The group Moms for Liberty accuses teachers of using books to indoctrinate kids about critical race theory and gender fluidity. Illustration by Joan Wong; Source photograph from Getty

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THE RIGHT-WING MOTHERS FUELLING THE SCHOOL-BOARD WARS

Moms for Liberty claims that teachers are indoctrinating students with dangerous ideologies. But is the group's aim protecting kids—or scaring parents?

By Paige Williams

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Content

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In August, 2020, Williamson County Schools, which serves more than forty thousand students in suburban Nashville, started using an English and Language Arts curriculum called Wit & Wisdom. The program, which is published by Great Minds, a company based in Washington, D.C., wasn't a renegade choice: hundreds of school districts nationwide had adopted it. Both Massachusetts and Louisiana—states with sharply different political profiles—gave Wit & Wisdom high approval ratings.

The decision had followed a strict process. The Tennessee State Board of Education governs academic standards and updates them every five or six years, providing school districts with an opportunity to switch curricula. Williamson County Schools assembled a selection committee—twenty-six parents, twenty-eight elementary-school teachers of English and Language Arts. The committee presented four options to teachers, who voted on them in February, 2020. Wit & Wisdom was the overwhelming favorite. After the selection committee ratified the teachers' choice, the school board, which has twelve members, unanimously adopted Wit & Wisdom, along with a traditional phonics program, for K-5 students.

Great Minds's promotional materials explain that Wit & Wisdom is designed to let students "read books they love while building knowledge of important topics" in literature, science, history, and art. By immersing students in "content-rich" topics that spark lively discussion, the curriculum prepares them to tackle more complicated texts. The materials are challenging by design: studies have shown that students read better sooner when confronted with complex sentences and advanced vocabulary. Wit & Wisdom's hundred and eighteen "core" texts, which range from picture books to nonfiction, emphasize diversity, but not in a strident way. They provide "mirrors and windows," allowing readers both to see themselves in the stories and to learn about other people's lives. The curriculum assigns or recommends portraits of heralded pioneers: Leonardo da Vinci, Sacagawea, Clara Barton, Duke Ellington, Ada Lovelace. The lessons revolve around readings, augmented with paintings, poetry, speeches, interviews, films, and music: in the module "A Hero's Journey," students explore an illustrated retelling of the Odyssey alongside the Ramayana, a Sanskrit epic, while also discussing "Star Wars." A section on "Wordplay" pairs "The Phantom Tollbooth" with Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" routine.

Elsewhere in Tennessee, teachers were saying that Wit & Wisdom improved literacy. The superintendent of Lauderdale County, a rural area where nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, published an essay reporting that his district's teachers had noticed "an enormous difference in students' writing" after implementing the curriculum. Wit & Wisdom encourages students to discuss readings with their families—a father in Sumner County, northeast of Nashville, was pleased that his daughters now talked about civil rights and the American Revolution at dinner.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Wit & Wisdom became the target of intense criticism. At first, the campaign in Williamson County was cryptic: stray e-mails, phone calls, public-information requests. Eric Welch, who was first elected to the school board in 2010, told me that the complainers "wouldn't just e-mail *us*—they would copy the county commission, our state legislative delegation, and state representatives in other counties." He said, "It was obviously an attempt to intimidate."

The school board is an American institution whose members, until recently, enjoyed visibility on a par with that of the county tax collector. "There's no glory in being a school-board member—and there *shouldn't* be," Anne McGraw, a former Williamson County Schools board member, said on a local podcast last year. Normally, the district's public meetings were sedate affairs featuring polite exchanges among civic-minded locals. The system's slogan was: "Be nice."

In May, 2021, as the district finished its first academic year with Wit & Wisdom, women wearing "Moms for Liberty" T-shirts began appearing at school-board meetings. They brought large placards that contained images and text from thirty-one books that they didn't want students to read. In public comments and in written complaints, the women claimed that Wit & Wisdom was teaching children to hate themselves, one another, their families, and America. "Rap a Tap Tap," an illustrated story about the vaudeville-era tap dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, by the Caldecott medalists Leo and Diane Dillon, harped on "skin color differences." A picture book about seahorses, which touched on everything from their ability to change color to the independent movement of their eyes, threatened to "normalize that males can get pregnant" by explaining that male seahorses give birth; the Moms suspected a covert endorsement of "gender fluidity." Greco-Roman myths: nudity, cannibalism. (Venus emerges naked from the sea; Tantalus cooks his son.)

The Moms kept attending school-board meetings and issuing complaints. Curiously, though they positioned themselves as traditionalists, they often borrowed "woke" rhetoric about the dangers of triggering vulnerable students. Readings about Ruby Bridges—who, in 1961, became the first Black child to attend an all-white school in New Orleans—exposed students to "psychological distress" because they described an angry white mob. (Bridges, in a memoir designed for young readers, wrote, "They yelled at me to go away.") The Moms also declared that, though they admired Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s iconic line about judging others "on the content of their character," the book "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington" was unacceptable, because it contained historical photographs—segregated drinking fountains, firefighters blasting Black Americans with hoses—that might make kids feel bad. The Moms considered it divisive for Wit & Wisdom to urge instructors to remind students that racial slurs are "words people use to show disrespect and hatred towards people of different races."

At one meeting, Welch watched, stunned, as a Moms member said, "You are poisoning our children," and "Wit & Wisdom must go!" Welch told me, "They went from zero to a hundred. Everything from them was aggressive, and threatening in nature." He said, "It was not 'Let's have a dialogue.' It was 'Here are our demands.' "

When the women in T-shirts first showed up, Welch had never heard of Moms for Liberty, and he didn't recognize its members. The group's leader, Robin Steenman, was in her early forties, with shoulder-length blond hair; in coloring and build, she resembled Marjorie Taylor Greene. Board of Education members struggled to understand why she'd inserted herself into a matter that didn't concern her: Steenman had no children in the public schools.

