

The Most Dangerous Person in the World Is Randi Weingarten'

School closures and culture wars turned classrooms into battlegrounds — and made the head of one of the country's largest teachers' unions a lightning rod for criticism.



By Jonathan Mahler

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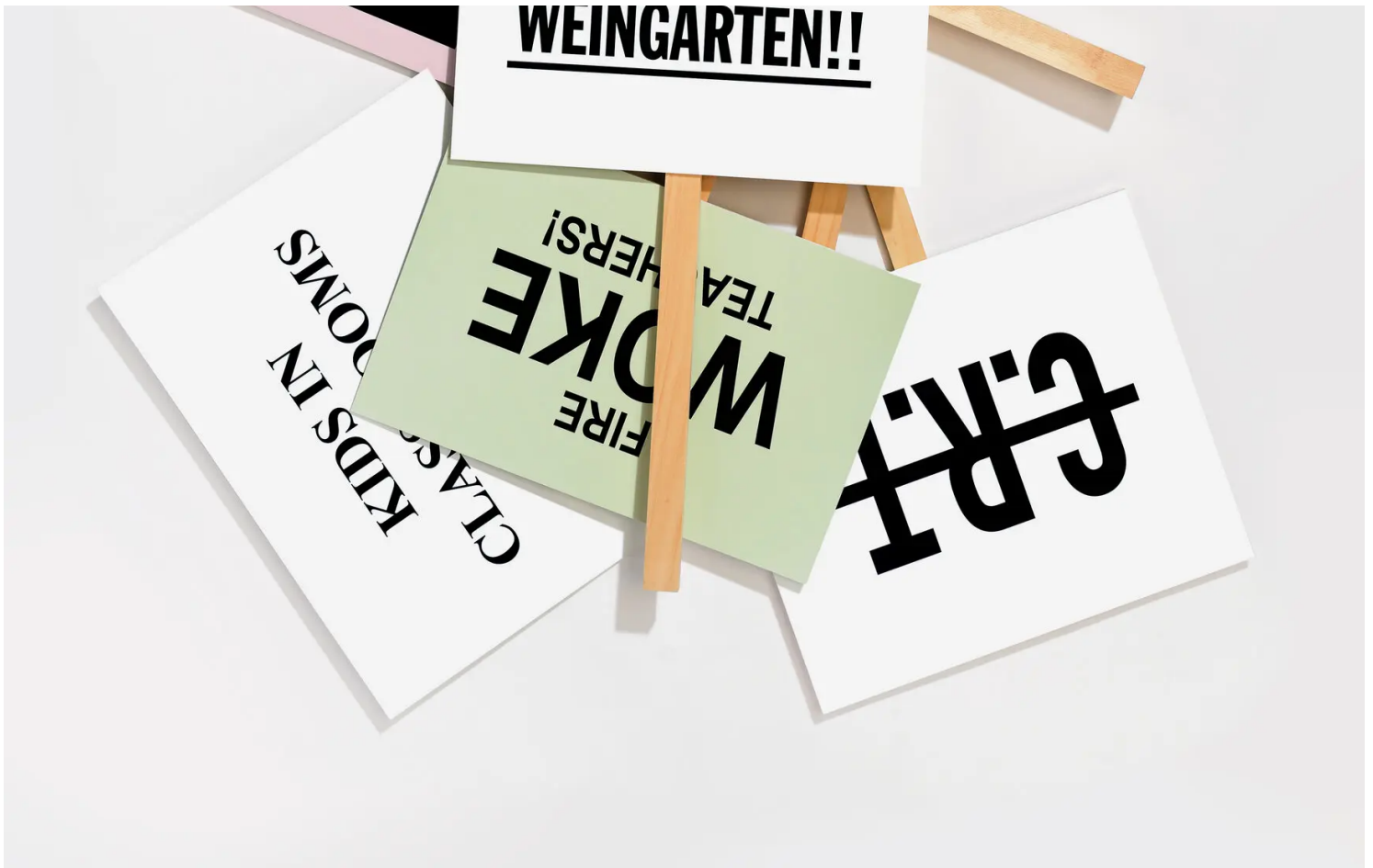
When the former secretary of state and C.I.A. director Mike Pompeo, a man who had dealt firsthand with autocrats like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, described Randi Weingarten as “the most dangerous person in the world” last November, it seemed as though he couldn’t possibly be serious.

Weingarten is 65 and just over five feet tall. She is Jewish and openly gay — she’s married to a rabbi — and lives in Upper Manhattan. She is the longtime president of the American Federation of Teachers, which is not even the country’s biggest union of public-school educators. (The A.F.T. has 1.7 million members; the National Education Association has three million.) The A.F.T. did give in excess of \$26 million to Democratic candidates and causes in the 2022 election cycle, but the Carpenters and Joiners union gave more than twice as much.

Pompeo, whose remarks appeared in a widely quoted interview with the online news site Semafor, had nevertheless put his finger on something: The pandemic and the ongoing culture wars over race and gender had shifted America’s educational landscape, and with it the political landscape. “It’s not a close call,” Pompeo elaborated. “If you ask, ‘Who’s the most likely to take this republic down?’ It would be the teachers’ unions, and the filth that they’re teaching our kids, and the fact that they don’t know math and reading or writing.”

