

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

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PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER THREAT IN THE USA – AND AUSTRALIA

The concept – and reality – of public education – educational opportunity for all of a nation’s children, is less than 200 years old. It has never, since its inception, been accepted by the oligarchies and their religious apologists. The older, private denominational system opposed its introduction and resented its dominance – although for it may have proved useful as a wastebasket system to keep children of the lower orders off the streets.

As well as starving the public system of funds, representatives of the private, religious system, have always attacked the ‘inclusivity’ of its schools. For the public system is ideally ‘free, secular and universal’, open to all children teachers and parents regardless of class creed and colour.

The private denominational system is none of those things. It is selective and it is that selectivity that it now sells to insecure, aspirational parents. For, as well as dividing children on sectarian grounds, the private system is now regarded as a very lucrative taxpayer funded business operation in both Australia and the United States.

In the nineteenth century Australia public schools were attacked as ‘Godless’ institutions by the religious proponents of the rival system. They still are.

Similar moralising attacks are now being articulated by the supporters of privatisation of education for profit – at taxpayers expense – in the USA. Australia tends to slavishly follow USA developments, so it is worth looking at current developments.

Jeff Bryant, the lead fellow of The Progressive's Public Schools Advocate project, and a writing fellow and chief correspondent for Our Schools, a project of the Independent Media Institute analyses the latest attacks on public education as follows:

The Right's Long Game to End Public Education

Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona finally said the quiet part out loud.

BY

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<https://progressive.org/public-schools-advocate/the-right%E2%80%99s-long-game-to-end-public-education/>

On February 13, President Joe Biden's Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, did something Democratic officials seldom do in public: He spoke the truth about what's behind the relentless attacks on public schools by rightwing advocacy groups and their financial backers.

As HuffPost [reported](#), one of the topics that came up during a meeting between Cardona and Black journalists that took place at the Department of Education, was the recent [wave of new laws](#) passed in mostly red states that target programs in K-12 schools and institutions of higher education that address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

Advocates for DEI programs [say](#) they are needed to ensure positive academic, health, and social outcomes for students who often face discrimination and fewer educational opportunities due to their race, class, religion, gender, or ability level. Opponents say they [shame white students](#) and cause "[reverse discrimination](#)."

Cardona called new laws passed by Republican state lawmakers to eliminate DEI programs "a deliberate attack on efforts to try to make sure schools are inclusive,

welcoming places for all students—in particular, students from different backgrounds.”

But more than just defending schools for embracing DEI, Cardona went further to call out the intention behind these attacks on the programs, calling them “very deliberate attempts to seek division in our schools so that a private option sounds better [emphasis added] for parents.”

“Every year, there’s something to stoke division in an attempt to disrupt our public schools and decrease the confidence in our public schools,” he said. “Four years ago were the masks. [Critical race theory] was a year after that. [Now,] DEI, [and] banning books.”

The serial crises that groups like Moms for Liberty and the Heritage Foundation string together year after year to inflame the populace with fear and suspicion about public schools have been the subject of [extensive reporting](#).

But when major news outlets report on these outbursts of rightwing rage, the articles tend to focus solely on the legitimacy of specific grievances rather than considering whether the attacks themselves could be a tactic in a much longer game.

According to an [analysis by NBC News](#), there are “at least 165 local and national groups” connected to protests and incidents of threats and violence directed at public schools. Many of these groups have connections to prominent national rightwing advocacy organizations and think tanks, including the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Manhattan Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and FreedomWorks.

In a study of the funding sources for Moms for Liberty, retired University of Massachusetts professor Maurice Cunningham [linked](#) the group’s financial records to conservative dark money organizations such as the Council for National Policy (CNP) and the Leadership Institute (LI).

The campaign to convince parents that public schools are “the boogeyman” has been hiding in plain sight for years.

CNP and LI, according to Cunningham, share a common aspiration to “destroy public education and privatize schooling . . . in order to reorient education toward Christian nationalism and transform the culture of the nation.”

Writing for *The Nation*, education journalist Jennifer Berkshire and education historian Jack Schneider [reach a similar conclusion](#).

