**Headline:** Why Michigan Public School Parents Might Be Too Strong of a Match for Betsy DeVos and Her Privatization Agenda

**Teaser:** Parents in DeVos’s backyard tell right-wing radicals, “No thank you to divisive, partisan agendas in schools.”

By Sarah Lahm

**Author Bio:** This article was produced by [Our Schools](https://independentmediainstitute.org/our-schools/). Sarah Lahm is a Minneapolis-based writer and researcher. Her work has appeared in outlets such as the Progressive and In These Times. Follow her on Twitter [@sarahrlahm](https://twitter.com/sarahrlahm).

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**[Article Body:]**

Culture war issues dressed as serious K-12 classroom concerns, such as trumped-up battles over [critical race theory](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/08/politics/critical-race-theory-panic-race-deconstructed-newsletter/index.html) and [gender identity](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/12/us/politics/transgender-laws-us.html), have become useful campaign fodder for the GOP in several key states.

In [Georgia](https://georgiarecorder.com/2022/04/05/republicans-pass-transgender-sports-ban-in-final-moments-of-legislative-session/), Republican lawmakers snuck last-minute language about transgender high school athletes into a more comprehensive education bill as their state’s legislative session was ending on April 5.

Democratic legislators immediately cried foul, noting that they were not even informed that the language had been added, and were only [given](https://georgiarecorder.com/2022/04/05/republicans-pass-transgender-sports-ban-in-final-moments-of-legislative-session/) 15 minutes to figure it out for themselves. There was no time to debate whether or not the provision, which could potentially result in transgender student-athletes being banned from participating on girls’ sports teams in public schools, was worth supporting in the first place.

Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, who [pushed](https://georgialawnews.com/the-georgia-legislature-passes-legal-guidelines-on-psychological-well-being-weapons-colleges-and-extra/) for the legislation, has conveyed to state lawmakers that “ensuring fair play in girls’ sports” by excluding transgender athletes is a top priority for him this session, according to a local news [report](https://georgiarecorder.com/2022/04/05/republicans-pass-transgender-sports-ban-in-final-moments-of-legislative-session/).

In Florida, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has become famous for signing a bill known as [“Don’t Say Gay”](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/florida-passes-dont-say-gay-bill-despite-protests) into law that seeks to restrict when and how public school teachers can discuss gender and sexual identity issues with students from kindergarten to third grade. Predictably, this bill has become a headline grabber for [DeSantis](https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/08/politics/desantis-reelection-campaign-money-2024-message/index.html), who is running for reelection as governor this year and is often [discussed](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/desantis-gops-rising-star-2024-hopefuls-drill-anti/story?id=83143776) as a candidate for the GOP presidential nomination in 2024.

While these attacks on public education may generate endless PR for aspiring political candidates, parents in local school districts are often left to deal with the [fallout](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/02/09/suburban-women-voters-organize/). In the face of everything from tense and [hyper-politicized](https://theintercept.com/2022/04/05/covid-school-board-parents-republicans/) school board meetings to attacks on [teachers](https://www.thegazette.com/opinion/public-school-faculty-are-like-families-and-in-iowa-theyre-under-attack/), some parents are getting organized and fighting back.

A perhaps unlikely place where parents have organized to defend their public schools and keep them inclusive and welcoming places for all children is in the Grand Rapids area of Michigan, the backyard of former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.

DeVos, whose hometown is Grand Rapids, is a billionaire with a penchant for funding pro-privatization school choice [schemes](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/betsy-devos-private-school-vouchers-michigan-rcna21384), which she has pursued both [personally](https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/betsy-devos-michigan-school-experiment-232399) and during her [time](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/10/us/politics/betsy-devos-private-schools-choice.html) in the Trump administration. As a member of Trump’s Cabinet, DeVos continually drew flack for her often flagrant [disregard](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/maryanngeorgantopoulos/a-washington-dc-public-school-fired-back-after-betsy-devos-c) for public schools and the teachers who staff them.