Moms for Liberty members soon escalated the conflict, publicly asserting that Williamson County Schools had adopted Wit & Wisdom hurriedly, and in violation of state rules. The school board still wasn't sure what Moms for Liberty was—who founded it, who funded it. Nevertheless, the district assembled a reassessment team to review the curriculum and the adoption process. At a public "work session" in June, 2021, the team announced that, after a preliminary review, it hadn't found any violations of protocol. Teachers had spent a full workday familiarizing themselves with Wit & Wisdom before implementing it. As Jenny Lopez, the district's curriculum director, explained, "Teachers actually had more time than they've *ever* had to look at materials."

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Maya Women Make a League of Their Own

The superintendent, Jason Golden, urged his colleagues to take parental feedback seriously, including worries that certain Wit & Wisdom content was too mature for young kids. For example, there were gruesome details in books about shark attacks and about war. Golden told the board, "These are real concerns." Yet Golden also recalled telling a Moms for Liberty representative how much he trusted the district's processes for evaluating curricula.

The review committee ultimately concluded that Wit & Wisdom had been an over-all success; still, administrators decided to survey teachers quarterly about how the curriculum was working. They limited access to the gorier images in one Civil War book and imposed similar "guardrails" involving "Hatchet," a popular young-adult novel in which a character attempts suicide. "Walk Two Moons," a novel by the Newbery Medal winner Sharon Creech, about a daughter's quest to find her missing mother, was eventually removed from the Williamson version of the program, not because its content was deemed objectionable but, rather, to adjust the pacing of one fourth-grade module. Golden, who is tall and genial, told the board members, "The overwhelming feedback that we got was: 'Man, can't we just read something *uplifting* in fourth grade?' And we felt the same way!"

At the work session, Golden shared one end of a conference table with Nancy Garrett, the board's chair. Garrett, who has rectangular glasses and a blond bob, is from a family that has attended or worked in Williamson County Schools for three generations. She had won the chairmanship, by unanimous vote, the previous August. At one point, she asked an assistant superintendent who had overseen the selection and review of Wit & Wisdom whether "the concept of critical race theory" had come up during the process. No, the assistant superintendent said.

Moms for Liberty members were portraying Wit & Wisdom as "critical race theory" in disguise. Garrett found this baffling. C.R.T., a complex academic framework that examines the systemic ways in which racism has shaped American society, is explored at the university level or higher. As far as the board knew, Williamson County Schools had never introduced the concept. Yet there had been such a deluge of references to it that Garrett had delved into her old e-mails, in an unsuccessful attempt to identify the origins of the outrage. She told her colleagues, "I guess I'm wondering what *happened*."

In September, 2020—four months after the murder of George Floyd, two months before the Presidential election, and a month into Williamson

County Schools' use of Wit & Wisdom—Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist, appeared on Tucker Carlson's show, on Fox News, and called critical race theory "an existential threat to the United States." Rufo capitalized on the fact that, given C.R.T.'s academic provenance, few Americans had heard of the concept. He argued that liberal educators, under the bland banner of "diversity," were manipulating students into thinking of America not as a vibrant champion of democracy but as a shameful embodiment of white supremacy. (As he framed things, there were no in-between positions.) Rufo later called C.R.T. "the perfect villain"—a term that "connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American views."

Rufo found a receptive ear in President Donald Trump, who was already ranting about "The 1619 Project," the collection of *Times Magazine* essays in which slavery is placed at the heart of the nation's founding. On Twitter, Trump had warned that the Department of Education would defund any school whose classroom taught material from the project. Trump conferred with Rufo and banned federal agencies from conducting "un-American propaganda training sessions" involving "critical race theory" or "white privilege." Trump said that Black Lives Matter protests were proliferating not because of anger over police abuses but because of "decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools." Establishing a "1776 Commission," he urged "patriotic moms and dads" to demand that schools stop feeding children "hateful lies about this country." (The American Historical Association condemned the Administration's eventual "1776 Report," highlighting its many inaccuracies and arguing that it attempted to airbrush history and "elevate ignorance about the past to a civic virtue.")

Nearly nine hundred school districts nationwide were soon targeted by anti-C.R.T. campaigns, many of which adopted language that closely echoed Trump's order not to teach material that made others "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex." In some red states, the vague wording was enshrined as law. Republicans filed what became known as "anti-C.R.T." bills; they were seemingly cut and pasted from templates, with similarly phrased references to such terms as "divisive concepts" and "indoctrination."

Williamson County Schools was uneventfully wrapping up its first term with Wit & Wisdom when, in early December, 2020, the American Legislative Exchange Council, which generates model legislation for right-leaning lawmakers, hosted a Webinar about "reclaiming education and the American dream." A representative of the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank, warned that elements of a "Black Lives Matter curriculum" were "now in our schools." Rufo—correctly predicting that Joe Biden, then the President-elect, would abolish Trump's executive order—urged state legislators and governors to take up the fight.

Continuing the agitation wasn't just an act of fealty to Trump; it was cunning politics. The fear that C.R.T. would cause children to become fixated on race has resonated with enough voters to help tip important elections. Last November, Glenn Youngkin, a candidate for the governorship of Virginia, won an upset victory after repeatedly warning that the "curriculum has gone haywire"—and promising to sign an executive order banning C.R.T. from schools. Jatia Wrighten, a political scientist at Virginia Commonwealth University, told the Washington *Post* that Youngkin had "activated white women to vote in a very specific way that they feel like is protecting their children."

