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K-12 REPORT

The Koch Network and the Capture
of K-12 Education

A B C

Cutting Public School Funding
Charter Schools & Vouchers
Curriculum and Content
Critical Race Theory



SAVE OUR
SCHOOLS
Strong Schools,
Strong State

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Executive Summary

The Koch network's massive and targeted "investments" are reshaping K-12 education. According to the Washington Post, in early 2018, Koch officials announced plans to "fundamentally transform America's education system," including K-12. Stacy Hock, a major Koch donor, called K-12 "[t]he lowest hanging fruit for policy change in the United States today[.]"

In order to influence K-12 public education, the Koch network has financed local, state, and national mechanisms to create multiple crises -- only to turn around and cite these same crises as reasons to adopt their free market solutions.

- Supporting the seating of state legislators who intentionally defund public education
- Destabilizing state funding in schools to promote policies that divert funds away from traditional public schools to charter schools, private schools, and online education under the guise of "school choice"
- Funding higher education centers that create the curriculum and textbooks being used in some K-12 programs
- Astroturfing moral panic about ideologies that critique their idea production and theory of change as regressive and racist (Critical Race Theory)

The Koch network has made no secret about the critical role that public education plays as an ideal arena for influencing U.S. policy and culture. Through a variety of tactics -- charter schools, vouchers, curriculum, textbooks, trainings, using state politicians to engage in culture war against progressive ideas and more -- the Koch network is able to ensure the spread of their ideas, including climate disinformation and free-market favoring economics philosophy.

All public institutions are a threat to the Koch network's free market economic agenda. In their assault on public education, the network has taken actions to increasingly privatize and corporatize K-12 institutions. In doing so, they've created a lot of waste, pushed to close "failing" schools, favored CEO-like superintendents, aggressively cut costs, and more. Lack of public accountability and transparency surrounding private and charter schools, as well as privately created curriculum and textbooks, leaves little room for parents and educators to take action against undesired and harmful agendas. Privatized education institutions are often not subject to audits, regulations that create standards for educators, and can lack standards for curriculum and assessment.

The Kochs' infiltration of K-12 education harms students, teachers, and our democracy. Students are losing access to quality public-school education. Teachers are losing access to resources and the support needed to create a healthy, generative public-school ecosystem. Finally, our democracy is harmed as students are taught with Koch-funded curriculum that promotes regressive and ahistorical ideologies that contribute to myths of meritocracy, normalizes extractive economic practices which disregard our climate, and justify historical structural violence.

THE KOCH NETWORK

Wants to meld the minds and policies of K-12 education in America.

SINCE THE 1960S, KOCH INDUSTRIES HAS INFLUENCED THE US EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.

There Is a

\$5,000 GAP PER STUDENT

School districts with high concentrations of Latinx and Black students show a spending deficit of around \$5,000/student compared to majority white districts. Cuts in education budgets supported by Koch-funded politicians have played a part in creating this gap.



OVER **\$500M** WASTED

Over a half-billion dollars has been wasted on now defunct charter schools. This was federal money that could have gone towards improving traditional public schools.



CURRICULUM CONTROL



Koch-funded think tanks and organizations create free-market friendly curriculum and textbooks being used in some K-12 programs.

LEARN CRITICAL RACE THEORY



The Koch network is amplifying and astroturfing a nationwide backlash against CRT -- curriculum that critiques their idea production and theory of change as regressive and racist.

Cutting Funds to Public Schools

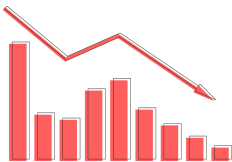
Public school budgets have fluctuated due to financial crises like recessions and COVID, but they have also been under attack by outside forces pushing agendas for privatizing education. With public school budgets being cut, it allows private education to flourish. Unlike public schools, private schools have little to no regulation, allowing pretty much anything to be taught, including content that ends up benefiting the large corporations heavily involved in financing education. Climate denial embedded in the education curriculum of charter schools is an example of private interest influence in K-12. Charles Koch and his late brother David have been very involved in supporting government officials and campaigns to cut public school budgets.



AMERICANS FOR PROSPERITY

The astroturf organization, Americans For Prosperity (AFP), is one of the tools used by the Koch network to push for cutting public school funding across the country. AFP was founded by the Koch brothers and is now active in 38 states, spending millions each year to push an anarcho-socialist agenda via the capture of state politicians and voters.

