

# Conservative school board candidates flop

## Across US, elections were contentious

**Brooke Schultz and Geoff Mulvihill**  
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HARRISBURG, Pa. – Voters across the U.S. largely rebuked conservative candidates in local school board elections who want to ban books and restrict classroom conversations on race and gender.

In recent years, down-ballot elections have become proxy votes for polarizing national issues. Liberal and moderate candidates took control in high-profile races Tuesday in conservative Iowa, and the swing states of Pennsylvania and Virginia.

The American Federation of Teachers said that candidates publicly endorsed by conservative groups such as Moms For Liberty and the 1776 Project lost about 80% of their races nationally in elections this week.

“They don’t want to engage in this banning of books or censoring of honest history or undermining who kids are,” Randi Weingarten, the teachers union president told The Associated Press on Wednesday, characterizing the candidates who won as “pro-public school.”

Conservative groups weren’t totally shut out though. In Pennsylvania’s York County, for instance, the 1776 Project’s political action committee said on social media that 36 of the 37 candidates they endorsed had won. Conservatives took control of the board in Texas’ third-largest district, Cypress-Fairbanks, in the Houston suburbs, and made gains in Minnesota’s largest district, Anoka-Hennepin.

Tina Descovich, a Moms for Liberty founder, said that 40% of the candidates endorsed by the group won in Tuesday’s elections, bringing to 365 the number of its candidates who have won races in the past two years.

“We have to work harder and we have to figure out how to invest in our candidates,” Descovich said, noting that teachers unions – a frequent foe – have decades-old political operations.

School boards, usually nonpartisan, deal with the nitty-gritty of running a key community institution that decides curriculum standards and discipline policies for students, negotiates contracts with teachers unions and sets property tax rates for homeowners.

But they also deal with some of the most divisive issues.

Pennsylvania saw a number of Democratic victories in school boards, particularly in districts that have recently seen GOP-led school boards adopt policies targeting transgender students, as well as reading materials and curriculum on LGBTQ+ history.

Turn PA Blue, a partisan political organization, said Democrats gained control of at least seven school boards and



Four school board candidates defeated Moms for Liberty-backed candidates in the Linn-Mar Community School District located outside of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. MARY JO CARLSON VIA AP

gained ground in a half-dozen others in Pennsylvania.

In the Central Bucks School District north of Philadelphia, Democrats flipped three seats, ousting the incumbent school board president, and retained two others, giving the party majority control. Democrats also wrested control of two other Bucks County boards.

At contentious school board meetings in Central Bucks in the past year, students who spoke out at meetings said they’d hear slurs and hate speech and seen violence at school – a problem they called on the board to address.

Many students felt more isolated after the board barred school staff from using students’ chosen names and pronouns without parental permission. The board also enforced policies of so-called “neutrality,” which prohibited classroom discussions that opponents say targeted LGBTQ+ students.

But strong opinions about these policies are precisely what drove people to the polls, said Bonnie Chong, the chairperson for Turn Bucks Blue.

“I think all of that made people understand that this has to change,” she said.

School board politics have also become contentious in Virginia since 2021, when Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin successfully campaigned on supporting “parents’ rights” in education.

He has criticized local school boards that prohibit schools from telling parents that their child identifies as

transgender, and he is trying to roll back accommodations for transgender students.

In Spotsylvania County, in the far outer suburbs of the Washington, D.C. area, all four GOP-endorsed candidates lost to more liberal candidates.

A conservative board in that county was one of the first to enact Youngkin’s reforms, and the superintendent hired by that district pulled 13 books from library shelves, including “Beloved” by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison and “The Perks of Being a Wallflower” by Stephen Chbosky.

Two board members went as far as to suggest that the books should be burned. One of those two, Kirk Twigg, lost his reelection race by almost 25 points.

Tamara Quick, a mother of five in Spotsylvania County, said she would leave the county if the current conservative board stayed in place. She was relieved about Tuesday’s results.

“I think it had to do with people really understanding the importance of education,” she said. The current board was not focused on that, Quick said. “They were drunk on power, tilting at windmills, creating monsters that didn’t exist so they could battle them.”

“They were just worried about how many books they could ban,” she continued.

In Loudoun County, another Virginia exurban area where the school board has been beset by controversies for two years, particularly over its policies on

transgender students, Democratic-endorsed candidates won or were leading in six of the nine school board races, although two Democratic incumbents lost or were trailing.

Meanwhile in Iowa, three candidates supported by Moms for Liberty were defeated in a district outside Cedar Rapids that has been in the national spotlight for its support of transgender students.

The race was targeted after the school board for Linn-Mar Community School District adopted a policy last year allowing students to request a plan supporting their gender identity that teachers, administrators and other students would follow – but that didn’t require permission from the students’ parents.

Before dropping out of the 2024 presidential race, former Vice President Mike Pence traveled to Cedar Rapids to rally opponents of the policy.

Parents sued over the policy, much of which became unenforceable after Gov. Kim Reynolds signed bills restricting which bathrooms transgender students can use and banning gender-affirming medical care.

“I think that that is a rejection of these policies and beliefs that public schools are bad,” said Brittanica Morey, who won reelection to the Linn-Mar board with the support of those who oppose Moms for Liberty-endorsed candidates. “It is a rejection of the belief that there is some sort of hidden agenda of indoctrination. None of that is happening.”