Days after the ALEC Webinar on "reclaiming education," three women in Florida filed incorporation papers for Moms for Liberty, Inc., later declaring that their "sole purpose" was to "fight for parental rights" to choose what sort of education was best for their kids. One of the organization's founders, Tina Descovich—who had recently lost reëlection to the school board of Brevard County, Florida, after opposing pandemic safety protocols—soon appeared on Rush Limbaugh's show. Declaring plans to "start with school boards and move on from there," she said of like-minded parents, "It sounds a little melodramatic, but there is *evil* working against us on a daily basis." MAGA media—"Tucker Carlson Tonight," Breitbart—showcased Moms for Liberty. Media Matters, the liberal watchdog, argued that influential right-wing media figures were essentially "recruiting their eager audience" for the Moms' campaign.

Moms for Liberty, which is sometimes referred to as M4L or MFL, is so new that it is hard to parse, from public documents, what its leaders are getting paid. (The founders say that the chairs of local chapters are volunteers.) The group describes itself as a "grassroots" organization, yet its instant absorption by the conservative mediasphere has led some critics to suspect it of being an Astroturf group—an operation secretly funded by moneyed interests. Moms for Liberty registered with the I.R.S. as the kind of social-welfare nonprofit that can accept unlimited dark money.

The leaders had deep G.O.P. connections. One, Marie Rogerson, was a successful Republican political strategist. The other, Bridget Ziegler, a school-board member in Sarasota County, is married to the vice-chair of the Florida G.O.P., Christian Ziegler, who told the Washington *Post*, "I have been trying for a dozen years to get twenty- and thirty-year-old females involved with the Republican Party, and it was a heavy lift to get that demographic. . . . But now Moms for Liberty has done it for me." Moms for Liberty worked with the office of Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, to help craft the state's infamous "Don't Say Gay" legislation, which DeSantis signed into law this past March; it forbids instruction on "sexual orientation or gender identity" in "kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate."

A national phalanx of interconnected organizations—including the Manhattan Institute, where Rufo is a fellow, and a group called Moms for America—supported the suite of talking points about C.R.T. According to NBC News, in a single week last year Breitbart alone published seven hundred and fifty posts or articles in which the theory was mentioned. Glenn Beck, the right-wing pundit, declared that C.R.T. is a "poison," urging his audience, "Stand up in your community and fire the teachers. Fire them!"

On March 15, 2021, Rufo, in a tweet thread, overtly described a key element of the far right's evolving strategy: "We have successfully frozen their brand—'critical race theory'—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category." He added, "The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.' "

Williamson County has some of Tennessee's top-ranked schools. "That's why people *move* here," Eric Welch, the longtime school-board member, told me. He describes the school system as an economic "asset that pays off." Williamson County has the state's second-lowest unemployment rate and the highest property values: the median home value exceeds eight hundred thousand dollars.

It is not a diverse place. Eighty-eight per cent of residents are white. Ninety-five per cent of the school district's teachers are white. Until September, all twelve school-board members and the superintendent were white. A Confederate monument anchors the town square of the county seat, Franklin. The square was publicly marked as a former slave market only three years ago. The Confederate flag still flies prominently in some areas. When the white father of Black children recently complained about this at a school-board meeting, a man in the audience sneered, "We're in the *South!* "

In 2018, several parents joined forces to point out that schools in Williamson County could work harder to be welcoming to children of color. The group, which became known as the Cultural Competency Council, included Black, Asian American, Jewish, and L.G.B.T.Q.+ residents. A school-district official who served as a liaison to the council created videos for teacher training and development, including one about privilege. That video's language had clearly been calibrated to preëmpt defensive reactions: a narrator underscored that the concept of privilege was "not meant to suggest that someone has never struggled or that success is unearned." Even so, the conservative media pounced: the *Tennessee Star* said that the video took viewers on a guilt trip about "the perks white males supposedly have that others do not, America's supposed dysfunctional history, and how unfair it all is." Such views have played well in a county that Trump carried twice, both times by more than twenty points. (The Cultural Competency Council has been disbanded.)

In 2020, Revida Rahman and another parent co-founded an anti-racism group, One WillCo, after Black parents chaperoning field trips to local plantations were astonished to see slavery depicted as benign. Rahman told me that some presentations suggested that "the slaves didn't really have it that bad—they lived better than we do, they had their food provided, they had housing." She added, "I beg to differ." At a school that one of Rahman's sons attended, some white classmates had mockingly linked arms as if to represent Trump's border wall.

One WillCo especially wanted the school system to address the fact that it had a record of disproportionately punishing students of color—a recent revelation. Moreover, some teachers used racially insensitive materials in their classrooms: in an assignment about the antebellum economy, students were instructed to imagine that their family "owns slaves," and to "create a list of expectations for your family's slaves."

On February 15, 2021, the school board hired a mother-and-son team of diversity consultants to gauge the depth of the district's problems with racism, bullying, and harassment, and to recommend solutions. A conservative board member, Jay Galbreath, forwarded information about the consultants to influential local Republicans, including Gregg Lawrence, a county commissioner, and Bev Burger, a longtime alderman in Franklin. In an e-mail, Lawrence complained to Galbreath that hiring the consultants was the type of thing that would lead to "the politicization of teaching in America where every subject is taught through the lens of race." He wrote, "These young people who have been protesting, looting and burning down our cities in America are doing so because they don't see anything about America worth preserving. And why is that? Because our public schools and universities taught them that America is a systemically racist nation founded by a bunch of bigoted slave owning colonizers."

This exchange was eventually made public through an open-records request, which also revealed that Burger had helped edit what has been called the foundational complaint against Wit & Wisdom: a month after the diversity consultants were hired, the parents of a biracial second grader e-mailed school officials to complain that the curriculum had caused their son to be "ashamed of his white half." Burger wrote of her edits, "See what you think." She cc'd Lawrence, who forwarded the communications to Galbreath and another school-board member, Dan Cash, a fellow-conservative who had

won his seat in 2014, during a Tea Party wave. The county commissioner told the school-board members, "Here is more evidence that we are teaching critical race theory," and urged them to "get rid of" Wit & Wisdom.

