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What to Watch 2024—Part 2

Democracy at a Crossroads: Navigating Threats and Charting the Course for the Future

Our nation's Founding Fathers maintained that the success of the fragile American democracy would require an educated population with the skills to navigate and tussle with political and social issues to participate in civic life; be informed voters to protect their rights and freedoms, and to resist tyrants and demagogues. This education, formal and informal, must include exposure to a variety of viewpoints and an unfiltered understanding of historical influences on present day policies and realities.



In the [first installment of What to Watch 2024](#), ACS examined these realities and how they threaten democracy; Threat 1: Reluctance to Embrace Living Wages, and Threat 2: Hurdles to Health Care Access.

This installment of What to Watch 2024 will examine two more policy trends, this time examining threats in our schools—the evolving trend of “parental rights” and how it differs from the continued expansion of school vouchers.



Threat 3: The “Parental Rights” Movement

A small but very vocal group of “parental rights” advocates are seeking to narrow the scope of and level of exposure that children have to topics that have historically been the standard for traditional public education.



The concept of “parental rights”—once an inconsequential phrase buried in the fine print of field trip permission slips—has emerged as a rallying cry for parents who want to involve themselves, with an unprecedented

level of detail, in the content, methodology, and practices that drive their children’s education. For more than 100 years, the United States has a well-chronicled history of parental rights dialogue and action. You can see this in the attempt to ban [child labor practices in the progressive era](#) and in national child labor standards outlined in [The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938](#). In the [1960s and 1970s the pace of social change led to variations of “child protection” strategies](#) through the banning

Happy Birthday ACS!

Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC, is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2024! Throughout this entire year, we will be looking back at our journey to get to where we are today, and looking forward to what the future has in store.

For 20 years we’ve helped our clients in nonprofits, for profits, government agencies, and philanthropic organizations successfully share their messages about target issues with key audiences, advocate for policy change, and position themselves as leaders in their respective fields. Just imagine what the next 20 years will bring!



of textbooks and other literature that was deemed inappropriate or an encroachment of a parent's ability to decide what all children should or should not be exposed to while at school.

This theme continued to evolve through the end of last century via the [priorities](#) and legislation of various political parties. More recently, there has been a spike in conversation [among members of Congress](#) and former [U.S. Secretary of Education Betsey DeVos in 2021](#) to ban the role of the federal government in education at the local level.

The recent wave of parental-rights activity stems from parental frustration over COVID-related school closures and public health regulations, as well as what some see as an [excess of "woke" public school curriculum](#). Activity has included targeted efforts to ban specific books, censor school curriculums, restrict bathroom use policy, and suppress various forms of speech presented by teachers and administrators related to Black history, democracy, diversity, and the LGBTQ+ community, just to name a few.

Following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effort to enshrine parental rights has chalked up multiple legislative victories in [Congress](#) and across [multiple state legislatures](#). Of significant concern is that some victories with regional and statewide implications have been led by the personal preferences of a handful of parents ([in one case, one parent](#)) who have dictated what hundreds and even thousands of children learn.

Most elected officials and organizations leading local and regional efforts are leveraging the fear induced when the term "parental rights" is used as a justification for issues that typically would not be a concern for most parents. In short, "parental rights" is usually a distraction from more important and substantive K-12 matters. For example, the Texas legislature is considering a bill that would ["would severely restrict classroom lessons, school activities and teacher guidance about sexual orientation and gender identity in all public and charter schools up to 12th grade."](#) Yet Texas [parents already have the right](#) to remove their child from a class or activity that conflicts with their beliefs and can review all instructional materials.

Ultimately, parental rights advocates have distracted policymakers from addressing the truly substantial issues affecting children in the United States:

learning loss from the pandemic,



the significant need to address student mental health,



the lack of behavioral health professionals,



the significant teacher shortage,



and the jarring lack of access to affordable quality child care for families



Threat 3: What's on the Horizon for 2024?

There have been instances of communities and small groups of parents pushing back on the “parental rights” movement either at the ballot box via local school board races or at local school districts where small bands of parents have called out and amplified misinformation of such efforts. There remains, however, momentum in local communities and at the federal level among certain members of Congress. In short, the “parental rights” movement will most certainly be a factor throughout and leading up to the 2024 election cycle. ACS continues to work on this issue and many others with traditional K-12 public schools, coalitions, and organizations around the country. ACS has partnered with these organizations to help address local, state, and federal attacks on traditional public education policy and programs through advocacy, direct lobbying, community engagement, and communication.

So, what can you do? Run for school board or speak out at your local school board about disruptive actions that do not promote strategic thinking and learning. Leverage resources from trusted organizations like Parents for Public Schools to help guide your community work.

