 to fulfill 6 records requests. Below, Table 1 shows the individual cost estimates received from school districts and the total cost to fulfill the five requests. These fees are far too onerous for the average parent to simply find out what is being taught in their child's classrooms.

DISTRICT	INVOICE AMOUNT	STATUS
Appleton Area School District	\$351	Complete
Green Bay Area School District	\$360	Complete
Janesville School District	\$400	Complete *Receiving Refund of \$150 From Request
Kenosha Unified School District	\$1,208.29	Closed Request Without Materials
Madison Metropolitan School District	\$5,250	Incomplete
Milwaukee Public School District	\$0	Incomplete
Racine Unified School District	\$0	Complete
Sheboygan Area School District	Unknown	Incomplete
Waukesha School District	\$491	Complete
Total	\$8,069.29	

Receiving materials from these school districts has been a time-consuming and tedious process. Some school districts stonewalled our requests quite dramatically. For example, a representative of the Racine Unified School District said that she didn't **"believe teachers would fulfill this request,"** and that the request would take **"thousands of hours of work."** Moreover, we were informed that the request would have a large location fee associated. Another representative of Racine Unified School District, who works on developing and determining district curriculum, had no idea her district was teaching the 1619 Project, even stating that she didn't believe the district taught any of the requested terms before sending the school's controversial curriculum policy (see accompanying PowerPoint). Upon receiving the teaching materials, we found that schools in the district not only taught this controversial version of history, but they dedicated entire units to presenting it.

Others such as Milwaukee Public School District have only partially completed the request by sending teaching materials, but excluding district curriculum **claiming copyright restrictions on curriculum.**

Some school districts were unresponsive to our request. For example, despite multiple attempts to communicate with the Sheboygan School District regarding our records request, and after 3 months the district has yet to respond to our request.

These are just a few examples of how school districts have handled simple requests for teaching materials from just two high-school classes. How are parents ever expected to get these types of materials if districts have a million reasons why they can't complete the request? Either transparency is not a priority for many school districts, or they don't want parents to be aware of what is being taught. Either is equally problematic.

A MODEL FOR REFORM

The Goldwater Institute's Matt Beienburg initially came up with the modest proposal that teaching materials be made available to families online. Legislation based on this concept has been proposed in Arizona and North Carolina. WILL has reworked the policy proposal to fit Wisconsin's needs and law.

Wisconsin law establishes that public school districts have a duty to provide a free education to all students, and the legislature establishes "a common understanding of what public schools should be and do. Establishing such goals and expectations is a necessary and proper complement to the state's financial contribution to education. Each school board should provide curriculum, course requirements, and instruction consistent with the goals and expectations [under state law]." Wis. Stat. 118.01

WILL proposes creating an access to curriculum statute that is clearly part of the duty of school districts and fundamentally tied to the expectations of education for Wisconsin parents. This includes:

- **Once per semester duty, require districts to provide an overview of any learning materials, such as PowerPoints, videos, and article citations, used for student instruction or student activities. Complying with the statute would not be a reproduction of any copyrighted materials.**
- **Include the information necessary to identify the specific learning materials used, including the title and the author, organization, or internet address associated with each material and activity.**
- **Nearly all materials produced in a public school are subject to Wisconsin's Public Records laws.**

This proposal would not place an onerous burden on teachers or school districts. All districts already have a website where this information could be updated and accessed from. Additionally, the use of services like Dropbox or Google Drive to upload files would be considered compliant with the law.

CONCLUSION

Following the model established in Arizona and North Carolina, Wisconsin should create a law that crafts a middle ground between those who are concerned about the increasing pervasiveness of political agendas in schools and those concerned about preserving local control. The legislation would increase the ability for parents and taxpayers to be aware of what is being taught in their local schools without providing for an outright prohibition on any particular material. Coupled with a proposal that would ban compelled speech, this legislation will advance the ball toward a time where families can be less concerned about indoctrination in the classroom.



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