Other Republicans quickly piled on. Pompeo had set the bar high, and they needed to invoke equally hot rhetoric and florid imagery to ensure headlines of their own. “Big labor unions have taken over public education,” Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina told Fox News in late January. “That’s bad for parents, bad for kids, bad for America.” Senator Marco Rubio of Florida mounted his attack in The American Conservative magazine: “Our schools are a cesspool of Marxist indoctrination. Dangerous academic constructs like critical race theory and radical gender theory are being forced on elementary school children.” Gov. Ron DeSantis, who had already garnered national attention with his book bans, Florida’s “Stop WOKE Act” and its so-called Don’t Say Gay legislation, unveiled a new proposal designed to rein in “overreaching teachers’ unions,” which a column on the Fox website enthusiastically embraced as “a blueprint to dominate union bosses.” Donald Trump, declaring that public schools “have been taken over by the radical left maniacs” and “pink-haired communists,” released his own plan to Save American Education. It was clear that Weingarten had come to stand for something much larger than herself.





Photograph by Hannah Whitaker. Prop stylist: JJ Chan.

The last few years have been historically convulsive ones for education in America. Some 1.3 million children left the public schools during the pandemic. The results from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress — known as the nation’s report card — revealed the largest average score decline in reading since 1990 and the first average score decline in math since 1969. Schools have reported major increases in rates of student depression, anxiety and trauma. School districts around the country are experiencing severe teacher shortages. Last fall, a Gallup poll found that the percentage of adults who are satisfied with the nation’s public schools had fallen to 42 percent, a 20-year low.

This crisis has political consequences. The pandemic closures and classroom culture wars have fueled the revival of the dormant school-choice movement, with Republican-led states around the country passing an array of far-reaching school-voucher bills. These bills come in different forms but share a common goal: to enable parents to move their children out of America’s government-run education system en masse. All of the prospective Republican presidential candidates for 2024 have committed to building on this growing movement, whose roots can be traced back more than 50 years, to the battle over desegregation. The same pandemic closures that demonstrated how central public schools are to the communities they serve also became the inciting event for an unprecedented effort to dismantle them.

The public-education system may not be very popular right now, but both Democrats and Republicans tend to like their local schools and their children’s teachers. The unions that represent those teachers, however, are more polarizing. One reason for this is that they are actively involved in partisan politics, and, more specifically, are closely aligned with the Democrats, a reality powerfully driven home during the pandemic. A study by Brown University’s Annenberg Institute found that Democratic districts, with correspondingly strong teachers’ unions, returned to in-person learning more slowly and gradually than Republican districts with weaker unions. In some ways, Randi Weingarten and the A.F.T. — the union “boss” and “big labor” — are a logical, even inevitable target for the G.O.P.

It’s no longer possible to separate education from politics, and public schools are more vulnerable than they’ve ever been.

A frequent knock on the A.F.T. is that it puts teachers before students, a framing neatly encapsulated by a quote attributed to the union’s former president Al Shanker: “When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that’s when I’ll start representing the interests of schoolchildren.” Shanker’s biographer, Richard Kahlenberg, found no record of Shanker’s ever saying this and doesn’t think he ever did,

but that hasn't stopped the union's critics from citing it. Weingarten has a rebuttal: Good working conditions for teachers make good learning conditions for students. But Weingarten does in fact represent teachers, not students. Often, such as when it comes to issues like classroom size or school budgets, their interests align. Sometimes they don't.

For a period during the pandemic, the two groups' apparent interests diverged, and a series of fault lines started opening across the country, separating not only Republicans from Democrats but also parents from teachers, centrist Democrats from progressives and urban Black parents from suburban white parents, and even dividing the teachers' union itself. These fault lines widened as the reopening debates merged into fights over how schools should deal with the teaching of the country's racial history as well as sexuality and gender identity.

What became increasingly clear to me over the last several months, as I spoke to dozens of politicians, political consultants, union leaders, parent activists and education scholars about the convulsions in American education, is that it's no longer possible to separate education from politics, and that public schools are more vulnerable than they've ever been. How did Randi Weingarten wind up at the center of the 2024 Republican primary? The only way to answer that question is to re-examine America's education wars and the competing political agendas that are driving them. "Oh, goodness, no! Not at all!" Pompeo answered when I asked if he was, perhaps, being hyperbolic in his remarks about Weingarten. "It's not just about Ms. Weingarten, but she has been the most visible face of the destruction of American education."

In the chaotic early months of the pandemic, teachers were celebrated as essential workers, heroically continuing to serve America's children from their homes, often with limited resources and inadequate technology. But during the summer of 2020, things started to shift. There was already early research showing that students were suffering academically from remote learning. Schools across Europe had begun reopening without any major outbreaks, and many of America's private and parochial schools were making plans to resume in-person learning at the start of the new school year. A lot of public-school parents wanted their children to be back in the classroom, too. But many teachers seemed resistant to the idea.

Because of the decentralized structure of America's public-education system, which has some 14,000 different school districts, the federal government could not order schools to reopen for in-person learning, but in July 2020, President Trump threatened to withhold federal funds from those that didn't. His education secretary, Betsy DeVos, echoed his sentiments, demanding that the nation's schools be "fully operational" by the fall without providing a specific plan for doing so.



