The Contestation of History in Schools in the United States

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La contestazione della storia nelle scuole degli Stati Uniti

Joel R. Malin, Jason A. Harnish

This essay explores the ongoing disputes and aggressive political actions in the United States surrounding how to teach about the nation's past within public schools. False accusations and fearmongering about Critical Race Theory (CRT) have led to policy changes that restrict or ban critical historical perspectives and materials in schools. These changes harm historically marginalized students, deprofessionalize teaching, and raise concerns about the sustainability of public schools. The essay identifies social-political factors driving these disputes' intensity and staying power and highlights the pernicious effects of associated policy changes on students and educators. The conclusion suggests that educators and public education supporters worldwide should be vigilant against partisan attacks on schools and systems to protect these important public goods.

Keywords

Curriculum; critical Race Theory; education Policy; de-professionalization of Teaching; Public Schools.

Questo saggio esplora le controversie in corso e le azioni politiche aggressive negli Stati Uniti su come insegnare il passato della nazione nelle scuole pubbliche. Le false accuse e la paura nei confronti della Critical Race Theory (CRT) hanno portato a cambiamenti politici che limitano o vietano le prospettive storiche critiche e i materiali nelle scuole. Questi cambiamenti danneggiano gli studenti storicamente emarginati, deprofessionalizzano l'insegnamento e sollevano preoccupazioni sulla sostenibilità delle scuole pubbliche. Il saggio identifica i fattori socio-politici che determinano l'intensità e la forza di queste controversie e sottolinea gli effetti perniciosi dei cambiamenti politici associati su studenti ed educatori. La conclusione suggerisce che gli educatori e i sostenitori dell'istruzione pubblica in tutto il mondo dovrebbero essere vigili contro gli attacchi di parte alle scuole e ai sistemi per proteggere questi importanti beni pubblici

Parole chiave

Curriculum; teoria critica della razza; politica educativa; de-professionalizzazione dell'insegnamento; scuole pubbliche.

Corresponding author: <a href="mailing:mailing

Currently, major disputes are occurring and aggressive political actions are being taken in the United States (US) around how to teach about the nation's past within its public schools¹. This has included prominent leaders like former President Donald Trump falsely claiming historical teaching in public schools has been perverted into 'left-wing indoctrination' that defames our national heroes, makes White students feel guilt and shame, and teaches students to hate America². Such falsehoods have been accompanied and fueled by rampant accusations about the supposed teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in public schools³. And, despite a near-total lack of evidence supporting such allegations⁴, on these shaky grounds more than one-third of US states have moved to restrict or ban critical historical perspectives and/or particular books and curricular materials in schools, and most other states' lawmakers have considered such policies⁵. Similar issues are occurring locally, as evidenced by highly-charged school board meetings, local book bans and curriculum audits, and teacher and administrator terminations⁶.

This situation is concerning, to put it mildly. We see significant and escalating harms to students and educators-and, more broadly, to surrounding communities and the nation's democratic foundations. From our perspectives as educators and researchers, vicious and coordinated smear campaigns aimed at advancing elite and radical conservative interests are actively propagating massive amounts of misand disinformation about public schools, teachers, and students7. Worse yet, this deception and fear mongering is being "successfully" taken up by some political actors and entrepreneurs to justify a slew of irrational, far-reaching policy actions. These relentless attacks have contributed to an unhealthy politicization of schooling, deprofessionalization of teaching, and diminishment of student learning. Broadly, this situation even raises concern about the sustainability of public schools moving forward, as their existence and ability to provide quality services is conditioned on public support and goodwill. Especially given vigorous and expanding school choice efforts⁸ (or "education freedom" in recent framings) through programs that divert public monies to lightly regulated private providers, these are serious concerns indeed.