These days, she is busily [reasserting](https://truthout.org/articles/betsy-devos-is-joining-michigans-far-right-militants-in-a-devious-campaign/) her role as a key player in Michigan politics, particularly when it comes to the dismantling of the state’s public education system. But although DeVos says she is a staunch supporter of [“parent rights,”](https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/betsy-devos-parents-rights-education-politicians) some parents affected by her agenda think she is dead wrong.

**Culture Clash: Newcomers Bringing Liberal Viewpoints to Conservative Christian Community**

When Becky Olson and her husband first became parents nearly a decade ago, they were living in Chicago. As their two children neared kindergarten age, they found themselves at a crossroads.

“We wondered if we should stay in the city or move to the suburbs,” she told Our Schools, as she and her husband contemplated the kind of school community they wanted for their young family. Eventually, they decided to move to a suburb of Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the cost of living is lower than it is in Chicago, and the public schools are well-regarded.

Olson is now the parent of a second grader and a soon-to-be kindergartner in the Forest Hills Public Schools District, which pulls in kids from several surrounding communities in the greater Grand Rapids area. Forest Hills is considered a “destination district,” Olson said, thanks to its strong reputation and ability to attract young professionals and their families.

Therein lies a problem, perhaps. Olson acknowledged that new residents like herself—who may bring more liberal viewpoints with them—are moving to Grand Rapids in search of affordable homes and stable public schools, leading to something of a culture clash.

“This area has always been very conservative,” she noted, thanks in large part to the longstanding presence of the Christian Reformed Church. Betsy DeVos and her family are [members](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/a-tale-of-two-betsy-devoses/518952/) of the church, like many other Western Michigan residents with Dutch roots, and it seems impossible to imagine Grand Rapids not being under the influence of either the DeVoses or their church.

This topic has been given a close examination by journalists Kristina Rizga and Emily DeRuy. Writing for the [Atlantic](https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/a-tale-of-two-betsy-devoses/518952/) in 2017, DeRuy explored the way DeVos’s religious and cultural roots inform her belief that public funding for education should be extended to private schools, including those that adhere to nonsecular teachings.

Rizga’s [piece](https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/01/betsy-DeVos-christian-schools-vouchers-charter-education-secretary/) for Mother Jones in 2017 offered a deeper dive into the way DeVos has used her significant financial resources as a means to push against the separation of church and state in the public education system, mainly by continuously supporting attempts to make school voucher policies a reality.

What is currently happening in Grand Rapids and Forest Hills Public Schools is, however, bigger than just the DeVos family and their religious leanings, although such factors are a potent ingredient in what Olson and her fellow public school advocates have been fighting against.

**Republican/Far-Right Attacks on Public Education**

Olson said she first noticed trouble brewing in Forest Hills Public Schools at a March 2021 school board meeting. Such meetings are “normally sleepy,” she said, although she quickly learned what [others](https://www.childrenfirstpa.org/news/10-22-21-enews/) around the country have also come to realize lately—school board meetings have reemerged as a key battleground in the current right-wing assault on public education and democratic governance.

Public education in the United States has frequently been a target of right-wing grievance, and flare-ups over what should be taught and who should do the teaching have always taken place. In the early 1990s, for example, Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition led a [push](https://unicornriot.ninja/2021/school-board-disruptions-escalate-funded-by-conservative-dark-money/) to take over school boards and usher in a new era of conservative Republican candidacies centered around so-called family values.

At the March 2021 meeting, Olson recalled conflict bubbling up around recent attempts by some community members to bring more racial equity and diversity to Forest Hills Public Schools. In response, a group of “concerned, Christian parents” signed in to the online meeting, she said, to protest the district’s support for an optional, diversity-focused [program](https://www.fhps.net/departments/instruction/global-learners-initiative/) known as the Global Learners Initiative.

Local media [coverage](https://www.fox17online.com/news/parents-at-forest-hills-at-odds-over-diversity-inclusion-education) of the meeting documented the controversy surrounding the Global Learners Initiative and noted that some parents consider it evidence of the school district’s “drastic critical race theory and transgender policies.”

