

Panelists see public schools as key to the soul of democracy

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Protecting public schools that serve all children is a fight for “the soul of democracy,” panelists told a crowd of activists and public education advocates in Southlake.

Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children, participated in the Jan. 6 [forum](#).

“You are at the front lines of this moral, spiritual battle ... for the soul of democracy. You are at the fiercest, most pitched place in that national struggle,” Johnson told participants at the event.

Southlake targeted by ‘takeover’ initiative

Southlake is home to the Carroll Independent School District, which also serves parts of neighboring Grapevine, Colleyville and Westlake. Carroll’s school board was one of four—along with boards in the Grapevine-Colleyville, Keller and Mansfield districts—targeted for “takeover” last year by a well-financed Grapevine-based political action committee, [Patriot Mobile Action](#).

The political action committee opposes the teaching of critical race theory, seeks to remove “troubling resources” from school libraries, and supports teaching “the values of American exceptionalism.”

At the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas last August, Glenn Story, president of the Patriot Mobile cellphone corporation, boasted [his](#)

[company funded campaigns](#) to elect like-minded candidates to school boards.

“We went out and found 11 candidates last cycle, and we supported them,” Story said. “And we won every seat. We took over four school boards.”

[Political analyst Chris Tackett](#), a former school board trustee for the Granbury Independent School District, encouraged supporters of public education to “follow the money” to see how a few extremely wealthy individuals influence public policy.

However, that can be difficult when it comes to school board elections, he noted. Donor contributions to campaigns for the Texas Legislature and statewide office are filed with the Texas Ethics Commission, but that same level of transparency is not required in school board races, he said.

“So those who have—we’ll say—nefarious aims really like the way the system works today, and they don’t want to change it,” Tackett said.

Beverly Powell, who served in the Texas Senate until being unseated in the last election after redistricting, likewise criticized how an “oligarchy” of wealthy individuals often influences public policy.

A voucher by any other name

She particularly urged supporters of public education to watch out for politicians promoting private school vouchers without using that term. Instead, she said, they talk about “education savings accounts,” “payments to families of students in special populations,” “tax credit scholarships” and “school choice.”

“It’s not about choice. It’s about stealing your money to send it to high-dollar private schools for wealthy kids who attend there,” Powell said.

She also warned against state funding for charter schools that are “more focused on profit than they are on children.”

Sherrie Mattula, a veteran schoolteacher and former school board trustee with the Clear Creek district who now leads the Sisters United Alliance, encouraged forum participants to learn local school board policies and use them to hold trustees accountable.

She urged local activists to organize groups of five to 10 people who attend every school board meeting to ensure the rights of students and teachers are protected.

Johnson likewise encouraged supporters of public education to attend school board meetings.

“The seat of democracy is the school board meeting. That meeting is where it happens,” he said.

‘Learn who your neighbor is’



Charles Foster Johnson

However, rather than engaging in bitter political battles, Johnson encouraged public education advocates—particularly in growing suburban areas populated by people who moved there from “somewhere else”—to get

to know their neighbors and find common ground with them.

“Learn who your neighbor is and start there. That’s where we have to begin,” he said.

Rather than talking only with like-minded political allies in small groups, Johnson urged supporters of public schools to get involved in broad-based community groups with people of different backgrounds.

“Share a meal. Drink a cup of coffee. And get to know the person who is different from you,” he said. “And she is going to see she has more in common with you than in conflict.”

Citing the late Baptist ethicist Glen Stassen, Johnson called on politically oriented advocates of public education to participate in “transforming initiatives” based on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

Retaliation—responding to political opponents with harsh rhetoric and verbal attacks—takes its toll, Johnson said, confessing his own shortcomings in that area.

“We have it on good authority. It’s a 2,000-year-old moral teaching,” he said.

“What doesn’t work ... is to whack somebody back who whacks you. It just increases the whacking.”