

America's Political Battleground — Public Schools



Increasingly, schools, teachers, and students are becoming mainstream media's focus in an unprecedented way. Buzzwords and phrases like Critical Race Theory (CRT), Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and school choice have worked their way into an increasing amount of Facebook posts and trending tweets. And curriculum, teacher efficacy, and parent involvement have been called into question seemingly out of nowhere.

So what is going on?

“Whoever controls the media, controls the mind.”

-Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors

While this may seem like the flippant statement of a rockstar, many sources support this very idea. In his 2008 book, *Just How Stupid Are We?: Facing the Truth About the American Voter*, Rick Shenkman comments on how American voters have a much more powerful voice since the advent of television but are also vulnerable to manipulation as a result.

Exactly how vulnerable to that manipulation are we? Reporters from *Wall Street Journal* reported that Facebook's internal presentations stated explicitly, "[our] algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness." In a world where each share brings visibility, and each click puts money in somebody's pocket, this exploitation has enormous implications and an even more significant impact.

With the widespread use of social media, politicians and policymakers have seen an opportunity to ensure that they maintain their political power. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok — these platforms are all exploited to meet potential voters and cause more division amongst voters.

The main topic of this current division is public schools.

And it makes sense; it's low-hanging fruit. According to Research.com, about 90% of American students are enrolled in public schools. This is the single most unifying factor of American voters. So public schools — and the children in them — have become the latest political battleground, a way for politicians to claw to maintain their footholds in society and their relevancy in an ever-changing world.

As far back as 1997, a group of educators argued that schools would be most successful if they were to integrate and combine academic, social, and emotional learning.¹ Fifty years before this book, however, was an arguably more influential article that argued the importance of social-emotional learning.

In 1943, Abraham Maslow published an article in *Psychological Review* in which he introduced a concept — that he later refined over the following decades — known as a "hierarchy of needs."² This hierarchy has admittedly been misquoted and misrepresented in several textbooks throughout the years,³ but his actual writings represented the foundations of social-emotional learning. In his writing, Maslow outlined what he perceived to be the

basic needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. He saw these as the “basic goals of human beings”.⁴

In broad terms, Maslow theorized that peoples’ most basic need was the physiological domain, which includes food, thirst, sleep, and even maternal behavior. Next came safety — being in an environment not threatened by wild animals, criminals, or the elements. For children, this also means stability, including having a semblance of routine.

After those needs were met, then love needs were next important — he also noted that love needs were the most common cause of maladjustment. After love came esteem, which he divided into two categories — the need for achievement and the need for respect. And finally, one can achieve self-actualization.

Along with these needs came Maslow’s preconditions — a set of prerequisites — nonnegotiables required to meet a person’s needs. These include the freedom of autonomy (to speak, act, and express oneself) and the freedom of inquiry and expression (seeking knowledge, defending oneself, seeking justice).⁵

It is clear that Maslow knew in 1943 what modern researchers are still confirming: meeting a child’s social and emotional needs is the best and most sound way to improve education. As Susanne Denham and Chavaughn Brown point out, students learn in social settings and “in collaboration with teachers and peers, and must be able to utilize their emotions to facilitate learning”.⁶ In their 2010 study, they provided clear data indicating obvious connections between SEL and favorable academic outcomes.

Yet, with the abundance of data available to support the need for SEL, policymakers — like those in Oklahoma who drafted SB 1442 — are aiming to remove SEL from school curricula.

“Policy makers need to understand what researchers and educators already know: Social-emotional learning helps create more engaging schools and prepares students for the challenges of the world”.⁷ While Weissberg and Cascarino are exactly right, I fear they may be missing an even more glaring idea.

Policy makers already know this and understand this. They have access to all of this exact same data. They can see that teaching students to be empathetic learners with emotional intelligence is the best way to lead American students to better education. What conservative policymakers — the frontmen behind hurtful bills like that in Oklahoma and

the harmful “Don’t Say Gay” Florida HB 1557 — also know is that “empirical research on the relationship between empathy and political attitudes indicates that empathy is positively correlated both with liberal ideology in general and specific liberal policy preferences”.⁸

In fact, in a 2016 Pew Research Center Report, “registered voters with a college degree or more education” favored Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump by 23 percentage points. And in 2018, according to *The Atlantic*, the “diploma divide” was still apparent. At the time, 61% of non-college-educated white voters voted in favor of Republican candidates, compared to the 37% of non-college-educated white voters who voted Democrat.

Interestingly, this diploma divide doesn’t exist because people go off to college and suddenly become liberals (though some of us do — myself included.) *The Atlantic* asserts that it results from college-educated white voters finding they “can’t fully support the [Republican] party anymore.”

With this information, policymakers and politicians have turned their sights on public schools, using children as weapons and pawns in their own political war. Immediately, they are passing bills and attacking topics Critical Race Theory and Social-Emotional Learning — which have been established to teach empathy and understanding. They are writing policies to make students feel uncomfortable and to make sure their lowest level needs aren’t being met.

They are using legislature like Indiana’s HB 1134 and Louisiana’s HB75 to make teachers — of whom society already asks too much — do more and more work until they are ineffectual as educators.

Policymakers are securing their places within American politics immediately by passing this legislature and using social media to put it in front of the average consumer. They are using media manipulation to make sure their constituents remember them on voting day.

But they’re also launching a long-term attack on schools, hoping to break a system that was already flawed at best. They’re using the political power they have to ensure that the 90% of students enrolled in public schools don’t have access to high-quality education. They’re doing so by refusing to meet students’ social and emotional needs, tying teachers’ hands with subpar curriculum, and making teachers’ jobs so unbearable they quit because of the pressure of their workload.

Policymakers have seen the data that college degrees and empathy lead people to vote for legislature that helps others rather than continuing to listen to harmful conservative rhetoric. As a result, they're trying to guarantee the future of America doesn't have access to proper education, empathy, and ultimately success on a global scale. All to secure their places as career politicians until retirement.

Schools have become America's political battleground. Has anyone stopped to consider the children inside?

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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Denham, Susanne A., and Chavaughn Brown. "Plays Nice With Others': Social–Emotional Learning and Academic Success." *Early Education & Development*. Informa UK Limited, October 7, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2010.497450>.
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