Accordingly, in this essay we do the following: First, we situate these ongoing issues historically. While these issues are consistent with longstanding American conflicts and fears related to race and identity, we find the current situation and policy efforts to be unusually intense, far-reaching, and partisan. Next, seeking to explain why these disputes are occurring with such intensity and staying power, we identify a small set of primary social-political factors and describe the outsized role of elite-funded conservative policy actors and intermediary organizations in fueling and framing ongoing culture war topics, for which schools are now central. Next, we show why this matters, explaining how associated policy changes are affecting curriculum and hamstringing educators' decision-making (which in turn is making education unattractive as a profession, which is likely to cause deleterious long-run effects). We also describe these policy changes' pernicious effects on students and on student learning, noting especially how they harm historically marginalized students. Our conclusion considers how to bring about a healthier situation in the US, and describes what educators and citizens in other systems might learn as well. We suggest educators and public education supporters worldwide should be vigilant against partisan attacks on schools and systems, in recognition and defense of these incredible public goods, which are meant to serve and benefit us all.

1. Historicizing US 'Curriculum Wars'

Although what is happening now is unique in some ways, debates over curriculum and educational purposes in the US are not new—and, frequently these

¹ In many instances, these disputes have also centered around if and how to address historical and contemporary topics of diversity, race, gender, and sexuality.

² T. Wheeler, *Donald Trump fakes history in order to divide us*, Brookings, 2020, July 6 https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/06/donald-trump-fakes-history-in-order-to-divide-us/

³ CRT is an academic theory used to examine and challenge the structural/systemic nature of racism; there is little to no evidence that it is being taught in public schools (Sawchuck, 2021).

⁴ J. R. Malin, J. Tan, *The state innovation exchange and educational policy*, Education Policy Analysis Archives, 30(123), 2022, n123.

⁵ J. R. Malin, D. Hornbeck, *Historical knowledge mobilisation in a post-factual era in the United States*, Evidence & Policy, **18**(3), 2022, 502-523 (under review)

⁶ F. López, A. Molnar, R. Johnson, et al., *Understanding the attacks on Critical Race Theory*, Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved Feb 16th, 2023 from http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/crt; R. Ray, A. Gibbons, *Why are states banning critical race theory?*, Brookings, 2021, November https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/

⁷ D. Hornbeck, J. R. Malin, *Demobilizing knowledge in schools: Censoring critical historical perspectives*, (under review).

⁸ J. R. Malin, I. Hardy, C. Lubienski, *Educational neoliberalization: The mediatization of ethical assertions in the voucher debate*, Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 40(2), 2019, 217–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1569880

disputes have centered around race. Following the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) US Supreme Court decision ordering the desegregation of public schools, white communities engaged in tactics of stalling school integration efforts and defying judicial rulings. Indeed, calls for "school choice" arose in response to African-American students entering public schools9. With meager levels of racial integration in the 1960s and into the 1970s, curriculum that centered around the studies of African-Americans. Latino-Americans and Asian-Americans was under attack, framed as "anti-American." Such efforts to aggressively counter progressive social change in America's past thus foreshadow current efforts to curtail voices of racial minorities in curriculum. Decades after Brown v. Board, racial animus and the legacy of desegregation led to an exodus of public-school students into the growing private school sector, particularly in the southern US. Thus, calls to stamp out CRT and the desire to protect one's children from "dangerous ideas" of public schools harkens to a long tradition in American culture - one of white fear and racism¹¹.

2. Why Are These Attacks Happening?

There is a robust but shadowy and somewhat poorly understood influence infrastructure representing elite and often extreme conservative interests¹². Although specific policy ideas and rhetorical devices have varied, a focus on limiting the size and scope of government and taxation on corporations and the rich has always been evident. This infrastructure now includes a slew of elite-funded advocacy organizations and policy entrepreneurs that can coordinate their efforts to push particular policies and

ideas¹³. They are uniquely well-positioned to operate powerfully through new and legacy media14. Recently, in a dramatically changed media environment, many of these individuals and entities have worked concertedly to exert an outsized influence over discourse and policy debates in/around education. They have often done so by embracing and propagating mis- and disinformation, with a discernible strategy of injecting content aimed at distracting and dividing Americans and fostering race-, gender-, class-, and sexuality-based senses of us versus them¹⁵, for instance, by highlighting phony "issues" like CRT or suggesting there are hordes of transgender athletes wreaking havoc in high school sports. Rather than attending to real issues like climate change, an epidemic of mass shootings, or inadequately funded schools, these actors seek out, manufacture, and relentlessly push marginal issues holding potential to distract, divide, and inflame people. And, though they have pursued different angles and interests over the years, they have consistently found ways to challenge or cast doubt on public schools and educators, ultimately seeking to destabilize or even destroy the public education sector. They have had some "successes" along the way, but now apparently they have sensed a unique opening to step up attacks, attaching increasingly bold policy solutions (e.g., universal school vouchers, union-busting laws) to shrill and low-evidence attacks on public schools' supposed tendency of foisting anti-American propaganda or unwelcome perspectives on gender and sexuality onto students. And strategically they may be onto something, as apparently the conservative base is energized by and frequently willing to engage-and, some politically "moderate" folks are finding these pitches compelling. These efforts' long-term sustainability are unclear. At minimum, though, many states and