A few weeks later, on March 22nd, the school board's monthly meeting took place on Zoom, because of the pandemic. Robin Steenman appeared before the board for the first time. Wearing a cream-colored sweater and dangly earrings, she presented herself simply as a concerned resident who wanted school officials to reject any diversity proposal that involved "The 1619 Project, critical race training, intersectionality." She worried aloud that a recent proposal in California to mandate a semester of ethnic studies would be "paraded as a blueprint for the rest of the country."

Steenman, who appeared to be reading from notes, asserted that parents in Virginia were being blacklisted for "speaking out." In Pennsylvania, an elementary school had "forced fifth graders to celebrate Black communism and host a Black Power rally." In North Carolina, a teacher had described parents as "an impediment to social justice." In Ohio, C.R.T. "had to be removed from the curriculum, because the students were literally turning on each other." Steenman cited no sources. She said, "If you give them an inch"—then changed course. Dropping the "them," she declared, "If you give *one* inch to this kind of teaching, then you're gonna subject yourself to the whole spectrum."

Several weeks later, Steenman started the Williamson County chapter of Moms for Liberty, building on the e-mail sent by the parents of the biracial child and harnessing the furious energy of families who were already accusing the school board of "medical tyranny" for requiring students to wear masks. This vocal minority had been particularly incensed at one school-board member, Brad Fiscus, a former science teacher whose wife, Michelle, a pediatrician, was Tennessee's chief vaccine officer. Williamson County is a Republican pipeline to state and national office: the governor, Bill Lee, is from there; Marsha Blackburn, the MAGA senator, began her political career as a county commissioner there. In July, 2021, the state fired Michelle Fiscus after conservative lawmakers objected to her "messaging" in support of COVID-19 vaccinations; afterward, Brad Fiscus resigned from the school board and the family moved to the East Coast. For right-wing extremists, the obvious lesson was that rage tactics worked. That August, one school-board meeting nearly ended in violence when two enraged men followed a proponent of masks to his vehicle, screaming, "We can find you!"

Moms for Liberty emphasizes the importance of being "joyful warriors"—relatable women who can rally their communities. A founder once explained, "This fight has to be fought in their own backyard." The organization may have seen Steenman as particularly well suited to winning over Williamson County residents: she was a former B-1-bomber pilot now raising three small children. Her husband, Matt, was also ex-Air Force—fighter jets. They moved to Williamson County five years ago, from Texas.

Another member of their fraternity was John Ragan, a former Air Force fighter pilot who'd been elected as a Republican to the Tennessee General Assembly in 2010. Ragan, a former business consultant from the city of Oak Ridge, had been listed as an alternate on ALEC's education task force. (He says that he does not recall attending any meetings.) He'd once crafted legislation to ban K-8 teachers from using materials "inconsistent with natural human reproduction" in the classroom. (It failed.)

Early last year, as Moms for Liberty was receiving its first wave of national media attention, Ragan introduced "anti-C.R.T." legislation. He wanted to ban teaching about white privilege or any other concepts that might cause students "discomfort or other psychological distress" because of their race or sex. The wording parroted talking points from Moms for Liberty, which parroted Trump, who parroted Rufo. Around the time that Moms for Liberty members began showing up at Williamson County school-board meetings, Steve Bannon, the former Trump adviser, said on his video podcast that "the path to save the nation is very simple—it's going to go through the school boards." Calling mothers "patriots," he urged a "revolt."

At a committee meeting of Tennessee House members, Ragan promoted his legislation by claiming that he'd heard about a seven-year-old Williamson County girl who had had suicidal thoughts, and was now in therapy, because she was ashamed of being white. (No such family has ever publicly come forward.) Two Black Democrats sharply challenged Ragan. Harold Love, a congressman from Nashville, asked him whether the proposed legislation would make it illegal for teachers to even mention "The 1619 Project." When Ragan replied that instructors could talk about it as long as they taught "both for and against," Love said, "It's kind of hard to be 'for or against' slavery." G. A. Hardaway, a congressman from Memphis, argued on the House floor that a law limiting discussion of race, ethnicity, discrimination, and bias contradicted "the very principles that our country was formed on."

Ragan pushed ahead, arguing that "subversive factions," "seditious charlatans," and "misguided souls" were creating "artificial divisions" in a "shameless pursuit of political power." His bill passed. Senator Raumesh Akbari, who chairs the Tennessee Senate Democratic Caucus, said, "This offensive legislation pretends skin color has never mattered in our country," adding that "our children deserve to learn the full story."

Once the Governor signed the bill into law, Moms for Liberty would be able to devise complaints arguing that certain elements of public instruction violated a Tennessee statute. Violators could be fined hundreds of thousands of dollars, potentially draining resources. Steenman, appearing on Blackburn's video podcast, "Unmuted with Marsha," let slip a tactical detail: the moment Tennessee's new law took effect, Moms for Liberty would have a complaint against Wit & Wisdom "ready to go" to the state. Blackburn praised Steenman as "the point of the spear."

Steenman also appeared on Glenn Beck's show. As if speaking directly to Governor Lee, she said, "Stop serving the woke-left lobby!" Beck said, "Bill Lee, shame on you!" Lee signed the bill into law on the eve of the anniversary of George Floyd's murder.

