

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

WEBINAR

FROM COVID TO CULTURE WARS:
THE GROWING HOSTILITY OF EDUCATION POLITICS

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, December 9, 2021

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190

PARTICIPANTS:

JON VALANT, Moderator
Director, Brown Center on Education Policy
Senior Fellow, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution

LAUREN CAMERA
Senior Writer
U.S. News & World Report

JONATHAN E. COLLINS
Assistant Professor of Education
Brown University

MARTIN R. WEST
Professor of Education
Harvard University

* * * * *

P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. VALANT: Good afternoon and thank you all for joining us. I'm Jon Valant, a Senior Fellow in the Governance Studies Program, at the Brookings Institution, and the Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy, at Brookings. It's my pleasure to welcome you to today's event on the politics of education. And as anyone watching this knows, this has been an extraordinary and difficult time, in a lot of ways, for U.S. schools.

Education is no stranger to political controversy, and there are plenty of examples from U.S. history of issues bubbling up from schools into our national politics. But I think it's safe to say that what we've been seeing lately is far from normal, and whether its issue is related to the pandemic, like school reopening's and mask mandates, or culture war issues, like critical race theory. The politics of education are generating more heat than they have in a very long time.

So, we have a terrific group of panelists to help us make sense of what's been happening and what it might mean for students, schools, and future elections. First, some introductions. We have Lauren Camera. Lauren is a Senior Writer at U.S. News & World Report, where she's worked as an Education Reporter since 2015. Lauren's reporting on education policy and politics goes back well before then, too, and she's written for a number of education outlets, including *Education Week*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as *Congressional Quarterly*, and others. Lauren covers a lot of ground with her reporting. Just over the last few weeks, she's written about topics ranging from teens' use of social media to vaccines for young children, student discipline, and what the Build Back Better Plan might mean for early childhood education.

Jonathan Collins is an Assistant Professor of Education, Political Science, and International and Public Affairs, at Brown University. His research examines how Democratic processes can improve the educational experiences of students in low income and minoritized communities. His research also examines the ways in which people of color, particularly African Americans, engage with American democracy. And I should note that Jonathan has been doing research that feels especially timely, right now, on topics like school boards and deliberative democracy.

Martin West is a Professor of Education and the Academic Dean, at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. At Harvard, he helps to lead the Harvard Kennedy School's Program on Education Policy and Governance, and is the Executive Editor of *Education Next*, which is a journal of education policy research and opinion. Marty's research covers a lot of topics in K-12 education politics and policy, and he's been directly involved in the policy world, by, for example, serving on the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and as a Senior Education Policy Advisor to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

Okay, so, a couple of logistical notes before we get started. We have an hour for the session. We'll have a panel discussion for the first 45 minutes or so, and then we'll turn to questions from the audience. And I'll convey those questions to our panelists. If you have questions, you can send them to -- via email to events@brookings.edu, via Twitter at @BrookingsEd, or by via Twitter by using the hashtag #EduChat, which is E-D-U-C-H-A-T.

All right. So, to get started, and, honestly, I feel like this has been such a wild topic that I could just sort of pose the question, "What the hell?", and then let you talk for an hour, but to put a little more structure around this. Lauren, I'm -- I'd like to start with you. And I'm hoping you can kind of set the stage for us a bit. So, you've covered national education news and politics for over a decade now. Could you tell us a bit about what strikes you about what you've been seeing and reporting on and how the current state of affairs compares to what preceded it?

MS. CAMERA: How much time do we have, Jon? Look, I think almost all the major pressure points you're seeing in education, right now, were already existing. It's just that the pandemic kind of poured accelerant on them and lit them on fire, right? So, I think it might be helpful, you know, to set the stage a little bit. Of course, at the onset of the pandemic, when schools closed for more than 50 million children, it was the lucky ones who went home with tablets and internet-connected devices and began remote learning from their kitchen tables.

But that was not the reality for the vast majority of kids in the U.S., many who went without any type of remote learning for months and months. We had school leaders who struggled, kind

of scrambling to try to figure out how to reach their students, how to get them internet-connected devices, how to feed them. We were asking a lot of schools already, and the pandemic dialed that way up, in ways that a lot were just not prepared to handle. For those of us who, you know, live and breathe in this education policy and politics world, we've been talking for decades about, you know, inequities in -- between well-resourced school districts and under-resourced school districts, between kids from middle-income and higher-income and lower-income families, between students of color and White students. But the pandemic really shined a light on this, in ways that hadn't been done so, so publicly, before.

Of course, those who fared worst, a lot of times, included students with disabilities and English learners, whose services were significantly interrupted, as well as students from low-income school districts, where financial barriers meant a real big lag in getting students devices and establishing remote learning, as well as a lag in being able to fully reopen for in-person learning. A lot of these districts dealt with much higher rates of community transmission and lacked resources to manage some of the CDC recommendation and risk mitigation strategies, things like social distancing, and PPE, and sanitization, and testing.

And, you know, in fact, it wasn't until this school year that many of them began welcoming kids back into the physical classroom. So, the academic, and social, and emotional learning loss has been really great, especially for some of our most disadvantaged students. And, of course, all of this is playing out, right? Well, parents and caregivers, overnight, became proctors and teacher aides, at least for those lucky enough to even be able to work from home. Others struggled to kind of piece together childcare. Some made difficult decisions to either leave some of their oldest children in charge of the younger ones or walk away from hard-earned careers. I mean, the mental load and stress for parents has been pretty incredible.