“Parental rights” efforts rarely include parents who are seeking to advance policies that are more open and inclusive to those with differences, who are unafraid of tough conversations about history, and who believe in free speech to ensure the experience of each child reflects what our public schools were originally established to achieve—[a productive workforce, an informed citizenry, and equal access to social mobility](#).

ACS has worked with dozens of K-12 organizations across the country, including school districts and regional and statewide coalitions and partnerships. Their success has been closely linked to maintaining their role as institutions that inspire learning, challenge assumptions, and embrace diversity of thought. Rather than putting up barriers to content, these traditional K-12 institutions break barriers by serving all who walk through their doors, with content that fulfills what the Founding Fathers intended for public education to achieve a stable democracy.

Threat 4: School Vouchers

According to the [National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education](#), based at Teachers College at Columbia University, there has been steady growth in the appeal of vouchers, particularly during the last two years. States expanding the availability and access to education vouchers include Ohio, Arizona, Florida, Iowa, Utah, Arkansas, North Carolina, North Dakota, Indiana, Missouri, West Virginia, and New Hampshire.

The use of vouchers is hotly contested. Advocates argue that vouchers can provide parents with more choices, increase competition among schools, and potentially improve educational outcomes. Critics raise several concerns, however, about the

Vouchers, or Ed Choice programs as they are also known, are public tax dollars provided to families to help subsidize tuition for their children at a private, parochial, or charter school. The original intent of vouchers was to give low-income families with children in traditional public schools the opportunity to choose other schools for their children, based on specific contextual situations, and to give those schools flexibility to operate non-traditionally to see if that improved performance. Eligibility, program requirements, and mandates related to vouchers vary from state to state.



negative implications of public school vouchers. Despite decades of experimentation, voucher programs are largely unproven from a student performance, operational accountability, eligibility, and ethical use perspective.

Student Performance.

There is little reliable data to compare outcomes between voucher students and their peers in traditional public schools because students receiving voucher dollars are usually not mandated to take the same tests or assessments as their traditional public school district counterparts. When comparative data *is* available, it shows that voucher students are not [excelling academically](#) in comparison to public school students.

Lack of Accountability.

Voucher programs drain states' public school resources without the accountability measures usually applied to the use of public tax dollars, such as annual audits, public record requests, compliance with state academic standards, and compliance with state testing mandates, to name a few.

Eligibility.

Traditional public schools have a responsibility to educate every student regardless of race, color, creed, religion, disability, socio-economic status, and/or family challenges. This includes special education and English language learner populations, which can be more than 10 percent of students. Schools accepting vouchers have the flexibility to engage in (deliberately or not) selective admission, thereby “cherry picking” students who have fewer complex needs and require fewer supports.

Misuse.

Many voucher student families who were already paying for and attending non-public schools are now using taxpayer dollars to [supplant their existing tuition payments](#). Some of these families can afford tuition and/or are from communities that are not historically disadvantaged.

- ▶ Studies of the Louisiana voucher program by researchers at the University of Arkansas, found that after four years, students using the vouchers to attend private schools “performed noticeably worse on state assessments than their [public school] control group counterparts.”¹
- ▶ A 2019 study published in the Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences found significant losses in academic achievement for Indiana students who used a voucher to move from public to private school.²
- ▶ A 2018 report by the Institute for Education Sciences evaluated the impact of Washington, D.C.’s Opportunity Scholarship Program after two years of participation in the program. Math scores were a statistically significant 10 percentile points lower for students who used a private school voucher compared with students who applied but did not receive a voucher.³
- ▶ In August 2020, the Cincinnati Enquirer published a study that analyzed the results of 2.5 million test scores from schools in 150 Ohio cities from 2017-18 and 2018-19 and found that in 88 percent of cities the public school students outperformed the voucher school students.
- ▶ Arizona and Iowa are both in the midst of unanticipated budget crunches. In Iowa, the state projected just over 14,000 applications for vouchers but more than 25,000 applied for a voucher. Arizona similarly misidentified the level of interest at roughly 68,000 students; revised reports update that figure to 100,000 students. These missteps are forcing policymakers to either cut the program or devote additional resources to the program.⁴
- ▶ Reports indicate that in Arizona, Iowa, and other newly universal voucher states, the majority of new voucher applicants are students already enrolled in private schools.

Through policy, communication, and strategy work, ACS and its clients have worked to preserve and protect the critical role that traditional K-12 institutions play in our country—to accept all students, to serve all students, and to embrace differences to ensure traditional K-12 public education remains a transparent and accountable cornerstone of residents’ education that leads to a stronger democracy.