Steenman raised Moms for Liberty's visibility by putting on events—rented plants, live music, charcuterie. One of them, C.R.T. 101, took place in May, 2021, before a large audience at Liberty Hall, a Franklin auditorium in a renovated stove factory filled with shops and restaurants. A clinical psychologist from Utah, Gary Thompson, came onstage and declared that C.R.T. engenders shame, which can trigger depression, which could "be pushing your kids to suicide." Thompson, who is Black, showed photographs of his multiracial family: he and his wife, a white pediatric neuropsychologist, have six children. Thompson joked, awkwardly, that the overwhelmingly white audience sure didn't *look* like members of the K.K.K. He noted that he'd voted for Barack Obama, and said that he approved of Williamson County Schools' hiring of diversity consultants to assess such problems as racial bullying. He opposed C.R.T., though, because it framed people of color as "victims." Choking up, Thompson said, "That is *not* the legacy that my parents left me."

Moms for Liberty often advances its cause by enlisting Black conservatives, or by borrowing snippets from their public comments. The organization has posted a video clip of Condoleezza Rice saying that white kids shouldn't have to "feel bad" in order for Black children to feel empowered. Steenman has collaborated with Carol Swain, a political scientist at Vanderbilt, who vocally opposes same-sex marriage and once described Islam as "dangerous to our society." This past January, Moms for Liberty sponsored a conference organized by Swain, American Dream, whose branding heavily featured images of Martin Luther King, Jr. Before the event, King's daughter Bernice tweeted an admonition about those who took her father's "words out of context to promote ideas that oppose his teachings," adding that Steenman's chapter, having "sought to erase him," was now "using him to make money."

At the C.R.T. 101 gathering, the author of the original complaint against Wit & Wisdom revealed herself onstage to be Chara Dixon, a mom in her forties. Nervously holding a copy of her speech, she introduced herself as a naturalized citizen. (She had emigrated, decades earlier, from Thailand.) Dixon, whose husband, Brian, is white, recalled helping their seven-year-old son with a Wit & Wisdom assignment about a "lonely little yellow leaf." The audience laughed when she declared, "It was boring." A book about a chameleon: "Another boring story!" Her son had also read about King's "I Have a Dream" speech, which was "beautiful and uplifting"; but the tale of Ruby Bridges and the "angry white mob" was depressing. Dixon said that in her son's childhood world "there's no color." (She soon became Moms for Liberty's treasurer.)

Dixon seemed to conflate Wit & Wisdom and C.R.T. Steenman, in an official complaint to the Tennessee Department of Education, wrote, "There does not have to be a textbook labeled 'Critical Race Theory' for its harmful tenets to be present in a curriculum." At the C.R.T. 101 event, she took the stage and told the audience that the threat of "Marxist" indoctrination at school could be vanquished by opposing "activist" teachers, curricula, and diversity-driven policy. An m.c. cheerily ended the evening by reminding everyone that "today's kids are tomorrow's voters."

The Williamson County chapter of M4L held its next big event, Let's Talk Wit & Wisdom, at a Harley-Davidson franchise in Franklin. Steenman had been having trouble finding a venue when the dealership's owner offered his showroom. Calling the man a "true patriot," Steenman presented him with a folded and framed American flag that, she said, had accompanied her on a bombing mission in Afghanistan.

Moms for Liberty had invited the entire school board to the event, but the only members who showed up were the group's three clear allies. One, a former kindergarten teacher who opposed masking, liked to hug people during breaks at school-board meetings. The other two were Cash and Galbreath, both of whom were up for reëlection on August 4, 2022.

Steenman, gesturing toward a large screen behind her, showed the "findings" of a Moms for Liberty "deep dive" into Wit & Wisdom. She elicited gasps from the audience by saying that the curriculum contained books that depicted "graphic murder," "rape," "promiscuity," "torture," "adultery," "stillbirth," and "scalping and skinning," along with content that her organization considered to be "anti-police," "anti-church," and "anti-nuclear family." Rhetoric about "empowering the students" was suddenly "*everywhere*," she complained. Without presenting any evidence, she claimed that elementary-school students now needed counsellors to help them "overcome the emotional trauma" caused by Wit & Wisdom.

Steenman's events often strayed far from the particulars of Williamson County Schools. At one of them, the proceedings were interrupted when someone walked onstage and breathlessly announced news from Virginia: Glenn Youngkin, the candidate for governor who'd crusaded against C.R.T., had won. The audience cheered as if Youngkin were one of their own.

Steenman's claims about Wit & Wisdom were so tendentious that several ardent supporters of the public schools looked her up on social media. Among other things, they discovered a Twitter account, @robin_steenman. On August 9, 2020, Matt Walsh—a columnist for the Daily Wire, the conservative media site co-founded by the pundit Ben Shapiro—had shared a thread by a Philadelphia teacher who expressed concern that meddlesome parents might overhear classroom conversations during online learning and undermine "honest conversations about gender/sexuality." (The Daily Wire is headquartered in Nashville, and Shapiro has propagated Moms for Liberty's messaging.) In a retweet of Walsh, @robin_steenman had posted, "You little brainwashing assholes will never get hold of my kids!" After Eric Welch and others publicly challenged Steenman about the tweet—and another one declaring that her children would never attend public schools—the account vanished. (Steenman agreed to an interview, but did not keep the appointment. A Moms for Liberty spokesperson, calling my questions "personal in nature," largely declined to provide answers.)

Privately, certain defenders of Wit & Wisdom referred to Moms for Liberty members as the Antis. In a sly move, some adopted the seahorse as a symbol of what one parent described to me as "the resistance." This summer in Williamson County, I saw seahorse stickers on cars and laptops. When I met Rahman for lunch, she was wearing seahorse earrings. At a school-board campaign event for a candidate who opposed Moms for Liberty, a volunteer wore a seahorse pendant on a necklace, alongside a gold cross. At least one person connected to Moms for Liberty had become concerned about the group's motives and tactics, and was secretly monitoring them from the inside. This person told me, "I'm the one in the trench, and I don't want to get caught."