The program, however, didn’t arise out of thin air. Olson said it was created in response to recent troubling incidents, including the time in 2016 when a handful of students [brought](https://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/2016/09/forest_hills_superintendent_is.html) Trump and [Betsy Ross flags](https://www.ushistory.org/betsy/)—both have been [linked](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/business/betsy-ross-shoe-kaepernick-nike.html) to racism and white nationalism—to a school football game that was hosted by a predominantly Black team. Still, the initiative included the kind of buzzwords, such as equity and inclusion, that have [inflamed](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/05/26/why-conservatives-really-fear-critical-race-theory/) conservative activists across the country.

It didn’t take long for the dust-up over the Global Learners Initiative to snowball into a full-fledged attack on Forest Hills and its school board, complete with a [recall campaign](https://youtu.be/-ugXKlyMHuI) aimed at board members that was led by Stefanie Boone—a local parent with her own designs on becoming an elected official.

**Critical Race Theory Fever**

Boone is currently vying to become a commissioner in Kent County, which includes Grand Rapids. Her public [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/booneforkcc) page lists her as a Republican/conservative candidate running for office and includes frequent posts attacking “wokeism,” as well as a slew of issues ranging from [mask mandates](https://www.facebook.com/booneforkcc/posts/140892565170313) to [abortion rights policies](https://www.facebook.com/booneforkcc/posts/145148304744739).

She is also an outspoken critic of Forest Hills Public Schools, where several of her children are students.

In a Facebook [post](https://fb.watch/cooDDw35rd/) from March 22, Boone said she had attended more than 50 school board meetings in and around Forest Hills since 2020, in alignment with other parents who are “tired of the liberal narrative of CRT/DEI/SEL being pushed on our children and in our workplaces.” She is also [affiliated](https://fhforjusteducation.org/) with a political action committee called Forest Hills for JUST Education, which filed a very [expensive](https://fhforjusteducation.org/foia-crt/) public information request against the local school district.

The acronyms stand for a [grab bag](https://www.takebackourschools-gcs.com/crt-rei) of policies that are perceived as part of a liberal agenda and are supposedly running amok in public schools, according to right-wing [political candidates](https://ryandkelley.com/policies) and [think tanks](https://www.npr.org/2021/06/24/1009839021/uncovering-who-is-driving-the-fight-against-critical-race-theory-in-schools). The list of these liberal policies includes critical race theory (CRT); diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEL); and social-emotional learning (SEL).

All three are red meat for Republican activists who perhaps need little convincing that public schools are a [threat](https://amac.us/leftist-indoctrination-in-americas-schools/) to be managed with vigilance, before another generation of students supposedly falls under the spell of liberal indoctrination.

Boone is not the only would-be Michigan politician using such terms these days. The state’s Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, is up for [reelection](https://www.wilx.com/2022/02/28/whitmer-announces-reelection-campaign/) this year. One of her potential opponents running in the Republican primary, Ryan D. Kelley, has made battling critical race theory and other polarizing school-based issues a central tenet of his campaign.

He even showed up at a Forest Hills Public Schools board meeting in February, as outlined in a Michigan Advance [article](https://michiganadvance.com/2022/03/09/gop-gov-candidate-ryan-kelley-turns-school-board-meeting-into-an-election-rally-parents-say/). Some parents in attendance objected to Kelley’s presence, noting that the meeting felt like a campaign event that had nothing to do with actual Forest Hills concerns. (Kelley does not have children in the Forest Hills Public Schools District.)

Reporter Allison Donahue’s article in the Michigan Advance described Kelley as railing against the same red herrings, from critical race theory to diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, that Boone has vociferously objected to.

The frequent use of these terms by people like Boone and Kelley caught Olson’s eye and helped lead her down her own path of resistance.

**Parents Fight Back to Protect the Public School System**

After the March 2021 school board meeting, Olson began to notice a common thread among those who were speaking out against Forest Hills Public Schools.

In a matter of weeks, she said, attacks against the school district and its board members began ramping up—alongside a new, [DeVos-backed push](https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2022/02/betsy-devos-says-ballot-initiative-would-let-parents-take-control-of-michigan-education.html) for school vouchers in Michigan.