Kumashiro, *Understanding the attacks on teaching: A background brief for educators and leaders*, 2021 https://www.kevinkumashiro.com/attacksonteaching; A. Hertel-Fernandez, *State capture: How conservative activists, big businesses, and wealthy donors reshaped the American states—and the nation*, Oxford University Press 2019

⁹ Some contemporary choice advocates, too, appear to be tapping into these racist impulses, for instance by tying their pitches for expanded "education freedom" to issues related to the supposedly too-critical teaching of history or, more broadly, educational propaganda coming from "woke" curriculum and "woke" educators; J.P. Greene, I.S. Kingsbury, *Empowering parents with school choice reduces wokeism in education*, The Heritage Foundation, 2022 https://www.heritage.org/education/report/empowering-parents-school-choice-reduces-wokeism-education; C. Anderson, *White rage: the unspoken truth of our racial divide*, Bloomsbury. New York, NY 2017; J. Hale, *The choice we face: How segregation, race, and power have shaped America's most controversial education reform movement*, Beacon Press 2021.

 $^{^{10}}$ In 1963, 9 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling, "not one black child attended a public school with a white child in South Carolina, Alabama, or Mississippi" (Anderson, 2017, p.81).

¹¹ C. Anderson, *White rage: the unspoken truth of our racial divide*, Bloomsbury. New York, NY 2017

¹² J. R. Malin, J. Tan, *The state innovation exchange and educational policy*. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 30(123), 2022, n123; K.

¹³ Ibidem

¹⁴ Y. Benkler, R. Faris, H. Roberts, *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; J.R.Malin, C. Lubienski, *Educational expertise, advocacy, and media influence*, Education Policy Analysis Archives, 23(6), 2015, 1–32. doi: 10.14507/epaa.

J. R. Malin, J. Tan, *The state innovation exchange and educational policy*, Education Policy Analysis Archives, 30(123), 2022, n123.

¹⁵ J. S. Hacker, P. Pierson, *Let them eat tweets: How the right rules in an age of extreme inequality*, Norton 2020; J. R. Malin, J. Tan, *The state innovation exchange and educational policy*, Education Policy Analysis Archives, 30(123), 2022, n123.

school districts are caught in the throes of these culture wars, needing to fend off ludicrous accusations, cope with radical new school board members, and deal with a firehose of burdensome information requests. Many states and districts have adopted radical policies, such as book bans and other forms of censorship/restriction of critical knowledge and perspectives¹⁶, and/or have enacted systems-changing policies facilitating massive transfers of public resources to unaccountable private education providers¹⁷.

The two years of pandemic schooling brought arguments over masks, vaccines, virtual versus in-person education, and curriculum. Indeed, it appears these conflicts opened a window of opportunity to conservative actors in the US; in recent decades, Democrats held substantial advantages regarding the popularity of their education policy positions, but some pandemic-era policies and decisions (e.g., long-lasting school closures, often occurring in Democrat-heavy local contexts) generated much emotion, providing an opening for conservative activists to adjust and step up their attacks on public schools. In Virginia, for example, a hotline was created so families and students could report on teachers who were allegedly utilizing "inherently divisive practices" in their classrooms¹⁸. Though the hotline was subsequently shut down, such hyperpartisan oversight and investigation into public schools continues to decrease the bipartisan support for, and efficacy of, public education.