Many Moms and like-minded parents wanted both Wit & Wisdom and Superintendent Golden gone. Golden's contract was up for annual review before the 2021-22 school year began. (One Moms for Liberty opponent recently tweeted, "The m.o. nationwide is to fire Supt's and hire ideologues.") At a meeting where the board planned to vote on Golden's future, one of the superintendent's many supporters implored the elected officials to "hold the line" against the "steady attack on our public schools." The Antis were louder. A man wearing an American-flag-themed shirt shouted, "We, the parents, are awake, we're organized, and we're *extremely* pissed off." He declared, "We're gonna replace every board member in here with people *just like me*. Nothing would make us happier than to surround you with a roomful of American patriots who believe in the Constitution of the United States and Jesus Christ above!"

The Antis jeered at speakers who expressed support for Golden or the district's diversity efforts. They mocked a woman whose daughters had experienced anti-Asian slurs at school. The mom told the board, "I've heard people say that teaching these parts of our history is 'racist' or '*traumatic*.' What's traumatic is Black, Latino, Asian, and L.G.B.T.Q. kids going to schools where they face discrimination and don't feel safe." A local psychologist, Alanna Truss, said, "I'm yet to see a child in my practice who's been traumatized by our county's curriculum choices. I have, however, seen *many* students experiencing trauma due to being discriminated against and bullied within our schools, related to race, religion, gender, and sexuality."

Six of the school-board members, who serve four-year terms, were coming up for reëlection in August of 2022. (The other six will finish their terms in 2024.) As the Wit & Wisdom furor grew, another component of the right-wing assault on schools locked into place: last fall, state lawmakers passed a bill legalizing partisan school-board elections. Moms for Liberty called the change "a HUGE step forward."

Educators and policymakers have long believed that public education should operate independently of political ideology. As the magazine *Governing* put it last year, "The goal of having nonpartisan elections is not to remove all politics" but "to remove a conflict point that keeps the school board from doing its job." For people who target school boards, conflict has become a tool. In Texas, a PAC linked to a cell-phone company which recently funded the MAGA takeover of several school boards paid for an inflammatory mail campaign blaming a classroom shooting on administrators who had "stopped disciplining students according to Critical Race Theory principles." In August, during a panel at *cpac*, the gathering of conservatives, the former Trump official Mercedes Schlapp warned that, though Republicans were focussed on federal and state elections, "school board elections are *critical*." The panel's title, "We Are All Domestic Terrorists," derisively referred to recent instructions from Attorney General Merrick Garland to the F.B.I. for devising a plan to protect school employees and board members from threats of violence.

Joining Schlapp onstage was Ryan Girdusky, the founder of the 1776 Project PAC, which funnels money to G.O.P. candidates in partisan school-board races. Girdusky boasted that, in 2021, his PAC "did fifty-eight elections in seven states and we won forty-two." Girdusky said that his goal this year is to boost at least five hundred school-board candidates nationwide. He urged the audience to "vote from the bottom up—go from school board and then go all the way up to governor and senator, and we'll have conservative majorities across the entire electorate."

Last November, mere weeks after Tennessee lawmakers voted to allow partisan school-board races, Steenman launched a PAC, Williamson Families. Its approach was markedly similar to that of Southlake Families, a Texas PAC whose orchestrated takeover of a school board in that state has led to attempted book bans. Both PACs have worked with Axiom Strategies, a political-consulting firm that has helped seat high-profile Republicans, including MAGA figures. Allen West, the chair of the Texas G.O.P., has urged Southlake Families to export its takeover blueprint to suburbs nationwide. Wealthy suburbs are some of America's purplest districts, and winning them may be key to controlling the House, the Senate, and the Presidency. Anne McGraw, the former Williamson County Schools board member, told me that the advent of Moms for Liberty "shows how hyperlocal the national machine is going with their tactics." She observed, "Moms for Liberty is not in Podunk, America. They're going into hyper-educated, wealthy counties like this, and trying to get *those* people to doubt the school system that *brought* us here."

Steenman's PAC quickly took in about a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars—an unusually large amount for local politics in Tennessee. The PAC held an inaugural event featuring John Rich, a country singer who had appeared with Trump on "The Celebrity Apprentice." Rich, who has no apparent connection to Williamson County, has contributed at least five thousand dollars to Steenman's PAC.

Progressives and policy experts have long suspected that right-wing attacks on school boards are less about changing curricula than about undermining the entire public-school system, in the hope of privatizing education. During the ALEC Webinar about "reclaiming education," the Heritage Foundation representative declared that "school choice" would become "very important in the next couple of years"; controversies about curricula, he said, were "opening up opportunity for policymakers at the state level" to consider options like charter schools.

This isn't the first time that the culture wars have taken aim at public education. But Rebecca Jacobsen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, believes that this era is different, because social media has made it easy for national operatives to stage "a coördinated, concrete" scare campaign designed to drive parents toward alternatives to public schools: "The message, at its core, is: 'Beware of your public-education system. Make sure your kid's teachers aren't up to something.' "

The timing of "anti-C.R.T." legislation is no coincidence. Instead of putting forth a platform, the Republican Party has tried to maintain power by demonizing its opponents and critics as sinister and un-American. In the lead-up to the midterms, the G.O.P.'s alarmism about critical race theory has accompanied fear-mongering about L.G.B.T.Q.+ teachers being "groomers." Conservative media aggressively promote both campaigns. From Fox News to the Twitter account Libs of TikTok, the messaging has been consistent: many public-school teachers are dangerous.