Organizations such as Moms for Liberty [may say](#) that their goals are to amplify parent grievances and institute more conservative curricula, but the “holy grail” of the organizations that fund these groups is to “[privatize education](#)” by expanding school voucher programs and enticing parents to pursue education options other than their local public schools.

To bolster their argument, Berkshire and Schneider point to the Manhattan Institute’s Christopher Rufo, who [laid out](#) the strategy for using culture wars to scare parents away from public schools in a speech at Hillsdale College in 2021 when he said, “To get to universal school choice, you really need to operate from a premise of universal public school distrust.”

The campaign to convince parents that public schools are “the boogeyman,” to use Cardona’s words, has been hiding in plain sight for years.

As Milwaukee-based education journalist Barbara Miner [wrote](#) in *The Progressive* in 2004, “Eliminating public education may seem unAmerican. But a growing number of movement conservatives have signed a proclamation from the Alliance for the Separation of School and State that favors ‘ending government involvement in education.’”

Back then, Miner sensed that the Republican agenda was all about politics—and that their goal was, principally, to blunt the political clout of teachers’ unions and to woo more nonwhite families to support Republican politicians who framed school vouchers and other private education options as “the civil rights cause of our time.”

Miner noted that while “[o]ccasionally, Republican strategists let the cat out of the bag and admit that vouchers—which divert public dollars to private schools—are about politics,” the goals of their stealth campaign remain mostly hidden.

But after the election of Barack Obama to the White House in 2008 [brought on the rise](#) of the Tea Party movement, the forerunner to today’s MAGA uprising, the right-wing’s calls to get rid of public schools became more out in the open.

As ThinkProgress [reported](#) for TruthOut in 2011, leaders in the Tea Party were openly advocating that the movement’s “ultimate goal” was to “shut down public schools and have private schools only.”

Prominent policy leaders in the Democratic party have been unable or unwilling, until Cardona’s recent remark, to call out this Republican agenda for what it is.

It didn’t take long for prominent Republican politicians to more openly take up the cause, and in 2012, former U.S. Senator from Pennsylvania Rick Santorum, during his failed campaign to become the Republican presidential nominee, [called for](#) ending public education. “We didn’t have government-run schools for a long time in this country,” he said, according to CBS News. “We had private education.”

While Santorum may have been a dud as a presidential candidate, it wasn’t long before his proposition for ending public education became a signature policy in the presidential administration of Donald Trump under the leadership of his education secretary, Betsy DeVos.

What DeVos's [agenda](#) revealed to the nation was that pushing through new voucher programs in state legislatures can be highly effective at undermining public education.

In the meantime, prominent policy leaders in the Democratic party have been unable or unwilling, until Cardona's recent remark, to call out this Republican agenda for what it is. It's uncertain why, but perhaps the reluctance has much to do with the fact that the last Democrat to hold Secretary Cardona's job for a substantial length of time was Arne Duncan, serving under Obama.

Duncan [routinely bashed](#) public schools, ignored educators who disagreed with his policies, and arguably [did more](#) than any other secretary of education before him to establish privately run charter schools as legitimate and positive alternatives to public schools.

Given the decades of strategizing and financial investment that rightwing operatives have put into their campaign to end public education, and the reluctance of Democratic leaders to understand and openly oppose that campaign, it's little wonder that public education now faces its most critical existential crisis in modern times.

The Network for Public Education, in its 2024 [report](#) *Public Schooling in America: Measuring Each State's Commitment to Democratically Governed Schools*, warns, "[T]he 'choice' movement aims to destroy democratically governed district public schools."

The report rated each state's commitment to democratically governed public schools and found that only five states received a grade of A; thirteen were awarded a B; nine a C; seven a D; and seventeen an F. "In short," the NPE concluded, "the ultimate goal of libertarians and the radical right is the 'back to the future' dream of American schooling before Horace Mann," who is often [considered to be](#) the founder of the movement for universal, free, and nonsectarian public schools in the United States.

Indeed, when Santorum declared in 2012 that this nation didn't have "government schools for a long time," he was correct. The part he left out was that the mostly private system of bygone years was [off limits](#) to almost everyone except able-bodied and wealthy white males.

Fortunately, we finally have someone in charge of education policy in Washington, D.C., who gets that.

Jeff Bryant

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