Why are these issues finding resonance with many US citizens? We identify three main contributing factors: First, in the US there is massive and growing economic (and accordingly: political) inequality, and decreasing social mobility in a country historically prized as a land of opportunity. This situation has left many citizens frustrated and scared - and, in this context, susceptible to appeals to scapegoat 'the other' as being to blame¹⁹. Second, information bubbles and declining traditional news coverage and quality in the new media environment have enabled robust and competitive "rationalization markets"²⁰ to develop, which have fostered the development of

compelling, competing, ideologically-charged narratives on all manner of topics, including these²¹. Third, there are substantially changing demographics, such that America is rapidly 'browning' and White citizens in particular appear to fear declining power and status overall, while many members of marginalized groups are increasingly vocal about systemic issues and demanding their correction.

To the latter point, it is no coincidence these policies (and the associated divisive rhetoric) largely emerged in the wake of a global reckoning regarding racial injustice. In the US, the historical record shows perpetual struggles, with bursts of progress on issues of racial and distributive justice reliably followed by backlash and enacted or attempted policy reversals. We believe these contemporary school conflicts can be understood as forms of backlash against assertive calls for (and, in some ways, progress towards) justice and rights by members of marginalized groups and their allies. Against this backdrop and in the wake of challenging pandemic politics, an opportunity emerged to spotlight and blame schools as central institutions of socialization, claiming they are responsible for actual or perceived social challenges. Along with that are attempts to reform or restrict what goes on within them or to abandon them in favor of private providers.

3. Why Do These School Debates Matter?

Over the years, public schools have frequently been *part of* the political conversation; this reflects, in part, Americans' tendency to look to schools as central institutions through which to solve social problems²². However, although arguments of previous eras facilitated a slow crawl toward school integration and generated calls for school choice and privatization, Democrats and Republicans often did reach agreement over the necessity and aims of education. For more than 25 years and beginning in the late 1980s, presidents of both political parties

¹⁶ H. Morgan, *Resisting the movement to ban critical race theory from schools*, The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 95(1), 2022, 35-41.

¹⁷ D.C. Berliner, (2021). The scandalous history of schools that receive public financing, but do not accept the public's right of oversight, in D. C. Berliner and C. Hermanns (Eds.) Public education: Defending a cornerstone of American democracy (268-86), Teachers College Press, New York 2021

B. Paviour, Youngkin administration shut down education 'tip line' in
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https://www.vpm.org/news/2022-11-03/youngkin-administration-shut-down-education-tip-line-in-september

¹⁹ H. McGhee, *The sum of us: What racism costs everyone and how we can prosper.* Penguin Random House 2012.

 $^{^{\}rm 20}$ D. Williams, The marketplace of rationalizations, Economics & Philosophy 2022 doi:10.1017/S0266267121000389

²¹ Also see J. R. Malin, D. Hombeck, *Historical knowledge mobilisation in a post-factual era in the United States*, Evidence & Policy, 18(3), 2022, 502-523.

²² D. Tyack, L. Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1995.

used education to signal pragmatic political positions, and they were frequently successful at appealing to swing voters and expanding coalitions²³. The current era of hyperpartisanship, by contrast, has seen widening rifts between the two main political parties, with some of the largest centered on public education²⁴. Education has now become a central battleground in ongoing, hyperpartisan "culture wars." As one consequence, because U.S. states are primary authorities over education, a public school student in Red (Republican) Texas is likely to receive a drastically different education vis-a-vis subjects and topics like US history, sex education, evolution, and climate change than someone in Blue (Democratic) California²⁵. To be sure, the concerns raised here are not evenly distributed within or across states-indeed, some school districts have been scarcely affected by these debates, while others have been dramatically impacted.

Broadly, though, US teachers are being bombarded with "alternative" curricular materials provided by parent-groups, think tanks, and other non-educational coalitions; such materials sometimes center on US history and sometimes focus on other topics. The Heartland Institute, for example, in 2017 sent thousands of teachers a book titled "Why Scientists Disagree About Global Warming," misrepresenting "the near universal consensus of scientists...that global warming is real and man-made"26. There are also massive amounts of online lessons available to teachers, and on closer examination much of these materials are junk, and many are funded by profitinterested oil companies and other elite-funded, radical organizations like the Charles Koch Foundation²⁷. One such group, Moms for Liberty (M4L). has local chapters throughout the country and fights to prevent indoctrination of children, which they argue is forced on them by their local public schools.