Americans for Prosperity financially supported Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker during his initial campaign in 2010 and during his recall in 2012. In 2011 Walker created a two year plan wherein budget cuts to many things, including public education, were deemed necessary to account for a \$3.6 billion shortfall. He wanted to cut education aid by \$900 million, and teachers' jobs were at stake as well. Then in 2015, Walker expanded a voucher program that used public funds for students' tuition at private and religious schools, while simultaneously cutting \$250 million in funding to the University of Wisconsin, which ultimately trickled down to the public



THE 2008 RECESSION

The 2008 recession had devastating effects on school budgets across the country. Money per-pupil was slashed by almost \$3,000 in states like Florida and North Carolina, and students and families were urged to look into other education alternatives like charter schools to escape the low public school budgets. A team of economists calculated that if per-pupil spending was cut by \$1,000 after the recession, reading and math test scores would fall approximately 1.6 percentile points. However, public school budgets have not risen significantly or recovered fully since the recession, and COVID is a threat to school budgets once again. Online schooling has revealed an opportunity to replace in-person education, which could further slow down state and federal investment in school infrastructure and programs.

The reduction in school funding has very real, tangible consequences. **Research shows that cutting budgets not only widens the education gap, but cutting school spending disproportionately affects lower income communities and students of color.** According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about 44% of education budgets from local districts comes from property tax in the area. This standard can be harmful when property taxes are higher in areas with higher value homes (allocating more money to schools in the vicinity) and areas with lower value homes have lower property tax, and in turn lower budgets.

Additionally, these areas tend to still be segregated and so the schools with lower budgets serve mostly students of color, whereas the schools with higher budgets tend to be mostly white. **A report from The Century Foundation found that low-income school districts are more than twice as likely to have a funding gap as higher income districts, which impacts students of color at higher rates. School districts with high concentrations of Latinx and Black students show a spending deficit of around \$5,000 per student, compared to majority white districts.**