The new campaign is called [Let Michigan Kids Learn](https://www.letmikidslearn.com/about), and it aims to gather 500,000 signatures on a petition designed to allow public education dollars to go toward “student opportunity scholarships” (a less offensive term used to refer to school vouchers) in the state. If it gets passed, K-12 education in Michigan would turn into a choice-based marketplace that includes religious schools.

DeVos [donated](https://www.mlive.com/public-interest/2022/02/betsy-devos-says-ballot-initiative-would-let-parents-take-control-of-michigan-education.html) $400,000 to this petition drive and has participated [publicly](https://youtu.be/8SLJtmXYBN4) in the organization’s events. Although students’ needs are supposedly the group’s main concern, the Let Michigan Kids Learn [website](https://www.letmikidslearn.com/) prominently states an intention to “take the power away from the unions, away from the governor, and put it in the hands of parents.”

If Olson and her fellow Forest Hills defenders are any indication, though, not all Michigan parents are falling for this latest effort to pit them against teachers, unions, and public schools in general.

In the face of persistent attacks on their local school districts, Olson and a network of other parents came together to create their own grassroots groups to defend the public education system. There is the [Support Forest Hills Public Schools](https://www.supportfhps.org/) group spearheaded by Olson and others, and another one for a nearby district called [Support Lowell Area Schools](https://supportlas.com/).

“We have had to learn on the fly,” Olson said, about how to set up their own political action committee or track campaign finance reports to find out who is funding groups like Let Michigan Kids Learn.

So far, they appear to have accomplished a lot in a short amount of time. The Support Forest Hills Public Schools group is focused on combating “partisan and manufactured attacks” on public education, according to the group’s [website](https://www.supportfhps.org/), and is working on disseminating information about this through blog posts and other forms of information sharing.

In doing so, members of this group helped successfully [thwart](https://www.supportfhps.org/faq) Boone’s attempt to [recall](https://ballotpedia.org/Forest_Hills_Public_Schools_recall,_Michigan_(2021-2022)) five school board members—a move Olson said would have cost taxpayers thousands of dollars.

Additionally, in the absence of any deep-pocketed donors like the DeVos family, the Support Forest Hills Public Schools group has set up an online [store](https://www.supportfhps.org/shop) selling yard signs and car decals in order to fund their efforts. Each item for sale includes a brightly colored declaration of love for the local school district and its staff members.

**Maintain Hope**

Erin Foltz is a parent in the Lowell Area Schools district near Grand Rapids. She is also a key force behind the grassroots group that has sprouted up to support this district, which has faced its own school board [recall](https://supportlas.com/?page_id=6) attempt recently. In Foltz’s view, the attacks being levied against the Lowell school district are not unique.

“Many school districts across the nation are currently experiencing the emergence of extremely politicized groups,” she told Our Schools. And these groups are bent on sowing “doubt in the minds of community members and parents” about their kids’ teachers and school administrators, Foltz said.

She said that she has witnessed protesters from outside of Lowell come to the town’s school board meetings and hurl allegations at board members, including now-familiar accusations about all the “liberal agendas” that are supposedly at play in the district. Every time there is a meeting, Foltz said, there is a new round of fearmongering from agitators.

“These attacks seem orchestrated to maintain a steady stream of shock value,” in Foltz’s estimation, as a means to “keep their side engaged and enraged, and to keep the opposition (other parents like us, the board of education, teachers, and administrators) exhausted and weary,” she said. (Republican senators deployed similar [tactics](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/apr/07/republicans-ketanji-brown-jackson-qanon-far-right) during Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson’s U.S. Supreme Court confirmation hearings.)

Still, Foltz is not ready to give up. Getting organized, informed, and engaged has proven to be a strong line of defense for her, Olson, and their fellow pro-public school activists. “If other parents are faced with these divisive, contradictory attacks in their school districts, I would say not to give up hope,” Foltz said.

It is important to remember, she added, that there are typically many more people who support public education and want to hold schools accountable without destroying them. Find them, Foltz advised, and then join forces to “collectively say no thank you to divisive, partisan agendas in schools.”