In one case, the group targeted Tennessee State Board of Education officials who had chosen an English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum from DC-based company Great Minds²⁸. The curriculum – Wit & Wisdom – had high approval ratings and after careful investigation by the board, the curriculum was adopted. M4L, however, framed the curriculum as teaching students to "hate themselves, one another, their families, and America"²⁹. Such disagreements have pushed some parents toward home- or private schooling, or to wage battle with public schools over the curriculum to which their children are exposed.

In these challenging times, some educators are leaving teaching for good, in part because battles over curriculum and associated attacks on teachers have hamstrung their decision-making while further eroding public trust in the profession³⁰. Some estimate about 8-10% of teachers left the profession following the pandemic31. Too often, there are not enough substitutes to fill teacherless classrooms. Many students have also left public schools for private schools, charter schools, or home-schooling³². For those students who do remain, battles over US historical narratives or what texts one can read have diminished the learning environment; Generally, these "political conflicts have created a broad chilling effect that has limited opportunities for students to practice respectful dialogue on controversial topics and made it harder to address rampant misinformation"33.

We must also note these attacks on education have particularly harmful effects for marginalized students. Curricular changes in schools over the years have (to some extent) evolved along with evolving historical understandings and aimed at reflecting the changing demographics of students attending schools; in these instances, the changes brought a

²³ F.M. Hess, *5 takeaways for education from Virginia's governor race*, Education Week, 2021; D.M. Houston, *Polarization, partisan sorting, and the politics of education*. (EdWorkingPaper: 22-690), Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University, 2022: https://doi.org/10.26300/h0hk-aj33; P. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the transformation of federal education policy, 1965-2005*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2006.

²⁴ D.M. Houston, *Polarization, partisan sorting, and the politics of education.* (EdWorkingPaper: 22-690), Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University, 2022: https://doi.org/10.26300/h0hk-aj33

²⁵ D. Goldstein, *Two states. Eight textbooks. Two American stories*, "The New York Times, 2020, January 12

 $^{{\}color{blue} https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/12/us/texas-vs-california-history-textbooks.html} \\$

²⁶ M. Melia, School lessons targeted by climate change doubters, Associated Press 2019 https://apnews.com/article/6f5ae325e919481fa081c188b1d5dc3f

²⁷ Ibidem

²⁸ P. Williams, The right-wing mothers fuelling the school-board wars, Annals of Education, 2022b, November 7

²⁹ Ibidem

³⁰ K. Dill, *Teachers are quitting, and companies are hot to hire them,* The Wall Street Journal, 2022, February 2https://www.wsj.com/articles/teachers-are-quitting-and-companies-are-hot-to-hire-them-11643634181

³¹ M. Smith, 'It killed my spirit': How 3 teachers are navigating the burnout crisis in education, CNBC News, 2022, November 3 https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/22/teachers-are-in-the-midst-of-a-burnout-crisis-it-became-intolerable.html#:~:text=Af-ter%20two%20years%20of%20weather-

ing,The%20Wall%20Street%20Journal%20reports
³² Ibidem

³³ J. Rogers, J. Kahne, with M. Ishimoto, et al., *Educating for a diverse democracy: The chilling role of political conflict in blue, purple, and red communities*, Los Angeles, CA: UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access 2022.

better educational experience to students who were traditionally left out of the curricular narratives. Ensuring curriculum both informs and reflects the experiences of students is an important part of school for all students-and, when lessons about race, gender and identity are removed or distorted, those students feel unvalued or even attacked. Many students who identify as LGBTQ, for example, report feeling a lack of safety and belonging in schools³⁴, while students of color experience disproportionately harsher punishments that increase their chances of criminalization and provide a path to incarceration³⁵. We believe these curricular restrictions are damaging to all students, who are best served if they can learn to take various perspectives and understand the fullness of US history and other subjects, but the damage falls heaviest on marginalized communities.