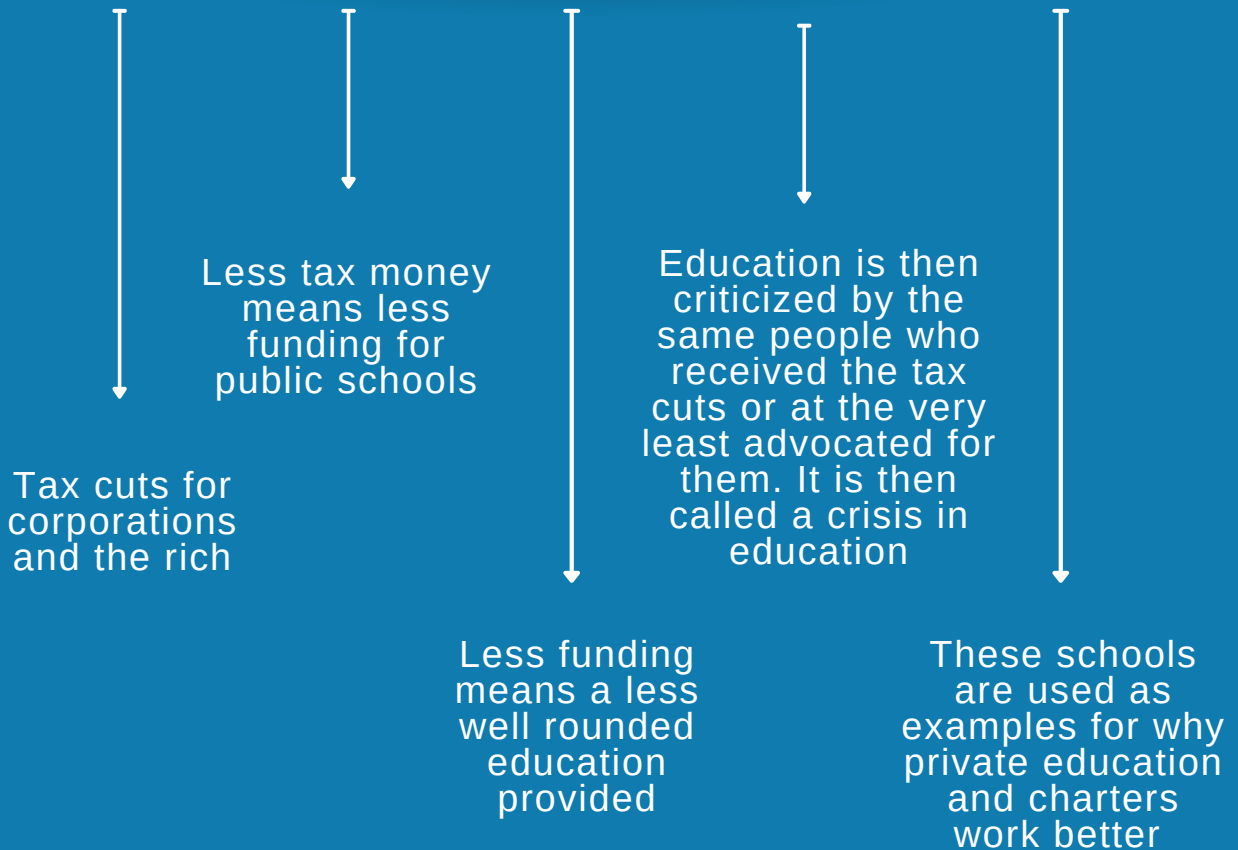


DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Even when government money is available to increase education budgets, it can have strings attached to make it harder to access. \$13.2 billion of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act was supposed to be allocated to K-12 education; however, Secretary of Education for the Trump administration, Betsy DeVos, instituted three very specific categories that states must fall under to receive the money, including “Statewide virtual learning and course access programs, so that students will always be able to access a full range of subjects, even those not taught in the traditional or assigned setting.” The wording is vague enough to justify whatever can be taught, even if it does not line up with the public school curriculum. Both DeVos and the Koch network have a common goal of privatizing education and both stand to gain more with curriculum that benefits their agendas.

In addition, DeVos put aside money to help create microgrants that could be awarded to families to help pay for private school tuition. These measures ensure that people who are funding private education can push their own agendas within public education, or better yet for them, privatized education. Otherwise, a lot of underfunded schools can't fit their needs into these specific categories, and therefore can't receive the funding.

STEPS IN PRIVATIZING EDUCATION



Charter Schools and Vouchers:

COVID-19 and the School Choice Movement

The advent of at home learning and other K-12 difficulties associated with public education during the pandemic have presented an opportunity for the school choice movement. The new Koch-funded education lobby, Yes Every Kid, and the State Policy Network have both capitalized on the pandemic. Yes Every Kid recently released a report titled “Opportunity in Crisis” that proposes a variety of education policy reforms including “the elimination of arbitrary certification requirements,” gubernatorial discretion over federal education funds, and the authorization of charter schools and micro schools. The State Policy Network has launched a similar campaign titled “born for this moment” advocating for increased educational alternatives and the right to school choice.

School choice legislation has flourished throughout COVID-19. In response to the pandemic, 50 school choice bills have been introduced in 30 states across the country.

The Koch Network has proposed charter schools as the solution to the public school crisis they have manufactured and incited. Charter schools are independent from state school systems in place, and have vastly boomed in popularity recently largely in response to philanthropic funding. Families are enticed to send their students to a charter school or use a publicly funded voucher as an expression of “school choice,” injecting “market-style competition into public education.”

The Koch network supports charter schools and alternatives to public schools like tax credit vouchers (often called STOs or School Tuition Organizations) and Education Savings Account (ESA) vouchers for three central reasons. First, these public school proxies promote the idea of “school choice,” a concept formed from the libertarian and free market values that the Koch network espouses. Next, the independence of charter schools and alternative schools allows for organizations and individuals within the Koch network to influence and align the curriculum being taught with Koch favored ideals. Finally, the Koch network has similar motives to the majority of fossil fuel companies who are largely supporting school privatization as a means to escape income taxes that fund public schools.

Betsy DeVos –a longtime affiliate of the Koch network– has long pushed the idea of charter schools. DeVos has contributed at least \$200 million to conservative organizations, including many within the Koch network, since the 1970s. The DeVos family money was essential in preventing a Michigan bill from passing that would have slowed the expansion of charter schools in the state. Plus, DeVos has invested in for profit education companies such as K12 inc. As Secretary of Education under Trump, DeVos allocated \$399 million in federal grant money toward the expansion of charter schools nationwide. However, most of DeVos’ efforts –such as her attempt to allocate \$400 million of the national budget toward charter schools in 2018 or her proposed \$5 billion voucher program– were unsuccessful.

Similar to the effects of cutting traditional public school funds, charter schools have a detrimental impact on students of color and students with disabilities. **According to a study by Urban Institute, growth in charter school enrollment increases the segregation of Black, Hispanic, and white students.** One analysis found that 70% of Black charter school students attended a heavily segregated minority charter school, double the percentage of Black students attending schools in the public sector. The UCLA Civil Rights Project found similarly egregious statistics surrounding charter school treatment of students with disabilities. The study found that, in an analysis of 5,250 charter schools, 1,093 schools suspended students with disabilities at a rate at least 10% higher than students without disabilities. Additionally the UCLA study found that of the charter schools studied, 235 suspended more than 50% of their total number of students with disabilities. The segregation promoted by charter schools and the disproportionate suspension rates of disabled students demonstrates just how dangerous the Koch network funding for charter schools can be.



