

# AFTERSCHOOL AND THE EDUCATION CULTURE WARS



## A Briefing Paper

By Sam Piha and Samantha Fasen

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Sam Piha has served as founder and president of Temescal Associates since 2007. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 13 years of classroom teaching and work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2006, Sam managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. He later founded Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation, both dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs. Sam served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a master's degree in Social Welfare.



Samantha Fasen joined Temescal Associates and the How Kids Learn Foundation in 2019 and has fully embraced her work with the afterschool field. She helps to coordinate and develop marketing campaigns and multimedia elements to reach a wider audience and share with people the importance of out-of-school time and youth development.



Ren (Stacey) Daraio brings over 35 years of experience working in the field of youth development as a facilitator, trainer, and coach. She has experience training and coaching diverse audience groups, from afterschool practitioners and parents to funders and technical assistance providers. Prior to her work with Temescal Associates, Ren was the Deputy Director at the Community Network for Youth Development and a consultant for the Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

## ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

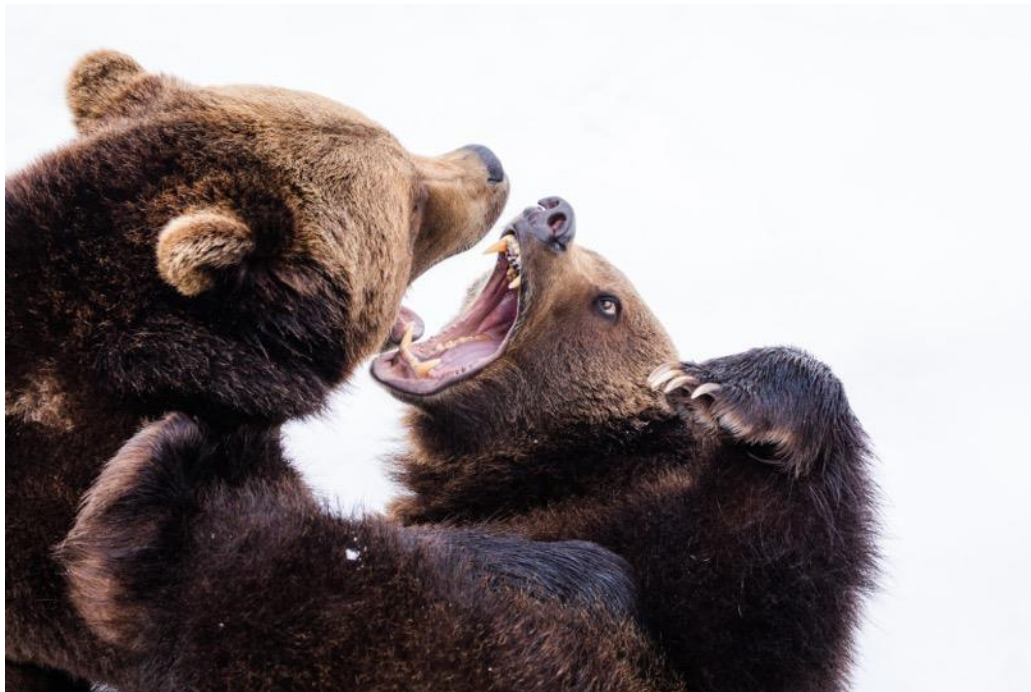
[Temescal Associates](#) is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who organizations, and policy makers.

[The How Kids Learn Foundation](#) (HKLf) is a 501(c)(3) organization. It is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of settings that support the education and healthy development of youth. This includes schools and out-of-school time programs. The HKL Foundation provides educational and training activities that promote the capacity of organizations that support the education and healthy development of youth. Examples of activities include conferences, speaker forums, screenings of relevant films, training sessions, coaching sessions, the awarding of digital badges to acknowledge exemplar programs and the learning that happens within these settings. Activities also include the development and distribution of educational materials (papers, self-assessment tools, videos, program guides, etc.).

Cover Photo: [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

We live in a political climate where differences are not explored, they are weaponized. In recent months schools and educators have been attacked under the guise of critical race theory, parent rights and the call to ban certain books. While afterschool programs have not been attacked directly, there are certain core values and program initiatives that have come under scrutiny. They include *equity, identity (LGBTQ+ and racial), mindfulness, growth mindsets, grit and social emotional learning (SEL)*.

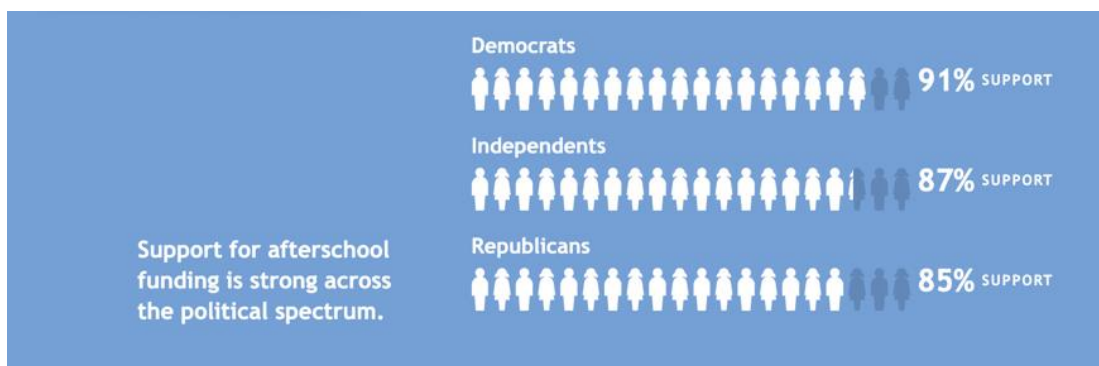
This paper presents important terms and definitions, examines the history of bipartisan support for afterschool and the recent uptick in criticism of afterschool's core concepts, and provides tips and resources to avoid entanglement in education culture wars.