Protesters carrying a makeshift coffin in New York City in 2020. Associated Press

Many members of the A.F.T. remained worried about putting themselves, their families and their communities at risk. The A.F.T. had issued its own reopening plan in late April, calling for adequate personal protective equipment, a temporary suspension of formal teacher performance evaluations, a limit on student testing, a cancellation of student-loan debt and a \$750 billion federal aid package to help schools prepare to reopen safely and facilitate "a real recovery for all our communities." Weingarten did not believe the Trump administration was giving schools what teachers needed to return to work safely. She publicly denounced Trump and DeVos's call to reopen as "reckless," "callous" and "cruel," and the A.F.T. passed a resolution supporting local strikes if schools were forced to reopen in areas where a variety of safety conditions hadn't been met. As if to underscore the point, some teachers took to the streets in protest with mock coffins.

Florida became a test case. Even as the state's Covid death rate was surging in July, its Department of Education issued an emergency order requiring schools to fully reopen in August. The state's largest teachers' union, the Florida Education Association, affiliated with both the A.F.T. and the N.E.A., sued DeSantis and his education commissioner, Richard Corcoran, among others, to block the reopenings, arguing that the order violated the state's Constitution, which guarantees Florida residents the right to "safe" and "secure" public schools.

At a virtual news conference announcing the lawsuit, Weingarten accused DeSantis of being in “intense denial.” After some Florida schools started reopening, an A.F.T. political action committee produced a TV ad attacking Trump, citing claims that schools were becoming superspreader sites and that children were being used as “guinea pigs.”

As the lawsuit was working its way through the legal system — the union won in the lower court but lost on appeal — Florida was holding its biannual school-board elections, and the prospective return to in-person learning became the defining issue in many races. In Brevard County, Tina Descovich, the incumbent, was in favor of an immediate return to the classroom and opposed mask mandates. She was challenged by a public-school speech-language pathologist, Jennifer Jenkins, who called for a more cautious approach, including a mask mandate for all but the youngest children.

Jenkins easily won the late-August election, but Descovich was just getting started. She called Tiffany Justice, a fellow school-board member in nearby Indian River County, to suggest that they create their own parents’ rights group, Moms for Liberty. “We’ve got to do something here,” Justice recalled Descovich’s telling her. “We have to help these parents because they’re trying to step up and speak out, and the schools are just slamming them at every turn.”



Tina Descovich, right, who was on the Brevard County school board and opposed mask mandates, started the parents’ rights group Moms for Liberty with a fellow former school-board member, Tiffany Justice. Octavio Jones/Getty Images

Other parents across the political spectrum started organizing, too. Many public schools hadn’t fully reopened for the start of the new school year, and they were frustrated. They wrote op-eds, held rallies or met via Zoom with school-board members and other elected officials, often finding themselves at odds with local teachers’ unions and union-backed school-board members. The first fault lines had started to open.

By the fall of 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement had prompted a national reckoning over race, as well as an ensuing backlash. The politics of the pandemic had begun to merge with the culture wars, and both were playing out most vividly in the American classroom. An esoteric academic term — critical race theory, or C.R.T. — had improbably become the rallying cry for a conservative campaign focused on the teaching of the nation’s racial history. President Trump, running for re-election, eagerly took up the cause, blaming “decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools” for the Black Lives Matter protests and urging America’s parents to fight back against efforts to teach their children “hateful lies about this country.”

The A.F.T. championed the new movement for racial equity, committing publicly to the fight to end “systemic racism in America.” Some of the A.F.T.’s locals went further. The Chicago Teachers Union took to the streets to demand that the city’s board of education cancel a \$33 million contract between Chicago’s public schools and its Police Department for the safety officers who staff the city’s public schools. United Teachers Los Angeles helped lead a successful fight to press its school district to slash its police budget by \$25 million and use the money instead to hire more counselors, psychologists and social workers.

That October, Weingarten embarked on a cross-country bus tour to get out the vote for Joe Biden. His Democratic predecessor, Barack Obama, had not always been in sync with the A.F.T.; the union opposed elements of Obama’s Race to the Top program, which sent money to states that reformed their public-education systems by, among other things, weakening teacher tenure, introducing data-driven accountability measures and adding more nonunionized charter schools. Biden, by contrast, vowed to focus on neighborhood public schools rather than charters and criticized the standardized-testing regimes and teacher evaluations that were a hallmark of Race to the Top. Weingarten’s name was even floated as a candidate for secretary of education. She didn’t get the job, but she and the head of the N.E.A., Becky Pringle, were invited to the White House on the day after Biden’s inauguration. The teachers’ unions finally had a true ally in the Oval Office. The first lady, Jill Biden, taught at a public community college herself. (“I sleep with an N.E.A. member every night,”

President Biden would later quip.) The new administration gave teachers preferential access to the Covid vaccine, behind some other essential workers but ahead of the general population. Biden had pledged to quickly reopen America's schools, and the A.F.T. was communicating with top officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about its guidelines for doing so, suggesting that the agency add a provision allowing for its recommendations to be revisited if a highly contagious Covid variant emerged. But the anger that had been unleashed by the pandemic closures and the culture wars had not abated.