- Recently founded in 2019 by Charles Koch and other far right donors, a 501 c 4 fighting for the school choice movement.
- The organization's strategy is to target legislatures in states already sympathetic to school choice policies.
- In 2019, Yes Every Kid filed an amicus brief in collaboration with Americans for Prosperity in the Supreme Court Case Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue. The Court ruled that state subsidies for private education must include religious schools.



- Founded in 2019, 4.0 schools is a new 501 c3 dedicated to the school choice movement
- The Charles Koch Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation both donated \$5 million
 - In 2019, the Charles Koch Foundation and the Walton Family Foundation both pledged \$5 million to 4.0 Schools. An additional \$5 million will be granted from other donors. Fund III will finance 600 entrepreneurs and pilot 500 new schools and programs



- ALEC is an organization of conservative legislators and corporations— including Koch Industries— that drafts model legislation for state governments.
- ALEC has drafted dozens of bills pertaining to public support for private education.
- In 2016 alone, 172 ALEC education bills were introduced in state legislatures across the nation.
- One bill, titled the “Great Schools Tax Credit Act” has inspired legislation in 17 states. The bill provides a tax credit to corporations that provide scholarships for students to attend the school of the student’s parent’s choice.



- AFP is a Koch-funded astroturf organization that pursues school choice policies on the state level
- The organization is heavily involved in state level elections ranging all the way from gubernatorial races to school board elections.
- AFP is known for producing high profile school choice themed political advertisements.
- AFP also provides legal support to the school choice movement. In addition to its work on Espinoza v. Montana Department of Revenue, AFP mounted an intense legal battle against Arizona proposition 305 in 2018. The proposition threatened to eliminate the expansion of Arizona’s school voucher program.



- SPN is a Koch-funded network of think tanks across the country.
- SPN think tanks advocate for school choice
- In 2016, a \$1billion initiative to grow support for charter schools and school choice was launched by SPN.

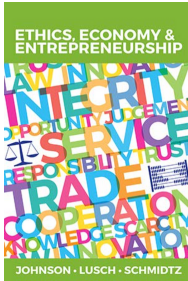


- Tracks the spread of privatization schemes across the states. Their monthly debrief podcast and their state-by-state Ed Choice recommendations make clear that their end goal is dismantling public ed.



Curriculum & Content

Creation of curriculum is yet one other way the Koch network can promote conservative, free-market capitalist ideals to America's youth. Given that K-12 are formative years of children's' lives, the manipulation of curriculum is particularly dangerous. Unbiased and research-based curriculum is essential for children to accurately understand the world around them, so it is no surprise that altering this information is appealing to the Koch Network.



ETHICS, ECONOMY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

There are various examples that expose the reality of Koch's influence on curriculum in K-12 schooling. In *Ethics, Economy and Entrepreneurship (EE&E)*, a textbook by David Schmitz proposed for use in the Tucson Unified School District, historically inaccurate claims are abundant. Schmitz is the director of the University of Arizona's Center for the Philosophy of Freedom, a think tank that has received over \$17 million in funding from the Koch network. **The many historically inaccurate claims include the following: Neanderthals became extinct because they "weren't entrepreneurs;" Jamestown failed because settlers did not have private property rights; Native Americans drove bison off cliffs leading to almost extinction; towns were founded before agriculture; and of course, that free market capitalism is the best economic system. Notably, there is no mention of the devastating 1929 and 2008 market crashes.**

Another concerning source of free, but inaccurate, educational content is Izzit.org (a project of the Koch-funded organization, Free to Choose Network), which provides online content to educators across the country. In one video, the narrator questions the rationale behind a minimum wage, and in another, they question "America's historical obsession with race." Izzit.org also has a video called "Unstoppable Solar Cycles," which sets out to explain how mankind "plays [a] small part in global warming," pushing the Koch network's agenda of climate disinformation.

Textbooks like *Ethics, Economy and Entrepreneurship* are not written by experts in the field, are not peer reviewed, and are not published by a reputable publishing house. In fact, the publishing house under which EE&E was distributed was created and owned by the textbook's authors, the same ones with no relevant expertise or credentials. Furthermore, an index, bibliography, footnotes, and references are entirely absent from these textbooks, adding further evidence that the claims and "factual" information included are not accurate whatsoever.

BRI**BILL OF RIGHTS INSTITUTE**

The Koch network and their many educational fronts like the Bill of Rights Institute, have used the phrase “academic freedom” as a defense of their work, claiming that students and faculty both have the freedom to choose what kind of educational content they are utilizing. Of course, this could not be further from the truth. The Koch network drains public school resources, making educators desperate for any content they can get their hands on. However, even more is at stake with regard to K-12 education, because students in elementary and high school are likely only offered one course in a subject they are required to take. While college students may face some degree of choice, many children in the United States are forced to be taught extreme, neo-libertarian ideals in lieu of an unbiased education.