Now, layer, on top of all of that, this national reckoning with systemic racism and inequality spurred by the death of George Floyd and so many others, the politics of the pandemic, so, you're talking masking, testing, vaccinations, and now, in our third pandemic school year, this intense COVID fatigue. So, I like to say, like, part of the genius of our education system, in some ways, is that it's controlled locally, but, in this case, it was also a bit of our Achilles' heel, right?

So, unlike other countries that have nationalized school systems, they would say, okay, all schools will do X, Y, and Z, end of story. Here in the U.S., the flavor of politics and policy, where you live, has largely driven and dictated what type of COVID precautions your schools are taking. All of that is to say there are a lot of angry parents out there, right now. They're tired, they've been through the wringer, they all want something different for their kids, which is one of the biggest stressors. So, they either still want virtual options, or they don't ever want to do virtual school again. They, you know, want schools to mandate masks and vaccinations, or they absolutely do not. They want schools to embrace a curriculum that includes more diversity, or they want to ban critical race theory. They want schools to feel safe for all students, or, perhaps, they want to limit the rights of transgender students.

So, we've reached this critical boiling over moment, and it's why you're seeing contentious school board meetings. That's why politicians are capitalizing on these issues. It's why political organizations are suddenly pouring more money than they ever have into local races. And, yeah, I know we're going to explore all of that today. So, I look forward to it. And thank you so much for having me.

MR. VALANT: And so, Lauren, am I hearing you right, that even some of the issues that aren't explicitly rooted in the pandemic feel like they probably have -- it's the stresses of the pandemic that are sort of providing some fuel for them?

MS. CAMERA: Yeah. I would say that's correct. I mean, school boards have always been, if we're going to take the school board example, right, so, school boards have always been contentious in some ways, right? You're just seeing new iterations of what their contentious about. And as a parent who has school age children, I can tell you, it's almost an easy outlet. You can see how parents, like, could use these meetings as this moment to just, like, vent all of their frustrations. I think the problem, and we'll get into this a lot, is in terms of politics, right, is which of those frustrations are the real frustrations that you need to listen to, in a way.

So, there's critical race theory, there's the rights of transgender students, but there's also real issues about transportation, like school districts not really being able to figure out transportation, right

now, because of staffing issues. There are issues with getting students with disabilities the services that they missed out on. There are issues with -- do we adopt Test to Stay policies, so our schools aren't as disrupted as they are for -- you know, we don't have -- we're not sending home classrooms full of students, for example. I think that the difficulty for politicians is getting to the sort of figuring out which ones they need to focus on.

MR. VALANT: Great. Thank you. So, Marty, you have a slightly different vantage point, when it comes to what's going on across the country, in that you've worked on the *EdNext* Survey of Public Opinion, I think for more than a decade now, and studied how Americans think about schools and education policy. What strikes you about what you've seen in those polls or kind of more generally?

MR. WEST: First, thanks, Jon, for the opportunity to be here today. It's great to be on the same panel as Lauren and Jonathan, and I look forward to the rest of the conversation. So, let me talk first, briefly, about what we've seen in our own polling and then try and link it to some of the connections that people have drawn about recent outcomes, like the Governor's Race in Virginia.

So, we were in the field for our annual survey, at the peak of the initial round of school closures, in May 2020, and then decided to field additional surveys in both November 2020 and May 2021. That means that we don't yet have any data from this school year, nor do we have any information related to the debate over critical race theory in schools, which, to be honest, is quite a new arrival on the scene.

That caveat aside, what struck me about our polling over the course of the pandemic was that there was -- I guess it was that -- how little evidence there was that public attitudes had shifted in a big way, on major questions in education policy debate. So, despite a lot of speculation and claims that it had occurred, we did not see a surge in support for school choice policies, nor did we see a notable shift in attitudes toward teacher unions, which remains split on largely partisan lines. When we asked whether teacher unions made it easier or harder for schools to reopen, most people said they didn't know, which strikes those of us who follow the issue pretty closely sort of chuckle, I think.

The parents did express a lot of concern about learning loss, about other adverse effects

of the pandemic on their children's mental and physical health, but they also said that they were broadly satisfied with how schools were responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic. So, all of this, in our own data, makes me a little bit skeptical of claims that the pandemic has brought about a fundamental shift on public opinion on education and even on claims that it played a decisive role in the Governor's Race in Virginia, for example. The similar shift in results in the New Jersey race we saw, where education issues were less salient, makes me think that the Biden administration struggles in the headwinds facing Democrats, nationally, were the real drivers of that outcome.

Now, what was striking in Virginia was to see education showing up as the issue voters said was most important to their choice, something that's unusual in statewide races, much less in Federal elections. And it was also striking to see the Republican candidate, Youngkin, having an advantage on education. That's another rare pattern. But I think that may be a product of what ended up being discussed in the campaign, especially after Terry McAuliffe's famous gaffe about not wanting parents to tell schools what to teach, rather than the true indicator of what drove the outcome.

All that said, to some extent, it doesn't matter whether the education interpretation of the 2021 Elections is correct because leaders in both parties have already accepted that narrative and are acting on it. So, you have, for example, a Republican Minority Leader in the House, Kevin McCarthy, talking about a Parental Bill of Rights and making the Republicans the Party of Education. So, I think there's little doubt that we'll continue to see the issue receive a lot of attention, in the 2022 midterms, in statewide and national elections, and perhaps beyond, and there's also no doubt that we've seen a sharp uptick of interest in school board races, as Lauren's been describing. I guess it's just not clear to me yet. Rather, that reflects a intensification of interest among a relatively small number of very agitated and concerned parents on a wide range of issues or whether that reflects a more general shift in opinion. I'm not sure how general it is yet.