¹Louisiana’s voucher program piloted in 2008, with the program going statewide in 2012. This study aims to observe the achievement impacts during a four year observation period spanning from 2012–13 (Year 1) to 2015–16 (Year 4).

²This study capitalizes on Indiana’s unique system with both private and public schools taking the same standardized tests over time.

³More recent studies are hard to come by for a couple of reasons: Covid disruption of education and state testing, and most states are still recovering from learning loss in 2020–21.

⁴Arizona’s program has seen massive expansion that has spent more money than budgeted.

Threat 4: How Has ACS Helped?

ACS has worked for 20 years to help bring accountability and transparency to the use of public funds for vouchers. ACS also has worked to build narratives with the media and policymakers to reinforce that the expenditure of public funds must have ongoing review, monitoring, and evaluation. In particular, those who receive these funds must be responsible with those public dollars. ACS has observed that most individuals do not realize that their public dollars are being sent to institutions that have nearly zero accountability for the use of those funds. As a result, this fight continues, and more narrative building is needed to ensure taxpayers understand where their dollars are going and how they are used.

So...Where Do We Go From Here?

While no system is without flaws, the preservation of democracy is essential for creating societies that respect individual rights, promote the common good, and provide a framework for addressing challenges in a just and inclusive manner.

Threats to our democracy are real, but the impact can vary depending on the specific circumstances, the resilience of democratic institutions, and the response of residents and leaders to these challenges. Vigilance, civic participation, and a commitment to democratic values are essential in mitigating the risks associated with threats to democracy. As long as some amount of trust in our local government and elected officials remains, there is hope. This hope is the driving force that encourages individuals and organizations to overcome the challenges these threats pose.

At the heart of ACS' work is our goal that the communities we work with and live in thrive. Our 75+ years of cumulative experience working in and with nonprofits, for profits, philanthropic organizations, and government agencies has shown us the work begins and ends with promoting democracy and civic engagement with and for those that are systematically marginalized. In 2023 alone, ACS has helped numerous organizations across the country—including [Arras Foundation](#), [Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children](#), [PRE4CLE](#), [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#),

The Ohio 8, [Girls Inc. of Greater Santa Barbara](#), and [YWCA USA](#)—establish, enhance, and/or implement their efforts to improve the lives of the communities and individuals they serve. We look forward to our continued work and new opportunities that 2024 will bring for ACS and our clients.

WANT MORE?

Want to learn how communication, strategy development, advocacy, or capacity building can move your organization forward? Need an expert for training sessions or conference presentations?

Contact one of our team members, call toll free at 1-877-372-0166, or visit our website at advocacyandcommunication.org.

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IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Winter 2024 Newsletter: Part 1



What to Watch 2024—Part 1
Democracy at a Crossroads:
Navigating Threats and
Charting the Course for the Future

In *What to Watch 2024*, Advocacy & Communication Solutions (ACS) walked you through what a healthy democracy looks like—one that builds open, responsive, and accountable institutions and processes that serve the needs and preferences of the public. And, you read about how you can do your part to ensure a healthy democracy.

In 2024, ACS will examine some of those policy trends—in our workforce, health care systems, and schools—through two installments of our *What to Watch* Newsletter, through which we provide strategic insight into how we can navigate those threats in the coming year while working towards preserving democracy.

Fall 2023 Newsletter




The Great Reshuffle—Is a better deal in the cards for America's workforce?

Since the COVID pandemic, we've read countless stories of how America's employees are struggling to attract and retain employees—especially in industries such as hospitality, health care, and retail goods and services. There have been many theories for the seeming reluctance of people to rejoin the workforce, ranging from lack of childcare to a desire for more flexibility to manage the demands of home and work.

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, nearly 100 million people (37.8 million to be exact) quit their jobs in 2021 and 2022 in what was dubbed "The Great Resignation." The Chamber notes that many of these workers who quit their post-pandemic jobs have since been hired elsewhere, making the "Great Resignation" more of a "Great Reshuffle." In September 2023, however, there were 8.8 million job openings across the country, but only 6.3 million unemployed workers—even as news outlets reported strong employment growth.¹

¹www.chamber.com/resources/insights/employment-issues/2023

Summer 2023 Newsletter



Effective Communication in a Post-Pandemic Work Environment: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

The COVID-19 pandemic forced employers and employees in many industries to think differently about the way we all work. Some businesses were able to work remotely, and their employees had to adjust to that reality. This meant Zoom meetings instead of in person meetings, more phone calls instead of passing one another at the water cooler or in the hallway, and managing all the activity without being face to face. When workers began to return to offices as the COVID-19 pandemic receded, communication at the workplace for everyone demanded yet another shift. In short, the office has forever changed, and communication in this hybrid world is a challenge that must be acknowledged.