Beyond tackling the Koch machine, there are steps that can be taken to reduce the influence of dark money in K-12 education. For example, school boards must ensure that textbooks being used in classrooms are properly examined prior to approval. They must also take steps to protect the teaching of critical race theory in schools.



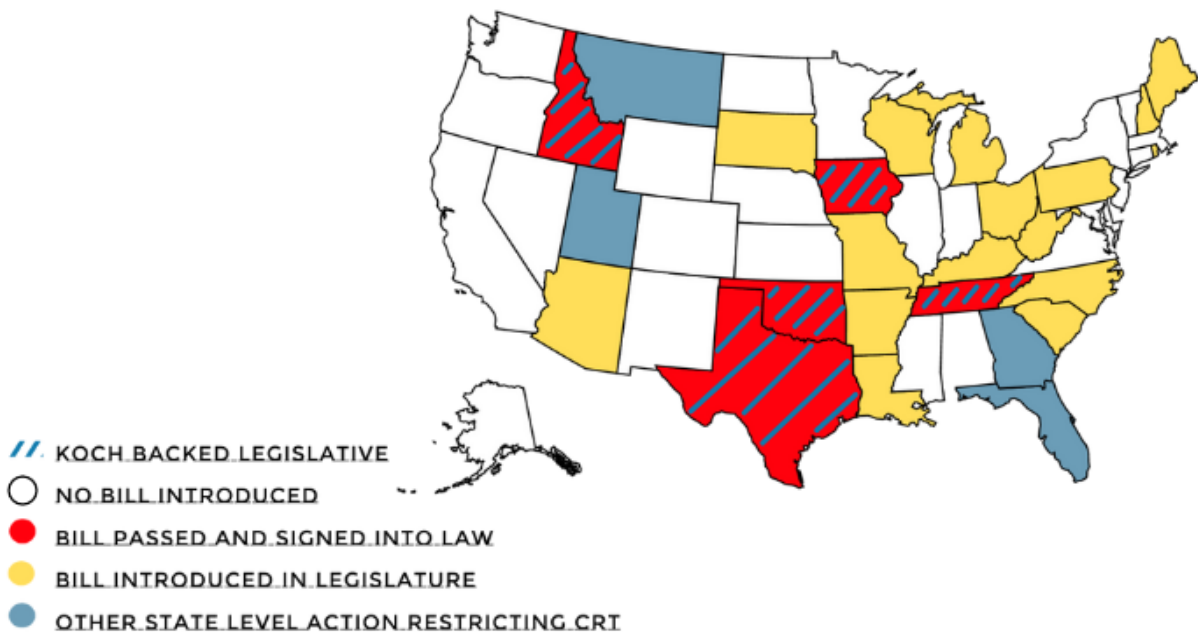
Critical Race Theory

One fight to gain a stronghold over curriculum and create a false panic around education revolves around critical race theory (CRT). Despite CRT being a current topic of discussion, it is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old, and centers the idea that racism is a social construct embedded into our legal systems and policies, and not simply the result of individual prejudice or bias. The fight against CRT isn't new either. It is part of a lengthier campaign to capture education by elevating conservative views and rejecting liberal ones.

The Koch network of legislators, political action committees, and think tanks are amplifying and astroturfing the current nationwide backlash against CRT. This campaign is designed with the goal to protect the ideological basis of an ultra-free market economy by preventing educators from teaching about the structural sources of racism in the United States.

At the moment, there is a coordinated effort in states across the country to pass bills attempting to ban the teaching of CRT in public schools. The Koch-funded Heritage Foundation is leading the push, claiming that CRT “is destructive and rejects the fundamental ideas on which our constitutional republic is based.” In their quest to control what is taught in schools, Heritage Action for America, an affiliate of the Heritage Foundation think tank, created a toolkit to get folks to push anti-CRT legislation in their individual states.