Justice and Descovich, the former Florida school-board members, incorporated Moms for Liberty in early 2021 with a far more ambitious and political agenda than simply advocating a return to maskless, in-person classes. As the group's mission statement explained, it was "dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government." The group built its brand with bumper magnets and T-shirts emblazoned with the motto "We Do NOT Co-Parent With the Government." It was embraced by the right-wing media and then by donors eager to turn it into a national movement, while nurturing its grass-roots image, mirroring the model created by the Tea Party, the quasi-populist uprising fueled by conservative billionaires and Fox News. The former Fox host Megyn Kelly headlined a fund-raising event in Florida, speaking about, as Justice recalled, "the woke ideology" coming out of America's classrooms. Moms for Liberty soon expanded beyond Florida. That summer, a chapter in Tennessee presented an 11-page letter of complaint to the state's Department of Education, objecting to a curriculum that it said "focuses repeatedly and daily on very dark and divisive slivers of American history" and works to "sow feelings of resentment, shame of one's skin color and/or fear." After several Republican states passed laws limiting the teaching of race-related subjects and banning C.R.T., Weingarten gave a speech citing a historian who had compared their efforts to the censorship of the Soviet regime. A clip of the speech spent days in heavy rotation on Fox News, and it inspired an editorial in The Wall Street Journal: "The Teachers Unions Go Woke."

It was not Glenn Youngkin's plan to turn Virginia's 2021 governor's race into a referendum on America's battles over education. Initially, he was just hoping to prevent his opponent, Terry McAuliffe, from owning an issue that historically favored Democrats. "We couldn't afford to let them take the fight to us," Jeff Roe, one of Youngkin's chief strategists, told me.

By almost every measure, Youngkin, a former private-equity executive with no political experience, was the underdog. McAuliffe, a Democratic stalwart dating back to the Clinton presidency, served as Virginia's governor between 2014 and 2018. (A state law barring governors from serving consecutive terms prevented him from running for re-election.)

Biden had beaten Trump by 10 points in Virginia, and McAuliffe led in the early polls. But Virginia's schools had been among the last on the East Coast to fully reopen, and the lingering bitterness from these pandemic closures had formed a politically combustible mix with the rising culture wars. Amid the national racial reckoning of 2020, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County — one of the top public high schools in the nation — had jettisoned its admissions exam, prompting a lawsuit by 17 families, many of them Asian American, who viewed the change as a form of discrimination against their children.



Glenn Youngkin, Republican candidate for governor in Virginia, at a campaign event in Leesburg in 2021. Al Drago, via Getty Images

Some of the most bitter fights were unfolding in suburban Loudoun County, where a proposal to allow transgender children to choose which bathrooms and pronouns they wished to use had sparked an angry backlash among conservative parents. The tensions were later exacerbated by news of a sexual assault in a high school girls' bathroom perpetrated by a boy who was wearing a skirt at the time. Loudoun's increasingly contentious school-board meetings became spectator events, attracting the sustained attention of right-wing media outlets like Fox News and The New York Post.

Youngkin held “Save Our Schools” rallies and pledged to ban C.R.T. from the state’s schools. But his campaign’s internal education polls revealed a wide range of voter priorities across the state. The race and gender issues that resonated with his base — Trump voters — weren’t going to be enough to win. He microtargeted other education voters with different ads; it was a scattershot approach, though, at least until a gubernatorial debate in late September.

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During his tenure as governor, McAuliffe had vetoed a bill — prompted by a mother who objected to her high school senior son’s reading Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” in an A.P. English class — that would have enabled parents to prevent their children from studying material they deemed sexually explicit. When Youngkin criticized that decision on the debate stage, McAuliffe shot back, “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.”

Recognizing that they had just been handed a political gift, Youngkin’s staff cobbled together a digital and TV ad that very night, hoping to take advantage of the apparent gaffe before McAuliffe tried to clarify it. “I was sure he was going to walk it back on ‘Morning Joe,’” Roe told me. Instead, McAuliffe stood by his comment, saying that states and local school boards should have authority over what’s taught in schools.

Youngkin unified his diffuse education campaign under a new phrase, “Parents Matter,” printing up T-shirts and bumper stickers and holding Parents Matter rallies in suburban and exurban counties that supported Biden in 2020. McAuliffe’s quote became the centerpiece of a rolling series of ads accusing him of going “on the attack against parents.” A longtime critic of organized labor, Youngkin also sought to drive a wedge between teachers and their unions, promising to devote at least \$100 million to raise teacher salaries while at the same time saying that McAuliffe would bow to his special-interest allies rather than doing what’s best for children.

A vast majority of Virginia’s teachers belong to the N.E.A., which tends to cover more rural areas, not the A.F.T., whose members are generally concentrated in big cities. But Weingarten was friendly with McAuliffe from the Clinton days and was supporting his candidacy on Twitter and cable news, and the A.F.T. was helping him develop his education platform. Weingarten told me that she called McAuliffe after the debate to tell him that he was wrong — that parents should have a role in their children’s education. “Terry made a very bad mistake, which Youngkin capitalized on,” she said. (Through a spokesman, McAuliffe said that he talked to Weingarten regularly during the campaign but has no recollection of her criticizing his remark.)