MR. VALANT: Interesting, thanks. And I suspect we'll see that in future polling. Okay, so, Jonathan, turning to you, so, I'm curious, Jonathan, about your thoughts on all of this, too, on sort of what's behind what we've been seeing, but also about how much and in what ways it matters, when the

politics of education heat up like this, and whether there are tangible ways in which fights over some of the issues that we've been talking about, mask mandates and CRT and transgender students' rights, whether they affect students, and schools, and society.

MR. COLLINS: Well, I think that's an important question, Jon. I think the fundamental impact and the potential hazard relates to the extent to which these fights help us get it right, or, in certain instances, prevent us from getting it right. And so, you know, Jon, you used the word debate, and I think that word is critical. And so, you know, true debate is grounded in fact and the search for truth. You know, when it comes to issues, like mask mandates or even vaccine mandates, you know, these are issues that should be grounded in a clear and thoughtful understanding of what the evidence is, not -- and also what it doesn't say. And so, we have multiple randomized controlled trial studies now that provide evidence that wearing masks reduces the spread of COVID, right?

For a debate to be useful for our schools and our kids, we need it to center around this kind of evidence, but that's not what's happening. You know, we're seeing misinformation spread from different corners of the internet, and we're -- and, instead, we're having debates about whether or not COVID is real or some sort of made-up conspiracy. You know, and that's a theme that runs through the other hot button issues that you mentioned, you know, critical race theory, you know, just some White blame indoctrinating ideology, a line of thought emerging out of critical legal studies, from some of our top law schools, you know, and the aim is to make sense of why we see such strong persisting racial disparities and outcomes. You know, the main argument is that we have some racist laws, laws that were put in place with discriminatory intent and have longstanding impacts on maintaining racial disparity. It's illegal wins, not necessarily a historical win, and no state or district, to my knowledge, has implemented, you know, CRT teaching practices within their curriculum standards or structures.

What we have seen is, in California and parts of Arizona, policymakers have made moves to require students to take ethnic studies courses. Maine implemented in African American history course requirement. States, like Delaware and New Jersey, have made softer promises to better incorporate diversity and inclusion into the curriculum, but the notion that kids are getting taught to hate

White people is simply not true. And then, what we should be having a debate about is how to construct, adopt, and implement curriculum that actually enables students, especially kids who look like me, really, to feel empowered when they open a textbook or encounter a new subject area.

But, again, that's not the debate we're having. It's about race wars and teaching White kids to -- making sure that we teach White kids to not feel bad about themselves. And, again, all of it is just rooted in misinformation. You know, a similar thing happens when we think about transgender student rights. The CDC releases an annual report, Jon, you've written about this, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Report. In 2019, they found about 43 percent of transgender youth reported having been bullied on school grounds, compared to 18 percent among cisgendered students, 29 percent said they've been -- they'd attempted suicide. According to multiple outlets, 2021 was the deadliest year on record for transgender people, most dying -- mostly dying as a result of violence. So, when we talk about transgender rights, I'm sorry, we're talking about keeping people alive. But that's not the debate. You know, again, Jon, you've written about this, about lawsuits being aimed at the Biden administration, filed by states who don't believe transgender students should have the right to access bathrooms and join sports teams. And these aren't -- I'm not saying that these aren't things that we shouldn't sort of sort out, but the debate we should be having is how we keep young people safe. It's the same debate we should be having when it comes to gun laws. But, too often, we're seeing too much distance between the most pertinent evidence on a policy-related issue and compared to the actual sort of debates that are materializing in school board meetings. And so, I think, again, at the root of it all is just this issue of misinformation that seems to be spreading across these policy issues.

MR. VALANT: Great, thanks. Thanks, Jon. And so, so, I want to turn a little more specifically to school boards. And school boards have come up, already, quite a bit, and it's obviously a big topic right now. We're seeing it in the news quite a bit. And, Lauren, I'll start with you again, if that's okay. And I'm curious, partly, to hear you talk about kind of what's been happening in school board meetings, in particular, and what has struck you about the flare ups in those meetings and kind of what might be the reasons behind it. And then I'm also curious -- so, based on what Marty was telling us

earlier about this sort of split between where we see all of this anger in school board meetings, but, so far, it hasn't necessarily been reflected in more representative polling, kind of how you make sense of that, too.

MS. CAMERA: Yeah, so, I would agree with Jonathan. I mean, some of this has really gotten out of hand. The National School Boards Association, they are not wrong when they characterize some of these threats that they're seeing as unprecedented. I think one of the things that's been interesting is the folks, who are showing up to protest school board members and policies around critical race theory or making vaccination and masking policies, they're not the majority. And, sometimes, they don't even have children in the school system. They typically all have very similar talking points. This is something Jonathan spoke to a little bit. They're coming directly, in a lot of cases, out of these, like, how-to pamphlets that are funded by groups, like Students for Trump or the Club for Growth, and that doesn't mean, though, that there aren't some really serious concerns being raised by parents who want to be heard, things like, as I mentioned previously, like transportation issues, staffing shortages, Test to Stay policy, special ed services. And that's where things get tricky, weeding out, like, the noise from the legitimate issues.