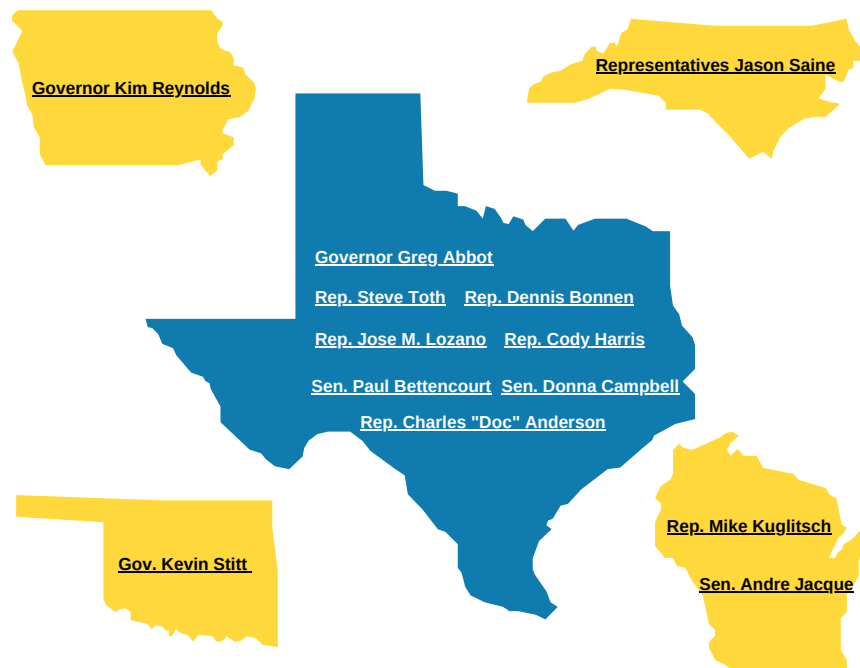
Both the Heritage Foundation and another Koch-funded organization, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) have held webinars in opposition to the teaching of CRT. ALEC has frequently produced model bills for various right-wing causes, causing concern over their involvement when it comes to anti-CRT state bills.



The bills, promoted by conservative legislators, are vague, but can lead to some really harmful situations in the classroom, impacting both students and educators alike. In some states, teachers could be fined for broaching “controversial topics,” while in other states, schools can have funding pulled if they teach about CRT. At the moment, over 20 states have introduced anti-CRT bills or have taken other steps that would restrict or limit how teachers are allowed to discuss racism and sexism in the classroom. Eight states have successfully enacted CRT bans through legislation or other actions.

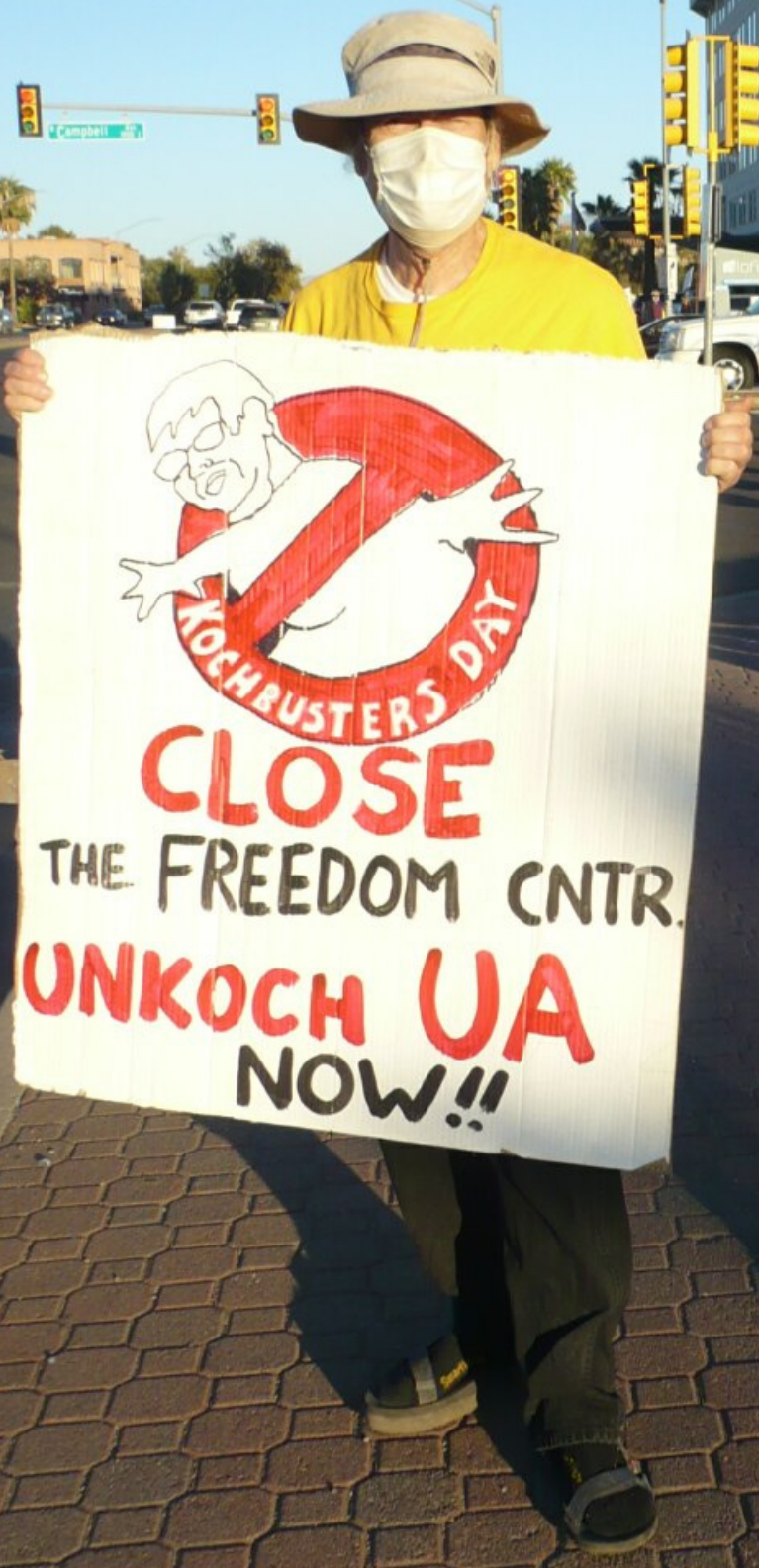
The push to prevent CRT from being taught at schools goes beyond the states and is being pursued at the federal level as well. Koch-backed U.S. senators like Marsha Blackburn have reintroduced the Saving American History Act, legislation that would block federal funds from going to schools teaching the 1619 Project (a long form journalism project centered around slavery in the US from The New York Times).