By the fall of 2021, America’s public schools were fully open, but mask mandates were still being hotly contested. Weingarten had been working to try to rebuild trust between some families and their schools. In late September, just a couple of days after the McAuliffe debate, she held a virtual town hall on mask mandates with Open Schools USA, an anti-masking right-wing parents’ rights group that was rallying families to pull their children out of public schools, in an effort to foster open dialogue with the union’s critics.

Under Weingarten, who was elected president of the A.F.T. in 2008, the national union has gone all in on electoral politics, significantly increasing its political spending in the belief that the best way to serve its rank and file is by electing Democrats. The A.F.T. gave more than \$1 million to McAuliffe, and Weingarten even knocked on doors for him in Alexandria. But Youngkin had the momentum in the final weeks of the race. His candidacy received another boost in October when Attorney General Merrick Garland ordered the F.B.I. to help address the rising threats of violence toward some school-board members. The order stemmed from a letter written to the Biden administration by the National School Boards Association, asking that federal law enforcement address threats against public school officials that “could be the equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism.” But Republican lawmakers and the right-wing media seized on the language in the letter to falsely accuse Garland of labeling parents “domestic terrorists.” Youngkin quickly exploited the opportunity, releasing an ad claiming that the F.B.I. was trying to “silence parents.”

On the night before the election, Weingarten headed down to Virginia to warm up the crowd at McAuliffe’s closing rally in Fairfax County. She was eager to be on hand for the final push, and her staff asked for her to be given a speaking role at the rally. Because she had been such a generous and loyal supporter of McAuliffe’s, the campaign didn’t want to say no, even though some Democrats worried that they could be handing Youngkin another gift.

Politically speaking, Weingarten played perfectly into Youngkin’s Parents Matter campaign. That spring, a right-wing watchdog group, Americans for Public Trust, had gotten hold of email communications between top officials at the A.F.T. and the C.D.C. about the agency’s school-reopening guidelines through the Freedom of Information Act and had passed them on to The New York Post. The tabloid, which had been gleefully attacking Weingarten for years — dubbing her Whine-garten — trumpeted the story: “Powerful Teachers Union Influenced C.D.C. on School Reopenings, Documents Show.” The rest of the right-wing media and numerous Republican officials instantly jumped on the narrative. Senator Susan Collins of Maine grilled the C.D.C.’s director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, at a committee hearing over what she called the C.D.C.’s “secret negotiations” with the teachers’ union. Weingarten told me that the C.D.C. had solicited the A.F.T.’s

input and that the union hadn't suggested anything that the agency wasn't already considering incorporating into its guidelines. But the appearance of a partisan union leader who had privately discussed the future of the nation's schools with a government agency could be counterproductive in Virginia's charged political climate.



Weingarten at a strike by faculty members and their supporters at the University of Illinois Chicago in January. Associated Press

Youngkin's staff was giddy at the prospect. "I wanted to send them a gift basket," Kristin Davison, another senior Youngkin strategist, told me. "It was almost as good as when Stacey Abrams came." Republican elected officials around the country took potshots at their emerging villain. "The union boss responsible for shutting down schools is the final surrogate for Terry McAuliffe's failing campaign," Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas wrote on Twitter. "Virginians should vote accordingly!"

Youngkin won narrowly, motivating the G.O.P. base and making critical inroads in Loudoun, which had voted overwhelmingly for Biden. "For a closer for a campaign, you would think you would bring in a showstopper," Betsy DeVos gloated on Fox News on election night. "I guess, in this case, he did bring in a showstopper in Randi Weingarten, because she definitely stopped the show for kids across the country."

To Republicans, Weingarten may be too progressive, but to some members of her own union, she is not progressive enough. As the pandemic dragged on, she found herself caught between the wishes of the Democratic establishment she did not want to alienate and the left-leaning rank and file she represented. In Chicago, this tension came down, in early 2022, to the most elemental question for unions: whether or not to strike.

At the time, the new Omicron variant was surging, and Illinois was experiencing a record number of Covid cases and hospitalizations. The A.F.T.'s left-wing local, the Chicago Teachers Union, was concerned about sending its 25,000 members back to the classroom after winter break. The union was hearing similar worries from the Black families whose children make up a large percentage of the 320,000 students in Chicago's public schools. Many white suburban and exurban parents had been desperate to see their children return to the classroom and were now committed to keeping them there; but many urban Black parents — who tended to live in smaller homes with more family members, had generally lower vaccination rates and had lost more loved ones to the pandemic — had been and remained wary, especially with a new variant spiking.

The union demanded mandatory testing for all teachers and students or a temporary return to remote learning. Mayor Lori Lightfoot, a Democrat, balked. President Biden and other prominent Democrats had been unambiguous about their desire for the nation's schools to remain open. And the recent governor's election in Virginia had underscored the political danger of introducing more disruptions to in-person learning, especially with the 2022 midterms just around the corner. For Weingarten and the national union, a strike in the country's third-largest school system would obviously be politically costly.

The insurgent group that leads the C.T.U. first came together in 2008, when the bipartisan education-reform movement was sweeping across the country, dividing the Democratic Party. Centrist billionaires and centrist Democrats joined forces to lead the effort to introduce more testing, accountability and free-market competition to the public schools. But the more progressive wing of the party viewed these measures as an attack on the very institution of public education, unleashing the forces of capitalism on what is supposed to be a public good.