I think, to Marty's point, I think his polling shows what, essentially, we're going to see is that the issues that are important have -- will remain the issues that are important, whereas this sort of noise that we're hearing coming out of school boards will, I don't know when, I'm not -- don't have a crystal ball, but will probably dissipate some. I just keep thinking to, you know, I guess, you know, the off-year election cycle that we just had and some of the school board recalls, which I know we're going to get to and talk about a little bit more. And some of the folks who are, you know, campaigning for school board positions and on issues, like stripping critical race theory out of curriculums, they're going to, if they're elected, right, they're going to get these school boards and say, oh, my gosh, I have to do boring things, like pass the budget or, you know, make staffing decisions, and those aren't the reasons why they're running. Those aren't the things that are, like, feeding the fire or fanning the flames in these school board issues. But those are the things school boards do. And a lot of times, they're volunteer

positions. These people are not getting paid, and, yeah, they're really just coming under fire, right now.

MR. VALANT: And so, and how much room -- so, there's this sort of boring work of school -- the boring bit of working work of school boards. And how much room and how, I guess, concerned should we be about the possibility that we don't know what some of these newly elected board members, who are maybe kind of well outside the mainstream, might adopt as their kind of pet projects, going forward? Like, is there room in school board governance for this to take some turns that we aren't expecting, right now?

MS. CAMERA: That might be a good question for Jonathan, since he's been doing so much work in it. But, I mean, yeah, I'm not really sure, to be honest with you. I think if you look at some of the data that places, like Ballotpedia, has, they've been collecting data on the outcomes of school board elections. I think you'll see that, despite an uptick in recalls and despite an uptick in people wanting to run for these seats, they're not really winning, as much as sort of like the noise around them running and recalling would show. So, I'm not really sure whether any of the policies that they're running on might actually pan out or not. I think a lot of places where they did win were -- they were just very consistent with the community's sort of flavor of politics. So, it wouldn't have been so controversial there.

MR. VALANT: Great, thank you. And, Jonathan, so, as Lauren said, you've been doing a lot of research on school boards, and you have a paper I really like that asks this kind of provocative question about whether Americans actually want school boards to be in charge and kind of how we think about that. So, can you tell us a little bit about how you think about local school boards as governing entities, and sort of what they do, and what they're set up to do well or do poorly?

MR. COLLINS: Sure. I think about school boards. They're kind of like the cousin that annoys us. Like, they have, like, they have some old habits that they can't seem to break, but it's our cousin, you know, so, we love them, and we wouldn't trade them for anything, but. And then, sometimes, when they try to change, we're like, mm, you actually -- I think you're worse now, can you go back to the way you were before? So, like, that's the kind of rolling metaphor I always kind of use to sort of think about how school boards are.

And so, in the study, like, you referenced that basic question, like, do people want school boards to be in charge? And like the up shock from the -- this, from the paper, was just that, you know, when you present people with these alternatives that have kind of been cycled through the kind of reform churn, mayoral control, you know, state takeover, and, like, some sort of form of state control, school councils, like local level autonomy, or even this kind of more, like, theoretical idea of Federal control that, as Lauren referenced, like, you see more in other countries, outside -- beyond the U.S., the modal preference is always going to be for school boards. And a part of this is just old habits die hard. We've had school boards since, you know, early 20th century, in many places. In Massachusetts, you can trace it back to 17th century, late 17th century, early 18th century. You know, we like them because we've had them. And, you know, in theory, they provide a really unique opportunity, and this is kind of the good. Here's a chance for the everyday person, the everyday parent, to have access to the policy decision making process.

All right, when it comes to Federal policy, you know, we're not getting on planes and flying to D.C. to have direct contact with our Federal lawmakers. But school boards, they offer this, like, really localized opportunity to have contact with policy decision makers and especially around an issue in education, which, because of compulsory education laws, most of us have had some sort of schooling experience, and, therefore, there's some sort of exposure there. And then when we think about education, there's this issue that has the ability to be really transformative, to create opportunities and pathways for mobility. Like, just the sheer relevance of it also creates this appetite for engagement, in a way that's different from some other local institutions, whether it's a city council or even a county commission.

And so, in theory, they have this ability to be these really incredible beacons of democracy in the vibrant civil society. Then, you know, you add in the fact that, you know, education has become one of the few areas where we can talk about racial and economic inequality in a really meaningful and substantive ways, the potential was extremely incredible. But then, you know, in practice, we don't actually -- we don't usually get this. You go to a school board meeting, and I've gone to more

than I wish I've actually have gone to, but you get hyper-professionalized spaces, esoteric acronyms, parliamentary procedure, and it -- it's just an environment that makes the engagement challenging, at best, and off-putting, at worst.

And, you know, school board members are in a dilemma. You know, Lauren sort of directs us towards this dilemma, you know? School board members, they're low salary folks, some are volunteers, and they're just looking to handle administrative affairs efficiently. But then, at the same time, the pathway to strong local democracy, I think, flows through the school board. And so, there's an opportunity to create -- to operate with democratic intensions, which I think, and then I argue in my work, can be very, very contagious. And there's also, admittedly, a danger because now, you go back to overseeing the CRT, when you -- Lauren mentioned the recalls. Marty mentioned the separation between, like, these kind of hot button issues and sort of traditional preferences on the more standard issues, how things can kind of get -- the sort of national wins can sweep into the school board meeting space and the school board governance space and take things in a different direction. And the end result could be just what we're seeing now, which is irrational and violent, even disagreement. But I think you'll find that this is more about national politics, again, sort of barging into school board agendas than a consistent obstacle for school boards to overcome. And so, you know, I think we have to ask ourselves, well, school boards, do we think we're going to be able to solve the biggest problems facing our school systems without substantively engaging our communities? Because that's what the school board essentially represents, this opportunity to have substantive engagement with local level community members.