Lee, the Tennessee governor, has leveraged this discord while trying to reformulate school funding: in January, he announced plans to create fifty new charter schools in partnership with Hillsdale College, a private Christian school in Michigan, whose president, Larry Arnn, headed Trump's 1776 Commission. The plan partially collapsed after a Tennessee television station aired footage of Arnn, during a private appearance in Williamson County, comparing public education to "the plague" and arguing that teachers are educated in "the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country." J. C. Bowman, the executive director and C.E.O. of Professional Educators of Tennessee, called Arnn's comments "reprehensible and irresponsible." Even Republican politicians backed away. The speaker of the Tennessee House, Cameron Sexton, acknowledged that Arnn had "insulted generations of teachers who have made a difference for countless students."

Moms for Liberty's role in the broader war on public schools became ever clearer in July, at the group's inaugural national summit, in Tampa. DeSantis, who delivered a key address, was presented with a "liberty sword." Another headliner was Trump's former Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, whose family has connections to Hillsdale. To an enthusiastic crowd that included Steenman, DeVos declared that the U.S. Department of Education—the agency that she once oversaw—should not exist.

Early this year, Eric Welch, the school-board member, was leaning against seeking reëlection. Both of his sons had graduated—he was the one who handed them their high-school diplomas when they crossed the stage. His wife, Andrea, wanted him to take it easy for a while.

School-board service, which is time-consuming and can be tedious, requires diplomacy, a breadth of knowledge, and the ability to make complex, well-informed decisions. At meetings, Welch, who considered ideologues and bullies a threat to public education, often rebutted misinformation about COVID-19 and Wit & Wisdom. At one meeting, he'd pointedly read aloud from a title that he found on a Moms for Liberty site: the book, written by a follower of the John Birch Society, referred to Black people as "pickaninnies." Rahman, the co-founder of One WillCo, the anti-racism organization, told me, "He came with *all* the receipts." Welch's detractors had declared him arrogant and rude; Rahman called him "a strong advocate for what's *right*."

For Welch's seat, Steenman's PAC backed William (Doc) Holladay, an optometrist who, like Steenman, had no children in Williamson County Schools. Holladay had shown up at school-board meetings to denounce C.R.T. as "racist." On Facebook, where he'd railed against pandemic protocols, his posts were routinely flagged or removed because they contained misinformation. His top "news" sources included the *Epoch Times*, which regularly promotes right-wing falsehoods.

Last year, Charlie Wilson, the president of the National School Boards Association, characterized local school-board members as fundamental guardians "of democracy, of liberty, of equality, of civility and community, and of the Constitution and the rule of law." Holladay, a felon who believes the conspiracy theory that Trump is still the "*legitimate* President," seemed more like an opportunist. In 2008, he'd pleaded guilty to multiple counts of prescription fraud and forgery; the Tennessee Department of Health had put him on probation for "immoral, unprofessional or dishonorable conduct," noting that he had also worked "while impaired." The state licensure board later added five more years of probation upon discovering that he'd made "untruthful" claims about "professional excellence or abilities." (Holladay told me that he has turned his life around.)

When Welch heard that Holladay and other figures he considered to be unsuitable were seeking authority over the schools, he tweeted, "I'm running." He told his wife, "I don't know that I can walk away and let these people be in charge." The "Tennessee School Board Candidate Guide" notes that, for the office of school board, "the best, most capable and most farsighted citizens of each community should be drafted."

During the campaign, Holladay tried to frame Welch, a lifelong Republican, as a "liberal" for having supported masking and Wit & Wisdom. Welch publicly noted that he had interned for Senator John Warner, of Virginia, and attended the Inauguration of George W. Bush. Holladay, who had no military service, bragged about being a patriot; Welch is an Army veteran.

In a Q. & A. published by One WillCo, candidates were asked to describe their involvement with Williamson County Schools. Welch explained that, in addition to serving on the executive board of the district's parent-teacher association, he had "run wrestling tournaments as a booster fundraiser, spray painted end zones, worked concessions, volunteered for holiday shows setup/breakdown, built theatre sets, cleaned bleachers, mopped floors." Holladay's answers: "Speaking out at school board meetings"; "Helping to lead activist groups in order to effect needed changes." When asked why he was running, he said that "the school board has largely been operating in a manner that runs counter to the conservative principles that most people who live here hold dear." This and other answers betrayed profound ignorance of what a school board does.

Moms for Liberty had been broadening its campaign against Wit & Wisdom and was now targeting reading materials available in school libraries, which provided access to the Epic app, a repository of nearly fifty thousand children's books. In a local news segment, Steenman read aloud, "I-is-for-intersex," from a book called "The GayBCs," which was available on Epic, and said, "What parent wants to explain 'intersex' to their child that, at

this point, doesn't even understand sex?"

Holladay tried a similar maneuver. During a live-streamed candidate forum, he handed his interviewer a passage from "Push," the acclaimed novel by Sapphire, and asked him to read it aloud. (If this was the same passage that Holladay later showed me on his cell phone, it began, "Daddy sick me, disgust me, but he sex me up.") The interviewer was Tom Lawrence, a gentlemanly fixture on AM radio who has been called "the voice of Williamson County." Lawrence scanned the text and declined to share it with viewers, saying, "It has words like 'orgasm' in it." Holladay, noting that the book could be found in one of the local high schools, declared, "Whoever is responsible for putting that book in the library should be *arrested*." (In a tweet, Welch expressed astonishment that a school-board candidate would "call for the arrest of a WCS librarian.")

As Holladay campaigned, he repeatedly invoked the nationwide partisan divide. In an interview that appeared on YouTube, he declared that conservatives were fleeing blue states for places like Williamson County because the left was trying to "destroy the last remaining refuges of conservatism and patriotism." If Williamson County "goes blue," he said, the rest of the state would follow, and if Tennessee "doesn't stay red" it will be "a huge blow to the country."