In Chicago, the reform efforts were led by Arne Duncan, the chief executive of the city's public-school district and President Obama's future education secretary. "Neoliberal education reform hit Chicago like a ton of bricks," Jesse Sharkey, a high school history teacher, told me. Sharkey was a leader of this insurgency and would go on to become president of the C.T.U. from 2018 to 2022. "You'd flip on the TV or

pick up a newspaper, and you couldn't avoid hearing our so-called leaders trashing our schools, talking about their culture of failure," he says. "It was an environment that was downright hostile to public education."

Sharkey and his fellow insurgents didn't believe the national union was fighting aggressively enough against these Democratic reformers. Tapping into Chicago's long history of community-based organizing, they built their own grass-roots movement within the union called the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators, or CORE. Led by Karen Lewis, a chemistry teacher and union activist, CORE challenged the C.T.U.'s incumbent leadership in 2010 and won control of the Chicago union. Two years later, after the city's new Democratic mayor, President Obama's former chief of staff Rahm Emanuel, embarked on an ambitious program to close public schools and replace them with charters, the C.T.U. called Chicago's first teachers' strike in 25 years. While the C.T.U. was voting on the strike authorization, Weingarten arrived in Chicago to appear on a panel with Emanuel at a conference hosted by the Clinton Global Initiative. It was a stunning turn of events that spoke to the tension between the A.F.T. and its left wing. For the political health of the union, Weingarten felt she needed to preserve her relationships with the country's most powerful Democratic leaders, many of whom, like Emanuel, were centrist reformers.

As the 2012 strike wore on, Emanuel tried to turn the city against the teachers, accusing them of using Chicago's children as "pawns," and unsuccessfully sought a court order to force them to return to work. After seven days, the city backed down; the union won major concessions, including a 16 percent raise over four years and the right for teachers who were laid off as part of Emanuel's ongoing school closures to be given priority for positions at other schools. The strike instantly became a galvanizing event for the union's more progressive members. Not only does CORE still control the C.T.U., but like-minded left-wing slates have since taken control of A.F.T. locals in several other cities, too, including Los Angeles and Baltimore.

These insurgent caucuses are unified by what they call "social justice unionism." They see public schools' ongoing struggles to educate their students as inseparable from the larger societal and economic issues facing their working-class members and the poor communities whose children dominate their classrooms. "We are trying to promote a brand of unionism that goes all out in its fight for educational justice and is brave about taking on conflicts," Sharkey says. "In some ways, we're less careful about who we piss off nationally."

There is a natural tension between these insurgent movements and the more establishment-oriented national union. In 2015, some rank-and-file members protested the A.F.T.'s decision to issue an early endorsement of Hillary Clinton, to whom Weingarten is close, who was running against the pro-labor Bernie Sanders. But the tension is about more than just politics; it also goes to the heart of the A.F.T.'s identity. To these caucuses, the union's power comes from the collective strength of its members — from the bottom up — which can conflict with the top-down leadership style of Weingarten, who has cultivated a distinct public profile, sometimes characterized by her own tendency toward political hyperbole. An impulsive user of Twitter, she has been known to send out the occasional overheated message. During the pandemic, when DeSantis supporters were selling "Don't Fauci My Florida" merchandise, including beer koozies, on the G.O.P.'s WinRed website, she wrote: "Disgusting. Millions of Floridians are going to die from Ron DeSantis' ignorance." She later apologized for the tweet.

Two days after returning from winter break in January 2022, with their demands still unmet, the C.T.U. called a strike. "The union isn't stupid," Sharkey, who was president at the time, told me. "We knew people were sick of the pandemic." But, he went on, "for better or for worse we're a union that strikes. We didn't think it would be an easy or strategically wise thing, but there was a principle around it. It was something we had to do."

The union already had a contentious relationship with Lightfoot, dating back to an 11-day strike over wages and class sizes in 2019 that ended with the city making major concessions. This time, though, the mayor had public opinion on her side, and she leveraged it in a flurry of media interviews, accusing the C.T.U. of holding Chicago's children "hostage." Lightfoot had long seen the A.F.T.'s local as a "political movement" whose ambitions extended well beyond protecting the rights of its workers. "I think, ultimately, they'd like to take over not only Chicago Public Schools, but take over running the city government," she told *The Times* in 2021.

The 2022 strike quickly became a political nightmare for national Democrats: A Democratic mayor was at war with a Democratic union, shutting down Chicago's schools at a moment when children were finally back in the classroom and the country was just beginning to confront the learning loss and emotional trauma caused by the pandemic. Splinter groups of teachers in Northern California were also planning sickouts in the face of the Omicron surge. The Chicago strike put Weingarten in a difficult position. Publicly, she supported the C.T.U., while also saying that children needed to be in the classroom. Behind the scenes, she was calling and texting Sharkey constantly, offering to do anything she could — even arrange a call with people at the White House — to help press Lightfoot and end the strike. After a few days, under intensifying public pressure, the C.T.U.'s members voted to return to work. They had lost this battle, but they already had their sights on a bigger one: the city's upcoming mayoral election.