Can we close achievement gaps without this? Can we equip students with knowledge and skills that they need to live happy and fruitful lives without this opportunity for substantive engagement? You know, I think the answer is no. And I think that the reason why these alternatives fail is because the answer is no. And but I think -- and I think the idea that the answer is yes is one of the reasons why we still have school boards intact, you know, those sort of flaws and all. So, it's kind of a story of old habits die hard, but I think we're constantly allured by the potential of what school boards can

become.

MR. VALANT: Thank you. And, Marty, kind of same question to you. I'd love to hear your thoughts on school boards, as institutions, and, you know, what they're sort of equipped to do well or poorly.

MR. WEST: First, I have to say I love Jonathan's cousin metaphor, and I'm going to start using that in my teaching, every year. So, I'll give you credit. But look, one idea that hasn't been introduced yet, that I think is important to keep in mind, especially at a moment in our national conversation, where there's been a lot of attention to the issue of voter rights and voter right suppression, is that, as I think about the school board election system that we have in the United States, it's really largely designed as one big effort to limit electoral participation in school board elections.

If you go back to the administrative progressive reforms that really shaped our current institutions of local control and education at the start of the 20th century, and Jonathan was referring to sort of that period, you know, a big effort was made to change the dates of school board elections, so that they would be off-cycle in non -- you know, not held at the same time as statewide and national elections, they were made nonpartisan in a, I think, good faith attempt to try to, I guess, separate the governance of schools from broader partisan politics, but in a way that means that they don't benefit from the mobilization efforts that play such a big role in driving voter turnout.

And these and other changes to how we conduct these elections, how we try to exercise local control, mean that turnout rates in school board elections are abysmal. They're typically in the single digits among registered voters. And recent research by Vladimir Kogan, at Ohio State, and others shows that turnout's not just low, but highly uneven with voters of color, in particular, disproportionately unlikely to participate, relative to their share of the population, much less their share of students served by public schools. And so, I sort of share Jonathan's desire to find a way to reinvigorate school board governance. But as I look at it, Lauren mentioned in her first response how the pandemic had shined a light on longstanding inequities in the American education system. I think, to some degree, it's done that in our education governance system, as well.

It's long been the case that school board elections tend to produce boards that are represented by a single interest advocates who are interested in a particular topic. It might be students with disabilities. It might be genetically modified foods in the cafeteria. And yet, they're charged with making decisions about transportation, curriculum across all subject areas, who the Superintendent is, and I think there's some real challenges with that model. So, again, I'd love to hear ideas about how to reinvigorate, how to capitalize on the potential local control, but I'm sort of very concerned that this system of limited participation that we've set up isn't an authentic vehicle for local control, at least as we'd like to see it. And I'll stop there.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, thank you. And I'd love to hear Lauren or Jonathan weigh in on that same question. And actually, we got quite a few questions from audience members kind of along similar lines about these, like, governance reform possibilities and the structure of local school board elections, and questions about, you know, we -- nonpartisan versus partisan elected school boards and how we think about that stuff. Do any of the three of you have, and I think, Marty, you may have hinted at a couple here, but have thoughts about, like, particular reforms that states should be looking at for how to actually handle those school board elections?

MR. WEST: Very briefly, I'll say, shifting the timing of elections, so that they occur on-cycle and alongside other elections that drive higher levels of turnout does seem to increase turnout. It's not clear that -- where that's been done. It's been transformative, with respect to the results that school board elections produce, in part because I think we still don't have good information for voters to access. So, you know, they may be turning out to vote, but they may either decide not to complete the ballot when it comes to the school board section, or they don't have much information to go on to serve as an authentic vehicle for accountability. So, that's a step that I favor, but I think it is not one that we should think would be transformational, in and of itself.

MS. CAMERA: I'd say I haven't done a lot of reporting on this particular aspect of school boards. So, I'm not sure I have a great answer to your question. But I -- one thing that I have thought about is how -- what's happening with school boards, right now, might be further turning off voters from

participating in it. I mean, they're, you know, Jonathan and Marty have both spoken to this, they're an integral part of accessing and being part of maintaining and bolstering your public education system. But the things that are happening now, in a lot of school boards, the debates, sort of the ferociousness there, I mean, we're a far cry from, like, the soft bigotry of low expectations, right? Like, we're not -- those, like, cordial conversations are no longer happening, and so, I do worry about what -- the debates that are happening now turning off people from participating even further.

MR. COLLINS: Okay, and just to add to that, I think, you know, in terms of reforms that we could be thinking about, and, of course, I love Marty's idea of on-cycle, and then I love Lauren's goal of, like, making sure that just like the dialogue and the kind of the spirit around school districts and school boards is more generative. And we should also be thinking about some reforms that they've been sort of floating at the national level, the idea of, like, a voting day as a national holiday.

One of the biggest, you know, kind of ironies I always find, when it comes to school board elections, is that, you know, most people, their voting precinct sends them to the school, and so, like, the school is the voting site, yet, like, we still struggle to get active voter participation happening in school board elections. And I just think, you know, whether it's, like, framing, you know, the school board election as a holiday, that everyone should be sort of excited about, whether it is figuring out reforms that could control the -- sort of reduce the impact of money. You look at urban districts, now, and candidates are having to raise north of a million dollars for a school board, to be competitive in a school board race, and that just seems insane. And so, like, you know, obviously, we've been having conversations about money and politics at the national level, but I think it's a conversation that should really move forward, more swiftly, when we're thinking about school board politics. And so, but the end result is just how can we have a more sort of generative discussive space that really centers the true idiosyncratic needs of that specific community and those kids in those seats. And it just seems, when we only have, as Marty mentions, single digit participation in school board elections, it's tough to create an environment that does that.