4. Summary and Looking Ahead

Curriculum wars in the US, centering around the teaching of history and other sensitive topics like gender and sexual identity, are ongoing and concerning. These issues also do not show signs of abating; indeed, it seems likely they will remain hot button issues at least through the 2024 presidential election, given that expected Republican candidates like Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis have been centering them in their political platforms. Likewise, the influence infrastructure supporting these attacks remains strong. We have also thus far seen few substantial and effective efforts to decrease mis- and disinformation and/or to weaken the connection between affluence and political influence³⁶. To the contrary, recently several major social media platforms have decreased their efforts to combat misinformation³⁷.

As noted, some US educators and students are less affected than others, depending on their backgrounds/identities and their state and local contexts. However, our view is that all who support public education, regardless of whether and how much they are being directly affected, should stand

up against the inaccurate information and harmful policies emerging in many parts of the US. Optimistically, we can say that, if/when playing on an even field where facts rather than fictions are the primary currency, those supporting public education and the honest teaching of history are well positioned: Most Americans do want students to be able to engage in critical thinking, understand important historical facts, and be able to take various perspectives to understand the past and present and make future plans. Most Americans, too, are averse to the idea of governmental censorship and curricular restrictions that function to push mythologies rather than evidence-based information into schools. But, these are complex debates, and those who oppose these policies will need to consistently communicate their positions in clear and compelling ways, and to vigorously counter the opposition. In the long run, we are hopeful this too shall pass; we believe the states resisting such measures will show better outcomes over time, which eventually will persuade others to revert to more sensible approaches. But we also think structural changes will be necessary to decrease the relationship between wealth and influence in our political system, if we want to develop durable solutions38. We also contemplate what other systems might learn from the US situation. First, we recognize similar battles can and do take place in other systems, including in Europe. Knight Abowitz (in press), for example, has identified a theme of backlash against liberal democratic ideals and reforms of schooling, occurring in several national systems. We expect that some less complicated educational systems (e.g., those featuring well-recognized constitutional rights to education, those featuring national educational authority/oversight) will face these issues differently -e.g., the ramifications of policy change will be more evenly spread and there will be fewer sites of political contestation. In the federalist US system, with multiple points of entry and divided educational authority, it is challenging to cope with such issues, as they often occur in multiple sites at once. Notwithstanding, perhaps the largest lesson for educators and supporters of public education worldwide is to do what

³⁴ D. Hornbeck, J. Duncheon, *From an ethic of care to queer resistance": Texas administrator and teacher perspectives on supporting LGBTQ students in secondary schools*, International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 2022

³⁵ M. P. Marchbanks, A.A. Peguero, K.S.Varela, et al., *School strictness and disproportionate minority contact: Investigating racial and ethnic disparities with the "school-to-prison pipeline"*, Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 16(2), 2018, 241–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204016680403

³⁶ J. S. Hacker, P. Pierson, *Let them eat tweets: How the right rules in an age of extreme inequality*, Norton 2020.

³⁷ S. L. Myers, N. Grant, *Combating disinformation wanes at social media giants*, New York Times, 2023, November 13 https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/14/technology/disinformation-moderation-social-media.html

³⁸ J. S. Hacker, P. Pierson, *Let them eat tweets: How the right rules in an age of extreme inequality*, Norton 2020.

you can to prevent education from becoming a highly politicized, polarizing topic, as unfortunately it now seems to be in much of the US. We and others see public education as an incredible public good³⁹, one that is meant to serve and benefit us all rather than something that comes to be viewed by much of the population as divisive, political, and harmful.

Joel R. Malin and Jason A. Harnish⁴⁰ University of Miami

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³⁹ R. S. White, M. P.Evans, J. R. Malin, *Political battles in suburbia*, Phi Delta Kappan, 104(5), 6-10, 2023.

⁴⁰ Joel R. Malin is an associate professor of educational leadership at Miami University. He is interested in understanding and strengthening the connections between research, policy, and practice. With Chris Brown, he has authored two recent edited volumes, *The Role of Knowledge Brokers in Education* (Routledge, 2020) and *The Emerald*

Handbook of Evidence-Informed Practice in Education (Emerald, 2022).

Jason Harnish teaches 8th grade US History in Kentucky. His research interests include educational philosophy, schooling & punishment and correctional education.