In late October, just before the 2022 midterms, the results from the first full National Assessment of Educational Progress since the start of the pandemic were released, revealing that 40 percent of the country's eighth-grade public-school students were not proficient in math, and 32 percent were not proficient in reading. The strikingly low scores instantly became a G.O.P. talking point: The culprit wasn't the pandemic, schools or teachers but the unions and Democratic politicians beholden to them. "We cannot let the nation forget how teachers' unions tried to hold our children's futures for ransom," said Representative Virginia Foxx of North Carolina, then the ranking Republican

on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. “These union bosses, and the politicians who enabled them, must be held accountable.” Republicans up and down the ballot accused their Democratic opponents of carrying water for the teachers’ unions. A week before the election, Fox News ran a segment headlined “Have the Teachers Unions Sold Out Your Kids to the Democrats?”

Christopher Rufo, the right-wing activist who manufactured the obsession with C.R.T. two years earlier, was now on Fox News railing against another crisis — the “academic queer theory” that he charged was being “mainlined” into America’s public schools — while Republican candidates condemned the “grooming” of children to identify as different genders in the nation’s classrooms. Many Republican candidates pledged their allegiance to a “Parents’ Bill of Rights,” requiring schools to provide information on reading lists, curriculums and whether a family’s child used another name or pronoun in school.

The A.F.T. spent in excess of \$20 million in the 2022 midterms, more than it ever had in an off-year election, and Weingarten campaigned tirelessly with high-profile Democrats around the country, her arrival on the stump invariably inspiring glee among local Republican leaders. When she appeared in Michigan with Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, one G.O.P. pundit, Kaylee McGhee White, described her on Fox Business Network as “the kiss of death.” Whitmer won easily, as did many other Democrats whose opponents had railed against drag-queen shows for children or L.G.B.T.Q.-themed books in school libraries. But Republican candidates who campaigned on another education issue — school choice — fared much better.

As a political matter, all the education battles that had erupted since the start of the pandemic — over school closures, over how the country’s racial history should be taught, over what sort of role parents ought to have in the classroom — were really about the same thing: whether America’s children should continue to be educated in government-run public schools. Did the pandemic and the culture wars reveal the indispensability of these schools to their communities and to the broader fabric of the nation, or did they only underscore their inherent limitations — in effect, making the case for school choice?

It was the University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman who first proposed the modern concept of school vouchers in a paper in 1955. Friedman was a champion of free markets, and his idea was to leverage the transformative power of capitalism to prod schools to compete for families’ dollars. But vouchers served another purpose too. The Supreme Court had just ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education*, and many white Americans were worried about the looming prospect of being forced to send their children to desegregated schools. Friedman saw an opening for his proposal, writing, “Under such a system, there can develop exclusively white schools, exclusively colored schools and mixed schools.”

Thirty years later, with Friedman serving as an economic adviser, President Reagan tried repeatedly to introduce federal school-voucher legislation. One of his most vocal opponents was Al Shanker, then the A.F.T.’s president, who argued that choice might be the point of “shopping malls,” but it was not the point of education, nor was it the reason taxpayers were expected to fund the nation’s public schools: “We do so not to satisfy the individual wants of parents and students but because of the public interest in producing an educated citizenry capable of exercising the rights of liberty and being productive members of society.”

Even Congress, where Republicans held the Senate majority, considered Reagan’s voucher proposals too radical. But the concept endured. In the 1990s, vouchers were championed by Christian conservatives like Paul Weyrich, a founder of the Heritage Foundation and mentor to Justice Clarence Thomas. Weyrich believed that the nation’s public schools had become “morally decadent institutions” and argued that the only answer was for Christians to educate their children themselves, ideally with government money. Over the years, some states experimented with limited voucher programs, typically designed to target discrete populations like children with special needs. But the pandemic created an opening for voucher advocates to think more ambitiously and move more aggressively. In fact, this had been the plan almost from the very beginning. Two months into the school closures, in the spring of 2020, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Catholic archbishop of New York, asked DeVos — then the education secretary and a longtime supporter of school choice — in an interview on SiriusXM radio if she intended to “utilize this particular crisis to ensure that justice is finally done to our kids and the parents who choose to send them to faith-based schools.” DeVos answered unequivocally: “Yes, absolutely.”

In 2021, at least 18 states created new school-choice programs or expanded existing ones, and more followed suit in 2022. Some of these new programs represent a significant departure from those of the past. Known collectively as universal voucher programs, they are available to everyone and can be applied toward any kind of school. The goal is not merely to disrupt public education but to defund and dismantle it. For years, the country’s lower courts largely agreed that spending taxpayer money on religious schools was unconstitutional. But last summer, the Supreme Court created a new precedent, ruling that it was in fact unconstitutional for voucher programs — in this case, one in rural Maine — to *exclude* religious schools.



Secretary of Education in an indoor setting, at a White House Coronavirus Task Force press briefing at the U.S. Department of Education in 2020. Alex Wong/Getty Images

DeVos, now back in the private sector, is one of the leading funders of this new national voucher campaign, primarily through an organization that she helped found called the American Federation for Children. The group and its affiliates spent \$9 million on school-choice campaigns in 2022, at least \$2.5 million of which came directly from DeVos and her husband. They spent much of this money in the primaries, turning support for school choice into a litmus test and targeting Republican incumbents opposed to it. Three-quarters of the candidates they supported won. “There wasn’t a red wave or a blue wave in the midterms, but there was a school-choice wave,” Corey DeAngelis, a senior fellow at the American Federation for Children, wrote to me in an email. Echoing Weyrich’s sentiments about the moral decadence of American public education, DeAngelis quoted Voddie Baucham, a Christian home-schooling advocate: “We cannot continue to send our children to Caesar for their education and be surprised when they come home as Romans.”