MR. VALANT: Great, thank you. And let me remind everyone, too, so, if you have

questions, and we'd certainly welcome them, so, that's -- you can email them to events@brookings.edu, or send them via Twitter to @BrookingsEd or hashtag #EduChat, E-D-U-C-H-A-T. And kind of on this topic of politics and elections, I'm curious, looking forward, if we look forward to 2022, and, Lauren, I think you may have alluded to this earlier, but which, if any, of the issues that have surfaced so far, in some of these conversations, feel like they have staying power to actually affect 2022 elections, whether that's gubernatorial or congressional elections, or maybe something else? And any of the three of you, feel free to jump in.

MS. CAMERA: Well, I think, certainly, the politics and policies of COVID will be something we'll be grappling with, you know, both in schools, and in politics, and in campaigns, for a while. Obviously, we're seeing some new variants, right now. I don't think we're going to be getting rid of this reality for a little while. So, I would bet all my money on, you know, COVID policies, masking in schools, vaccine mandates playing or continuing to play a big role in some of these races.

And, frankly, you know, I know a lot of these culture war issues are, like, flashes in the pan, a lot of times, but it seems like critical race theory has some legs, and I would not be surprised if this issue continues on. I think Democrats will want to turn it into, you know, a more of a focus on inequity, more generally, and point to some of the things that the Biden administration is trying to do to drive equity with some of the extra Federal aid that school districts are seeing. But, you know, what happened in Virginia, for Republicans, that was a huge win, and so, I don't see that issue going anywhere.

I think, you know, parental voice is going to be another big, big topic that we're going to hear a lot about. I talk to folks, now, who will say, well, well, look, you know, Republicans can run on the stance of, well, we opened schools, or we never really closed schools to begin with. And I think that, at least at a national level, is something Democrats are going to have to start dealing with.

MR. WEST: The first thing that comes to me mind -- me, Jon, is just the issue of parental rights, that Lauren alluded to. You saw Republicans in the House of Representatives talking about a Parental Bill of Rights, a right to know what your child is learning. So, I think you'll hear calls for transparency around curriculum. I think you'll hear calls that, ironically, because I don't see it as a way of

expanding parent rights, but, at the state level, you'll see continued moves by Republican legislatures to ban critical race theory and its variants, in schools. I don't think those -- I think those laws are largely symbolic, given what Jon explained earlier about the actual status of instruction on those issues.

But I think you'll probably also see, in an effort to try and do something more substantive on the issue of parental rights, continued efforts to expand school choice policies in Republican controlled states. We saw a big wave of this activity amid the pandemic. As I said earlier, I don't think that was driven by a sudden surge in public enthusiasm for specific policy proposals, but it was certainly an effort by elected officials to link a strategy that they favored to the concerns of the day, at a time when many private schools were succeeding in getting kids back in school much more quickly. And so, I would not at all be surprised to see those efforts continue and be part of the broader debate, at the state level, over the next year.

And one final thought on this, I think the more that happens over time, that's a strategy that's going to unfold primarily in Red States. And I think we may end up seeing, more so than we have in the past, the emergence of some pretty different models of education, across the U.S., the Red State Model and the Blue State Model, that may be more distinctive than we're used to.

MR. VALANT: Can you say more about that? So, in what way? How -- where -- what's the -- what does that separation end up looking like?

MR. WEST: Well, I think, it -- there -- the differentiation around spending levels, around approaches to teacher licensure, around approaches to school choice, above all, where you may have some states that are much more comfortable with a variety of providers of publicly funded education, a variety of schooling models, and others that are more in the one best system mold, as we traditionally understood it. And, you know, we've already started to see some variation along those lines. It hasn't always been strictly on a Red State, Blue State basis, but I -- it's speculative, but it's something that we could see emerge, over time.

MS. CAMERA: That's a really good observation, Marty. I think you're right on the money with that.

MR. VALANT: And we had, if I can pull in one -- another audience question here, so, we had a question, this one from Patrick Sopher, from the Accreditation Commission for Schools, and he asked how much all of this has been a Red State versus Blue State issue, and so, whether it's kind of look forward at how policies will change, or it's how, like, these school board fights have been playing out? Do we know? Have the -- has it looked different in Red States and Blue States, or maybe in urban-suburban rural areas? Like, do we know anything about how this is playing out differently in different places?

MR. COLLINS: Well, I can jump in about the CRT issues, or as it relates to that question, because I think it illustrates something that I wanted to kind of underscore why, you know, Marty's comments were so important, and -- which is that when you look at what's happening with CRT, there is very much a Blue State, Red State divide, but it's lopsided, in that what we're seeing is, on the Right, the messaging is much clearer than the messaging on the Left. The messaging on the right is we are anti-CRT, and we are going to craft bills in the State House that explicitly ban this thing that's not taught, versus what we're seeing on the Left is an inability to formulate a message, or, one, how do you formulate a message around something that's not taught?

But, regardless, what you're seeing here are sort of disparate and totally different types of policy responses. As I mentioned, you have California, that decided to implement an ethnic studies requirement. Then, you have a state -- like, I think, Kansas put out an intention to embrace diversity. You have, again, Maine, that implemented a requirement for African American studies courses. So, when you have a range of responses that are kind of in a constellation, in relation to the issue, versus on the other side, the messaging is consistent, and it's firm, and it's clear. You have this divide, but the divide is not going to be balanced.