On Election Day, Welch, a wiry ex-wrestler, erected a pole tent outside Hunters Bend Elementary School, a voting precinct. Holladay's supporters set up nearby. I arrived to find Welch, wearing khaki shorts and a "RE-ELECT ERIC WELCH" T-shirt, squaring off in the parking lot with a Holladay supporter who was saying, angrily, "I've laid people *out* for less than that!"

The man, Brian Russell, described Welch as the aggressor—"He shoulder-checked me"—but multiple witnesses characterized the altercation differently. Meghan Guffee, a Republican running for reëlection to the county commission, told me that Russell had demanded to know why Welch had blocked him on social media. Welch, trying to walk away, had responded, "I'm ending this conversation. You're an ass."

In a public Facebook post, Russell had declared Welch to be "as bad as a pedophile." Guffee said that she'd heard Russell, in the parking lot, accuse Welch of having "voted to teach third graders how to masturbate." (Russell denies this.) Guffee was particularly appalled that her six-year-old daughter, who was with her at the voting site, had witnessed Russell's hostility. She told me, "That is not how this community does things."

Before leaving the school grounds, Russell, a painting contractor in his early fifties, told me that he was angry about Wit & Wisdom: "When my daughter comes home and her best friend is Black, and she's wondering why 'I'm bad because I'm white. . . . ' " This and other comments suggested that his children attended local schools. In fact, Russell's three children lived in his native state of Ohio.

Throughout America, MAGA types were targeting education officials. In Maine, a man plastered a school-board member's photograph on a sign and surrounded it with rat traps, telling NBC News, "This is a war with the left," and "In war, tactics and strategy can become blurry." A member of the Proud

Boys ran for a school-board seat in California. On September 27th, the American Libraries Association sent an open letter to the F.B.I. director, Chris Wray, asking for help: in the previous two weeks alone, "bombing or shooting threats" had forced the temporary closing of libraries in five states. Tennessee was one of them.

In Williamson County, Moms for Liberty members couldn't claim ignorance of the beliefs of some of the candidates they and Steenman's PAC supported. Williamson Families donated a thousand dollars to the campaign of an ex-marine who was running for county commissioner, and who had publicly warned the school board, "In the past, you dealt with sheep. Now prepare yourselves to deal with lions! I swore an oath to protect this country from all enemies—foreign and domestic. You harm my children, you become a domestic enemy."

That guy lost. So did Holladay. Welch beat him by five hundred and fifty-nine votes. Welch was surprised that *anybody* had voted for Holladay, later telling me, "If you had to *design* a candidate who is unqualified and should not be on a board of education, that's what he'd look like."

Candidates backed by Moms for Liberty members won, however, in two other districts. A Republican who appeared to have no connection to the public schools beat Ken Chilton, who ran as an independent and who, the day after the election, tweeted that Tennessee lawmakers' decision to allow partisan school-board elections had "created a monster."

Jay Galbreath, the board member who had forwarded the e-mails about diversity consultants to other conservative politicians, had found himself challenged from the right flank—by a M4L-affiliated candidate whose campaign signs said "REJECT CRT." As if to prove his opposition to Wit & Wisdom, Galbreath had posted publicly, on Facebook, that progressives were "constantly looking at ways to inject and normalize things like gender identity, the black lives matter movement, and LGBTQ by weaving it into curriculum." Williamson Strong, a PAC composed of local progressives who have long defended the public schools, called for Galbreath's resignation, noting, "This is pure hate speech, and it has NO place in a position of influence or power over 40,000+ children and their education. It has no place in Williamson County, period." The group, whose leaders include Anne McGraw, the former school-board member, observed, "All filters have apparently been obliterated now that he's competing for votes against an MFL-endorsed candidate." Despite the controversy, Galbreath won reëlection.

A month before the vote, a civil action was filed against Wit & Wisdom: the parents of an elementary-school student sued the school board and various administrators in the district on behalf of a conservative nonprofit that they had just launched, Parents' Choice Tennessee. The lawsuit's complaint echoed Moms for Liberty's assertions that the curriculum's "harmful, unlawful and age-inappropriate content" represented a "clear violation of Tennessee code." If the lawsuit succeeds, Williamson County Schools may have to find a new curriculum and pay fines. (Citing the litigation, Williamson County Schools officials declined to comment for this article.)

The lawsuit may have been designed, in part, to give the impression that there was more local opposition to Wit & Wisdom than actually existed. There are eighteen thousand students in the district's elementary schools, but according to a district report only thirty-seven people had complained about the new curriculum. Fourteen of the complainants had no children in the system.

Rebecca Jacobsen, the Michigan scholar, looks for clues in such data. She said, of the vitriol toward school boards, "Is this a blip, and we'll rebound? Or are we chipping away at our largest public institution and the system that has been at the center of our democracy since the founding of this country?" She noted that some Americans "don't trust their *schools* and *teachers* anymore," adding, "That's *radical*."

Moms for Liberty's campaign, meanwhile, continues to widen. The organization now claims two hundred and forty chapters in forty-two states, and more than a hundred thousand members. It has thrown a fund-raising gala, featuring Megyn Kelly, in which the top ticket cost twenty thousand dollars. In late October, a spokesperson for the Moms told me that the organization—ostensibly a charity—is a "media company."

The slick rollout of Moms for Liberty has made it seem less like a good-faith collective of informed parents and more like a well-funded operation vying to sway American voters in a pivotal election year. Steenman's chapter recently announced a slate of upcoming talks: "Gender Ideology," "Restorative Justice," "Comprehensive Sex Ed," "History of Marxism in Education." I asked Jacobsen whether she thinks that Moms for Liberty members actually believe that a curriculum like Wit & Wisdom damages children. "I don't know what anybody *believes* anymore," she replied. "We seem to have lost a sense of honesty. It may just be about power and money." ♦

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