



The Influence of Dark Money on Schools in Virginia

Background: For years, Virginia’s public school system has consistently been ranked in the top ten by the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Studies despite ranking 28th in teachers’ salaries by the National Education Association and 41st in per pupil funding by The Commonwealth Institute. Virginia students typically outperform the national average in most, if not all subjects and grade levels. Virginia is ranked in the top 5-10 school systems across the United States, depending on the ranking tool.

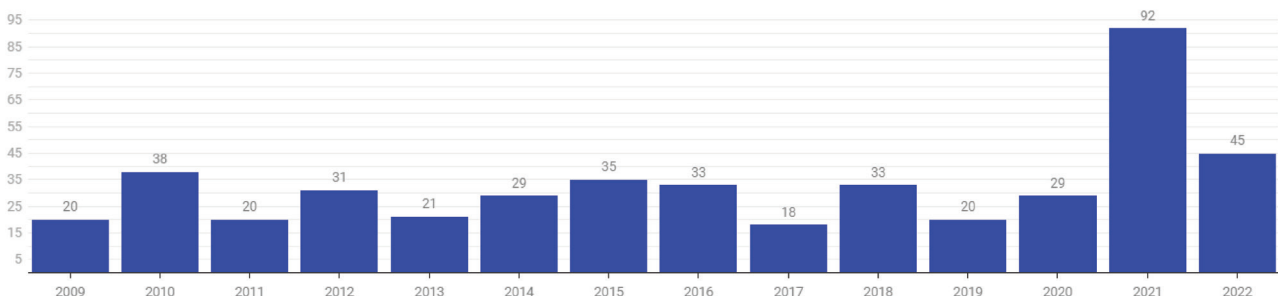
Influence of Dark Money on Education: The influence of Dark Money on public education is not new. For decades, groups funded by billionaires have worked to push policies and proposals that pull teachers, funding, and other resources from public schools, including efforts to promote school privatization, charter schools, vouchers, and other so-called “education reform” schemes intended to defund and dismantle public education. But recently pressures have increased.

- Since March 2020, a network of dark money groups have shaped the education pandemic response narrative, with an initial focus on homeschooling and private schooling models. Many of these efforts were in Virginia.
- The number of school board recalls have skyrocketed since the beginning of the pandemic. Per Ballotpedia, 35% of school board recalls since 2006 were conducted in the last 2.5 years with a record 92 initiated in 2021. These recall efforts have been supported by dark money. In Fairfax County, the open FCPS school board recall effort received 73% of its funds from N2 America, a right-wing dark money organization.

The chart below details how many recall efforts were tracked each year. The 2022 numbers were current as of July 22, 2022.

Note: If a recall effort spanned multiple years, it was counted each year.

School board recall efforts by year



- The National Education Association (NEA) identified dark money networks that have radicalized adults over COVID protocols, curriculum (e.g., “critical race theory (CRT)”), culture war issues, and book bans. The NEA reports that teachers have been assaulted and threatened as a result. Well-known dark money groups leading the attacks include: No Left Turn, Parents Defending Education, Fight for Schools, Citizens for Renewing America, and Moms for Liberty.
- Over the last two years, OpenSchools and anti-CRT groups appeared across the U.S. with carefully moderated forums, coordinated messaging, and loud voices at school board meetings and on social media. These groups claimed to be “grassroots;” however, many (if not most) of these groups were started and operated by republican operatives, candidates, lobbyists, and consultants, which means they were astroturfed groups (a.k.a, fake grassroots) backed by powerful people, institutions, and dollars. These astroturfed groups used social media to amplify their voice to seem as if there was more support for their goals than there actually was.
- Right-wing operatives have deployed a network of fake local news websites to amplify their message. In Virginia, these political operatives. Dark money groups have been instrumental in translating this issue into Virginia state politics with the Koch and DeVos-funded sister groups called the “Independent Women’s Voice (IWW) and “Independent Women’s Forum” (IWF) investing in attack ads in the 2021 Virginia elections. Supporting this effort was a Virginia-based political action committee called “Fight for Schools” (FFS), a Trump and GOP-linked PAC purporting to support “common sense” candidates who oppose critical race theory in schools. FFS was reported as raising over \$586,000 since 2021 which was spent on legal expenses, media advertising, postage, printing, etc.
- In Virginia, these political operatives and dark money groups were instrumental in Glenn Youngkin’s election to governor. Prior to the election, a group backed by the right-wing Concord Fund, Free to Learn Action, that argues parents should have more of a role in developing school curriculum, launched a \$1 million dollar ad buy in Virginia that targeted McAuliffe on education.

How this affects you:

- Our public policies influencing education continue to be undermined by dark money groups. Growing coordination between dark money groups and politicians is increasing pressure on our schools and school board members. School board meetings are intense and sometimes feel dangerous. Rallies organized by dark money groups can bring people who are from out of town and/or may not have children in the school district. Meetings and rallies are not limited by civil discourse, much less the truth. Parents, teachers, and elected officials have been targeted for harassment.
- Teacher resignations are at an all-time high after two years of pandemic teaching, harassment by parents and right-wing groups, and a lack of support by school administrations who were struggling under the same attacks. The resulting teacher shortage is affecting schools across the nation, which means some classrooms may not have certified or experienced teachers.
- In Virginia, Governor Glenn Youngkin and appointed people to the Virginia Board of Education are pushing an agenda which includes initiatives designed to pull money from public education (e.g, lab schools and charter schools); installing pro-privatization anti-CRT proponents in the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Board of Education; and limiting the authority of the school boards to supervise their school district.