And you -- the question is, well, why, what is to be gained by this? And it seems like it's an opportunity that the Right is using to generate political power to do other things. I don't -- I think if you ask someone who is in a State House, in a conservative state, in confidence, they would tell you that their issue with -- is not CRT. I think their issue would be to do some of the things that Marty underlines. But

the conversation, what gets parent groups excited, what gets people turning out, I guess, to the Virginia gubernatorial election, which an interesting thing about the -- Virginia's race was this is one state that hasn't done anything, pro or anti, regards -- with -- and in regard -- with respect to CRT. Their State House, I don't think, has even taken up any sort of debate around CRT. Yet, it becomes one of the primary issues that bubbles to the top during the gubernatorial race. So, you can start to see how, you know, these things are being used as kind of like political baiting, but it turns -- in terms of policy, what we're seeing is the Red -- the folks on the Right want to use this as opportunities to make the kinds of policy changes that they want to make. And you'll see that those policy changes aren't really related to the thing that we're talking about, during the -- on the campaign trail. This is my speculation.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, and then all three of you have mentioned the Virginia gubernatorial race, and I'm curious what you think, and, Jonathan, you just mentioned the Democratic parties struggle to, like, articulate a -- anything on those issues. I'm curious if any of you think that there are certain lessons that either the Democratic or Republican parties are drawing from what happened in Virginia that we might see, going forward, in some of these races.

MS. CAMERA: Well, certainly, I would say you can't say that parents shouldn't have a say in their children's education, right? This is now, like, the famous gaffe from McAuliffe, complete unforced error. I mean, that's going to be something that haunts Democrats for the next few election cycles, probably. But I think a lot of the energy in the Virginia gubernatorial election was focused in Loudoun County, right? I mean, to Jonathan's point, critical race theory became sort of this boogeyman there, and, in a way, Republicans were able to capitalize on it, even though that wasn't really, you know -- Youngkin didn't have any, like, grand education proposals, right? It was just that that's what they were able to capitalize on. It kind of took the oxygen out of the room. So, I think that that is the perfect example there. I don't know, what do you think, Marty?

MR. WEST: Well, I -- someone sent me a Democratic Strategies Report, recently, analyzing the Virginia election, based on a series of focus groups, and, you know, their interpretation of the parents gaffe was that the problem with it was that it played into an existing narrative that Democrats

weren't listening to parents when they kept schools closed for too long and that they had sort of not been sufficiently responsive to the community. And so, I think that's the lesson that Democrats are drawing from it, that they need to not come off as the parents -- the part of, I don't know, technocratic expertise that is not sufficiently attentive to what parents want.

Republicans, I think, are too often thinking that this, the issue of CRT, was a decisive factor in Youngkin's success. I've already called that narrative into question. And I think there are other things you can say about why I don't think that was the real reason he won. I think if Republicans draw that lesson, it'll be the wrong one because I've seen other polling recently, from groups like Echelon Insights, that say, look, like 80 percent of the country wants a honest critical presentation of American history in K-12 schools, 75 percent of the country favors efforts to increase the representation of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color on English reading lists. I think there is actually, when it comes to questions of curriculum, much more consensus than is reflected in this debate over this abstract concept and that these efforts to ban, again, I don't know what to call it, but ban this approach in K-12 schools are likely to backfire, that they're actually not going to appeal to a broad range of voters.

MR. VALANT: And we got -- so, there was sort of a group of questions that we got, that are kind of along these lines, and about what it is that districts or school boards can do to sort of turn down the temperature, a little bit, and try to get things done, and make sure that people are getting what they want. So, to read a couple of those questions, and then jump in on any of these.

So, we have one from Jennienne Burke, who's the President of the Stamford Board of Education, and she asked about de-escalation strategies, like what kinds of things could, you know, a school board do, if it were trying to turn down the temperature a bit. William Maxwell, from Great Decisions, should schools communicate about how they will teach about race and distinguish that from CRT? And so, I'm curious for, you know, for those we have with us, who are working in schools and working on these issues and have things they need to do, how do you operate in an environment where everything feels so touchy?

MS. CAMERA: This is a great story idea for me, and I should probably look into it. De-

escalation strategies, I'm putting it on my to-do list. I think school boards are in a tough position with that, though, because if you think of, like, okay, we want to take down the temperature, maybe, this time, we won't invite people, maybe we'll just do it like on virtual, then you get called for, like, dinging people's first amendment rights. It's kind of like a -- they're in a really tough spot with this. I'm not sure what the right answer is. Have you, either of you, seen any good strategies implemented for this?

MR. COLLINS: Well, I think before we discuss the strategies, I want to make a point that I think ties well with Marty's last point, which is that, you know, when I -- as I've been continuing to study school boards across the U.S., and especially school board meetings, the thing that I'm consistently finding is that they're not -- the mode of school board meeting in no way mirrors the kind of school board meeting you're seeing reported in the media. You're still seeing school boards sit down and have very pragmatic conversations about, you know, very idiosyncratic issues related to districts. They're still approving contracts for vendors and contractors. They're still, you know, figuring out what kinds of services specific schools need. They're still trying to bring kids in or figure out ways to give out awards and trophies to kids for showing up at meetings.

