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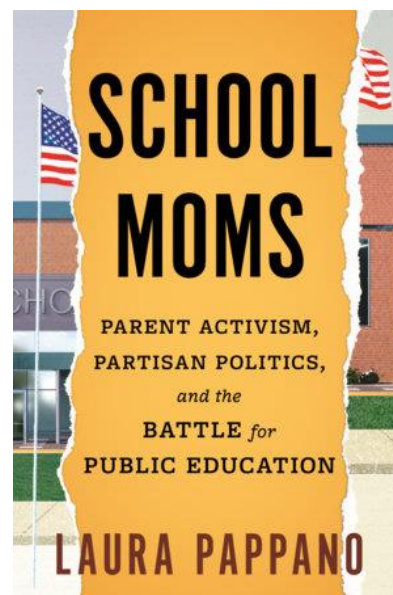
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The war for public education is not new (Hartman, 2013). The unfortunate truth of the matter is that the struggle for academic freedom in America is tipping in favor of those that would see public education censored from inclusivity, diversity, multiple perspectives, and, in some cases, historical fact. Americans are bearing witness to rising trends of attacks on academic freedom as teachers, librarians, and superintendents face punishments from their fellow citizens for doing the very thing America

charged them to do: educate the youth of America. Laura Pappano's *School Moms: Parent Activism, Partisan Politics and the Battle for Public Education* uses journalism and humor to report on the issue of school voucher programs and curricular censorship in America's public schools.



In *School Moms*, Pappano uses journalism to document the growing partisan politics in American education. While the methods Pappano employs are not empirical, they do highlight and humanize the effects of partisan politics invading education spaces. Pappano interviewed a education stakeholders from all points along the political spectrum. In addition to political actors, Pappano interviewed members of public education spaces such as teachers, librarians, administrators, and community members. Along with her interviews, the author documented her experience of attending events hosted by political action committees (PACs) and various activist groups such as the Moms of Liberty, a right leaning grass roots organization that focuses on public education curriculum and governance. Though left-

leaning, Pappano's reporting strives to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the political tension prevalent in public education.

Pappano is a decorated education journalist having worked with and for wide and varied entities such as *The New York Times* and *The Hechinger Report*. Beyond her journalism, she is the writer-in-residence for the Wellesley Centers for Women and a Fellow-in-Residence at Yale University. Pappano is also the founder of the New Haven Student Journalism Project, wherein local public school students, along with a mentor from Yale, cover current events in *The East Rock Record*. Given her journalistic bent, the audience for *School Moms* is written for the general public interested in public education. However, the subject matter will interest audiences from the education research and academic communities as well as readers involved with education policy and analysis. The language and writing of the book is personal and intimate, as if the reader was having a cup of coffee discussing the content with Pappano herself. As a result, the book invites the reader to empathize with the experiences of those about whom Pappano writes.

Pappano's work adds a human element to the narrative I was not previously exposed to. Empirical works aside, to my knowledge the only work similar to Pappano's book is Cara Fitzpatrick's (2023) *The Death of Public School: How Conservatives Won the War over Education in America*, which takes a historical approach to document the rise of partisan politics in American public education. While policy briefs, legal documents, and scholarly journals serve as excellent sources of information, they often lack authentic insight into the human experience of education. *School Moms* weaves together historical context and present issues in education through the experience of educators from the classroom to the district board office.

One example is Pappano's recollection of attending a Moms for Liberty Convention alongside an anime convention with vivid detail of women dressed in their Sunday best next to cosplayers bedecked in colorful costumes. The author's description paints a portrait of the diversity of America that Americans can identify with in their everyday lives. Pappano includes the stories of teachers, librarians, and superintendents who have experienced legal or career repercussions in addition to character assassinations from their community members. Furthermore, Pappano's work serves as a succinct yet thorough warning regarding the trajectory of education in the United States and encourages readers to pay greater attention to the issues raised in the academic community.

Education is a public good for American citizens with an ever-crumbling foundation as states pass new curricular censorship laws or legislation that takes money from public schools in the form of school choice (Horsford, 2019). When lines blur between politics and public schooling, the actual stakeholders, students, become lost in the battle for control. Pappano describes the macro-level impact of the far right's efforts to gain control of school boards. For example, such efforts include blatant fearmongering

about critical race theory (CRT) and Marxism in schools and demands for dismantling public education as a democratic entity (Bauerlein, 2024). Pappano writes that due to the far right's determination for power in school leadership, PACs now fund some campaigns of affiliate party members for school board positions. An example highlighted in the book is Williamson County, Tennessee, where it is now legal to run for school office and claim allegiance to a partisan party, effectively introducing partisan politics into the heart of school leadership. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that censorship laws, with their vague language, are accomplishing their goal as school faculty instead choose to self-censor out of caution to protect their livelihoods. As the author notes, such censorship and subsequent self-censorship create a vicious cycle of educational oppression by means of fear.

Furthermore, the rhetoric from the far right has effectively created a sort of neo-segregation wherein "public schools across the nation are nearly as segregated as they were five decades ago." According to a survey in June 2022, "more than one-third of students attended a public school in which 75% or more of the student population was the of the same race and ethnicity" (p. 90). However, the author, with other researchers like Horsford (2019) and Fitzpatrick (2023), demonstrates how the macro bleeds into students' and educators' everyday lives.

Pappano does an excellent job of capturing the micro-level repercussions of macro-level decisions. The two anecdotes from the book that should interest educators and those who care about education are about a current events teacher, Hawn, and a Black superintendent, Whitefield. Pappano describes how Hawn lost a position as a current events teacher in the state of Tennessee, and upon asking the school board for reasons for the termination, they refused to explain. Meanwhile, Whitefield was publicly vilified at a community school board meeting after sharing personal social media views that did not support the far-right agenda. Stories of Hawn and Whitefield fighting against the attempted conservative takeover of public schools are a source of encouragement and also a warning. Between conservative politics and cooperate greed, it is difficult to maintain an optimistic perspective on the future of education in the United States. Pappano leaves readers with the mission to always seek ways to resist and fight for the sacred space that is public schools through advocacy for education to remain a truly public good and free from partisan politics.

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About the Reviewer

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