KOCH-FUNDED POLITICIANS PROMOTING/SUPPORTING ANTI-CRT LEGISLATION:



In addition to legislation, the Koch network is rallying parents, feeding them disinformation about CRT, and using them to push their agenda. In Rhode Island, the Koch-funded, Arizona-based Goldwater Institute is representing a mother who was seeking records of CRT and gender curriculum, continuing to push the idea that CRT is controversial and dangerous.

This nationwide effort to control what can and cannot be taught in schools brushes up against free speech rights. How will these laws impact a teacher who wants to discuss the creation of Jim Crow laws (a factual example of state-sponsored racism) for example? Will entire swaths of U.S. history be ignored for fear of loss of funding or even jobs? There is also a fear amongst teachers that these bills –if not challenged– can lead to future legislation that attacks other aspects of curriculum, effectively holding academic freedom hostage while limiting student access to information.



CASE STUDY

ARIZONA

Case Study: Arizona

Arizona shows exactly what happens when all of these factors fall into place. From Koch influence in state government impacting public school funds to the proliferation of ESA vouchers and charter schools, Koch-backed curriculum and textbooks, and the pushback to Critical Race Theory, Arizona highlights how a state and its K-12 education can be captured by a well coordinated attack on public education at the expense of the common good.

CUTTING PUBLIC SCHOOL FUNDS

Arizona public schools are in crisis. Between 2008-2012, Arizona cut more funding to K-12 public schools than any other state, and schools are still struggling. Dark money has steadily flooded the state for decades, making it even more difficult for public schools to receive the funding they require. In 2012, the Koch network poured \$1.8 million into defeating a ballot measure that would have added a billion dollars to K-12 funding, which could have helped purchase much needed educational equipment and supplies, as well as give Arizona teachers, among the lowest paid in the nation, a raise. Governor Doug Ducey, along with many Arizona state legislators, have received contributions from the Koch network to ensure these trends continue.

Governor Ducey, who considers himself the “Education Governor,” received \$1.4 million from the Koch brothers during his campaign. The continuous infusion of Koch network money (through organizations like Americans for Prosperity and the American Legislative Exchange Council), has the public school system in true peril. The Koch network’s efforts to dismantle public schools has made a significant impact: **Arizona has nearly the lowest per pupil spending, one of the lowest averages for teacher’s pay, and some of the largest class sizes on average.**

If funding isn’t reaching the public schools, where is all the money going? Vouchers.

CHARTER SCHOOLS/VOUCHERS

The charter school movement in Arizona has flourished like none-other. 18% of Arizona students are enrolled in charter schools, making it the state with the highest proportion of charter school students in the country. Moreover, Arizona is ranked at the top of ALEC’s Report Card on American Education. **Arizona has long been the focal point of the ‘school choice’ movement as a result of decades long effort by the Koch network and other far right wealthy donors, particularly surrounding the use of vouchers.** In 1997, Arizona became the first state to adopt a tax credit for individual donations to private schools. In 2005, it was one of the first states to adopt a corporate tax break for private schools modeled off of ALEC legislation. Next, in 2011, Arizona became the first state to implement Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) -- a program created -- and heavily lobbied for by the Koch-funded Goldwater Institute. ESAs are vouchers that parents can use to pay for private school expenses and were initially only available to students with special needs, in “failing schools,” in foster care, and living on Native American Reservations.