So, the -- you know, the idea that every school board meeting, now, is this kind of big cafeteria fight between pro- and anti-CRT of folks is a bit overblown. And so, I think the important takeaway is that there is a -- there are very sort of typical mundane issues that school boards can very much still build conversation around, that don't elicit the kind of reaction that we've seen proliferate through the media and social media.

But the fundamental question, though, is what do we do, when we have people show up at these meetings and essentially try to hijack them with these questions about sort of -- or things that I think are pretty much driven by their sort of national politics and ideology? What do we do in those situations? How do we handle that? How do we handle that in a way that respects their rights to participate, but then, at the same time, allows the administrative business to flow and, honestly, to -- keeps the school board environment as a space where you invite people, and you want them to come and express concerns that are directly related to kids in the schools in that district? So, that's the

challenge.

MR. VALANT: Hard one. Yeah. And then, we got some questions about teachers and teachers' unions, too. So, to read a couple. I have one from Jennifer St. Clair, who's a special ed teacher in the Santa Fe Public Schools. What do recent events mean for teachers? And then one from Melissa Lyon, at Brown University. How do you think teachers' unions and or strikes have intersected with partisan polarization to either dampen or exacerbate hostilities?

MR. WEST: Sorry, I'm trying to -- I feel like I should jump in. Struggling to organize my thoughts. You know, we have not seen a ton of actual strikes or other labor actions, over the course of the pandemic. We've seen some threats. The wave of strikes has been in the -- several years leading up to the election, where you saw quite widespread activity in some states. And, yes, we've looked at that wave of activity in our polling. We saw, actually, that the strikes did not sort of lower the reputation of unions in the public's mind. In that sense, the union sort of won the strike. And I think, as we've entered this pandemic period, again, somewhat to my surprise, they seem to have succeeded in presenting themselves as not an obstacle to what parents want, when it comes to reopening schools, so, at least when it comes to sort of public understanding of the role of unions, and I haven't seen much in the way of fallout for the unions from the activities over the past 18 months.

MR. COLLINS: I think --

MR. VALANT: Lauren, can I pick on you with -- oh, I'm sorry, no, go ahead.

MR. COLLINS: No, no, go ahead. I -- Lauren, you can jump in.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, Lauren, I'm curious kind of what you've seen and what you interpret about the way that the unions have engaged over the last months and last couple of years.

MS. CAMERA: Yeah, I was really surprised by the *EdNext* polling, Marty, when that came out, because it seemed like they, teachers' unions, were getting dinged and blamed for a lot of the slow reopening's or continued closures. But I think what's interesting, right now, and, like, what I'm kind of focused on, as a reporter, and watching, and really interested in, to see where it goes, is with the teacher shortages, right now, in some school districts, where you're having -- you know, maybe districts

are closing for every Friday, or they're having to start, you know, giving some mental health days off, here and there, or trying to move teachers from -- you know, to double dip on teachers and ask administrators to cover some classes and things like that, as they're really getting -- they're really getting pinched, right now, and I'm curious to watch and see, you know, especially leading up to the 2022 midterms and some of the gubernatorial elections, how this plays out in states. There's -- and I don't want to make too much of it because I don't think it's a -- it's like a -- you know, or I don't want to amplify something that doesn't really exist, but there is this sort of like push and pull between what parents need, in terms of like a schedule, a school schedule that they can count on, and what schools are able to provide, given all the stressors that they're under, right now. And I think that's going to be really fascinating to watch, to see how the teachers' unions handle that because that's a really tough one.

MR. VALANT: Yeah, I do feel like -- I feel like whenever I talk to people in schools, it's shortages that are top of mind.

MS. CAMERA: Yeah.

MR. VALANT: It's -- whether it's teachers, or substitute teachers, or bus drivers, like, that's -- that is sort of top of mind. So, we have just a minute left, and this is an unfair question for, like, 10 seconds. But I'm curious if we -- if we look back at this era, a decade from now, whether this is going to feel, in your mind, like a blip, like a weird moment in politics, or if we're seeing something more substantive than that. Do either of you have like a quick -- or any of you have a quick reaction to that question?

MR. WEST: I'll say, to continue the theme that I started with today, that, you know, I think there's been a little more continuity and a moment revealing aspects of a system that were already there, rather than a fundamental departure. So, I also think that education systems are inherently very conservative, in the sense of being resistant to change. So, I'm always inclined, in that question, to think a blip, rather than a tectonic shift, and so, that's where I would be placing my bet.

If I could say one other thing, you know, my hope -- one theme of this conversation that hasn't been made explicit is that some of what people have been talking about in the politics of education

is a real distraction from what schools need to be paying attention to, right now, in the wake of what's, very clearly, the largest decline in achievement that students have experienced in our nation's history. And, you know, my hope is that we'll be able to refocus our energies on that problem and strategies to address it, as quickly as possible.

MR. VALANT: Thanks, Marty, and I think that was a very well taken point. I think we all probably agree on that one. I feel like this conversation could, honestly, go, like, eight hours, but it can't because I'll get in trouble, so. So, let me thank the three of you. Thanks to Lauren, to Marty, and to Jonathan. And thanks to everyone for sticking with us and engaging with really good questions. And we hope to continue the conversation soon. So, thank you.

* * * * *

CERTIFICATE OF NOTARY PUBLIC

I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

Carleton J. Anderson, III

(Signature and Seal on File)

Notary Public in and for the Commonwealth of Virginia

Commission No. 351998

Expires: November 30, 2024

ANDERSON COURT REPORTING
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314
Phone (703) 519-7180 Fax (703) 519-7190