DeAngelis identified Weingarten as a useful political foil long before Mike Pompeo. He has been trolling her relentlessly on Twitter since 2021, ostentatiously thanking her for starting “the school choice revolution.” In March, at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference in suburban Washington, he posed with a life-size cardboard cutout of her clutching an award labeled “Threat to America’s Children,” his left thumb raised in approval.

Lori Lightfoot, the mayor of Chicago, was right about the local teachers’ union’s political ambitions. In February, Brandon Johnson, a former middle-school teacher and paid union organizer, challenged her in the city’s mayoral election. It was a long shot — one early poll put his support at 3 percent — but for the C.T.U., the Johnson campaign was a natural progression. To pursue their broader agenda, which reaches beyond education into areas like housing and policing, they needed the kind of power that can come only from winning partisan political elections. And they had both a powerful grass-roots movement and a source of campaign funds, in the form of members’ dues, that could be leveraged to support Johnson’s candidacy.

Johnson’s campaign was underwritten largely by the teachers’ unions. Though the A.F.T. and the C.T.U. had their differences in the past, they have become more closely aligned in recent years. While there are still some divisions within the Democratic Party over education policy, the bipartisan education-reform movement that once posed such a formidable existential threat to the A.F.T. is a shadow of its former self. The threat to the A.F.T. is now partisan, which means that Weingarten is no longer facing as much pressure from centrist Democrats. Backed by the financial and organizational muscle of the national and local teachers’ unions, Johnson knocked Lightfoot out of the two-person runoff, making her the first incumbent mayor in Chicago to be unseated after a single term in 40 years.



The Chicago mayoral candidate Brandon Johnson at a rally at the Chicago Teachers Union Foundation in March. John J. Kim, via Getty Images

By now, Pompeo, Tim Scott, Marco Rubio, Ron DeSantis, Donald Trump and the rest of the Republican Party were busy elevating education to a central plank in its 2024 platform and in the process transforming Weingarten into the new Hillary — a G.O.P. stand-in for everything that was wrong with America. The Republican-led House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic was continuing to build its case that Weingarten and the A.F.T. exerted undue influence over the C.D.C.'s school-reopening guidelines, summoning Weingarten to appear in Washington on April 26 at a hearing titled “The Consequences of School Closures.”

But Weingarten was building her own case. Public education was now itself a hyperpartisan issue, and she addressed it in hyperpartisan terms in a fiery speech at the National Press Club. Calling out by name some of the people who had demonized her since the pandemic, including Betsy DeVos, she described the ongoing effort to defund public schools as nothing less than a threat to “cornerstones of community, of our democracy, our economy and our nation.” She pointed to studies that have shown that vouchers don’t improve student achievement, characterizing them as a back door into private and parochial schools that are not subject to the same federal civil rights laws as public institutions and can therefore promote discrimination. “Our public schools shouldn’t be pawns for politicians’ ambitions!” she thundered, moving toward her emotional conclusion. “They shouldn’t be defunded or destroyed by ideologies.”

Like the Virginia’s governor’s race one and a half years earlier, Chicago’s mayoral runoff became, at least in part, a referendum on education. The effects of the pandemic on Chicago’s public schools have been profound. More than 33,000 students have left the school system since the fall of 2020, and the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress scores showed steep declines in math and a widening achievement gap between white and Black students.

Brandon Johnson’s opponent, Paul Vallas, ran Chicago’s public schools in the late 1990s. Chicago has no Republican Party to speak of, but Vallas, a vocal proponent of charter schools and vouchers, was the conservative candidate. In 2009, he said he was “more of a Republican than a Democrat.” He was supported by the local business community and endorsed by the city’s police union. A group affiliated with the American Federation for Children spent \$60,285 on a pro-Vallas digital media effort. But Arne Duncan and a number of other centrist Democrats endorsed Vallas, too.

On the eve of the April runoff election, Weingarten headed to Chicago to speak at a Johnson political rally headlined by Bernie Sanders. Both the A.F.T. and the C.T.U. continued to funnel money into Johnson’s campaign as the election approached, their combined contributions totaling \$4.6 million. “All of this stuff is about power,” observed a local community activist, Ja’Mal Green, who had run in the first round of the election but didn’t make the runoff and was now supporting Vallas.

When Johnson narrowly won, it was a stunning upset, not just for the candidate but for the left. Even as the Republicans were ramping up their attacks on Weingarten and on the institution of public education, the teachers’ unions had effectively elected the mayor of America’s third-largest city, who was himself an avowedly progressive union organizer promising to raise taxes on the rich, reform the police and increase funding for the city’s schools. Maybe Pompeo hadn’t been wrong, at least as far as his own party was concerned. It was those who had underestimated the political power of the unions who were mistaken. “They said this would never happen,” Johnson said in his victory speech. “If they didn’t know, now they know!”

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