In 2017, the Arizona voucher debate reached a boiling point when the state legislature passed SB 1431– based on another ALEC bill – expanding ESA eligibility to every student in the state. Thanks to the efforts of Save Our Schools Arizona (SOSAZ), a grassroots organization founded by Arizona parents, Proposition 305 put the ESA eligibility expansion on the ballot. In response, the Koch network and other corporate actors mounted an all-out effort in favor of Proposition 305. The Koch funded Libre Institute targeted Arizona’s Latinx population with advertisements and canvassing to bolster support for Prop 305. Meanwhile, the Koch-funded Americans for Prosperity filed a lawsuit questioning the legitimacy of Prop 305 with hopes of removing the initiative from the ballot and defaulting back to SB 1431. Nonetheless, the efforts of SOSAZ prevailed. Proposition 305 and the lawsuit against it failed, meaning that ESA eligibility would not be extended to all Arizona students.

However, efforts to expand vouchers for schooling in Arizona have returned. In February 2021, Koch-funded senator Paul Boyer introduced a bill to expand voucher eligibility to students from schools with a high percentage of low income students or who qualify for free or reduced lunch, roughly 600,000 of Arizona’s 1.1 million public school students, citing the pandemic as a key reason why such legislation is needed. Unlike the bill that failed in 2018, this one has no cap on enrollment, making it even more dangerous than before. A variety of pro-charter/voucher organizations, including the Koch-funded Goldwater Institute, have also come out in support of the bill. As of June 2021, the bill –SB1452– was passed by the Senate and the House Ways and Means Committee. This bill held up the entire budget, leading to one of the longest legislative sessions in Arizona history: 171 days.

CURRICULUM AND CONTENT

The University of Arizona hosts the Koch-funded Center for the Philosophy of Freedom (known as the Freedom Center), which has played a large role in influencing public education in the state. The Freedom Center, which received close to a million dollars from the Charles Koch Foundation in 2019, has not been shy about its goals. According to Founding director David Schmitz: “We aim not only to produce the teachers, but the materials that are getting taught.”

In 2015, the Freedom Center created a course called “Phil 101: Ethics, Economy, and Entrepreneurship,” (EE&E) designing the curriculum and textbook, as well as offering workshops on how to teach the class. This course was offered in the Tucson Unified School District, along with a handful of other school districts, as well as at least seven private and charter schools. EE&E is based on free market economics, promoting content conducive to the Koch network’s greater agenda. Hundreds of students took the class and used the accompanying textbook before the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) voted unanimously to remove the course in 2019. The effort to get the course out of TUSD was led by Kochs Off Campus!

Most recently, Arizona Representative Judy Burges created an amendment to the state education budget that would have added an “American civics education” to the competency requirements for high school graduation. In addition, the amendment directs the state board of education to work with the School of Economic Thought and Leadership at Arizona State University and the Center for the Philosophy of Freedom at the University of Arizona. Burges’ amendment passed in the House, though it was eventually negotiated out in the Senate before the final budget moved on to Governor Ducey. While the amendment failed, it is an example of another tactic for the Koch network to have a hand in curriculum. If they’re unable to have textbooks and courses mandated, the next step appears to try and influence actual civics requirements.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

In Arizona, teachers could be fined for even broaching “controversial” subjects, or teaching that students’ race, ethnicity, or sex determines their character. The state budget, passed in June of 2021 included language that bans , “...any instruction that infers that one race is inherently racist, should be discriminated against or feel guilty because of their race.” In early July, Governor Ducey signed the bill into law, creating consequences as severe as \$5,000 fines for schools that violate it, as well as the potential for individual teachers to lose their license.

Governor Ducey went even farther, signing into law another bill that “prohibits the state and any local governments from requiring their employees to engage in orientation, training or therapy that suggest an employee is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” In doing so, **Arizona is the first in the nation to have legislation banning CRT at all levels in the government, showing the immense power and influence that outside interests have on the state.**

Beyond having Koch network aligned state politicians backing CRT bans, Arizona is also seeing an influx of parents protesting the teaching of CRT at school board meetings.

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Acknowledgements

Special thank you to our Summer
2021 Fellows:

- Anya Cunningham
- Victoria Freire
- Jake Lowe
- Katarina Sousa



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