## BACKGROUND

Recently there have been some loud voices challenging core concepts of public education and afterschool programs. Are there many citizens who are leading this fight or is it a manufactured controversy, which is a product of the internet? Below is a quote from an article (NEA News) that attempts to explain this.<sup>1</sup>

***“As the nation continues to reckon with the role racism plays in our society, a tiny but extremely vocal minority of voices is determined to turn our classrooms into battlegrounds for their vicious culture wars. These radical groups are using social media to spread disinformation and stoke fear about race in the classroom, pushing for laws to ban books about Ruby Bridges, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights figures, and seeking to censor teachers and deny students the right to a truthful and honest education.”*** – Edward Graham, NEA News

There has been an abundance of polling that asks about public support for the use of public funds for afterschool programs. Over the last 30 years, the approval numbers have been 80% or more. This suggests that the volume of recent critical voices does not represent the vast majority, regardless of party affiliation, that supports afterschool. The question we need to consider is who will control the narrative: the internet or actual data?



Source: [Afterschool Alliance, America After 3pm](#)

## HOW TO USE THIS BRIEFING PAPER

This paper is designed to raise understanding and awareness of the education culture wars that may threaten support for afterschool. It also provides resources for afterschool and organizational leaders. We recommend that program leaders share this paper with organizational leaders and program staff and consider the best ways to respond to misinformation and education culture wars.

## IMPORTANT TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Afterschool** - There are many terms that refer to school-based and community-based youth programs outside of the classroom. They include “afterschool,” “out-of-school time (OST),” “expanded learning programs (EXL),” “summer programs,” and “youth programs.” For the purposes of this paper, we will primarily use the term “afterschool” to refer to all these programs.

**Bipartisanship** - Sometimes referred to as **nonpartisanship**, is a political situation, usually in the context of a two-party system (especially those of the United States and some other western countries), in which opposing political parties find common ground through compromise. <sup>2</sup> Tripartisanship includes Independents along with Republicans and Democrats.

**Book Banning**- “a form of censorship, occurs when private individuals, government officials, or organizations remove books from libraries, school reading lists, or bookstore shelves because they object to their content, ideas, or themes.” <sup>3</sup>

“Before a book becomes banned, someone must first challenge it. The American Library Association defines a challenge as “an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group.” <sup>4</sup> The PBS News Hour offered a good segment on [book bans](#).



Source: [PBS News Hour](#)

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)** – “Critical race theory is an academic concept that is more than 40 years old. The core idea is that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies. The basic tenets of critical race theory, or CRT, emerged out of a framework for legal analysis in the late 1970s and early 1980s created by legal scholars Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, among others.” <sup>5</sup> The PBS News Hour offered a good segment on [CRT](#).



Source: [PBS News Hour](#)



**Equity** – Equity is often confused with equality. “Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.” <sup>6</sup>

**Mindfulness** – “Mindfulness is the awareness that occurs when you focus on the present and on the purpose of what you are doing and has both physical and psychological benefits.” <sup>7</sup>

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL)** – “SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” <sup>8</sup>

## HISTORY OF BIPARTISAN SUPPORT

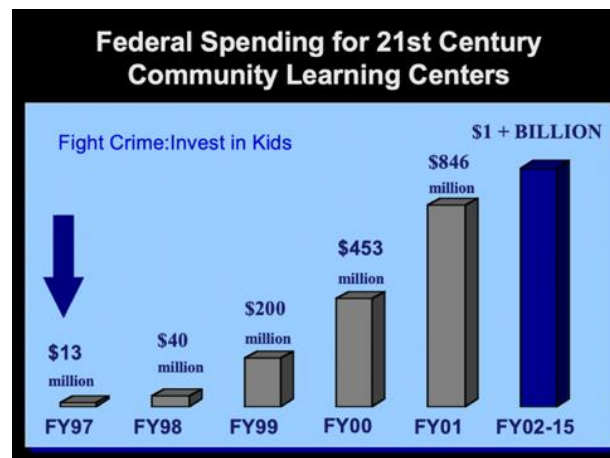
We currently live in a political landscape which is marked by divisiveness and polarization. But before we discuss how to not get entangled in the education culture wars, it is important to note that the support for the afterschool movement over the last 30 years has largely been bipartisan.

To get a better understanding of the bipartisan support for afterschool, past and present and how to maintain bipartisan support, we interviewed Dr. Terry Peterson, who was the chief counselor for former US Secretary of Education, Dick Riley, under President Bill Clinton. Dr. Peterson was involved in the launching of the 21st Century Community Learning Center Initiative. He is currently Vice Chair on the board for Afterschool Alliance. Learn more by viewing the [History of Afterschool in America](#) documentary.



Dr. Terry Peterson

**Q: Can you say something about the bipartisan roots of the afterschool movement?**  
**A: I find it very useful to trace overtime the bipartisan roots and continuing support for expanding, funding and improving summer enrichment and comprehensive afterschool and expanded learning opportunities and partnerships. The “roots” of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers in the 1990’s clearly involved Republican and Democratic members of Congress and a Democratic Administration.**



Source: [History of Afterschool in America](#)

*The roots in California involved bipartisan support in some key cities in the late 1980's, like Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and Sacramento and then spread greatly with the strong leadership of a Republican Governor, Schwarzenegger, and then much later, now, a huge expansion by a democratic Governor, Newsom. This type of local, state and national expansion of an initiative overtime is very unusual and very important.*

**Q: What kind of politics are needed to support afterschool, summer and expanded learning programs?**

**A:** *It is critical to keep this bipartisan support for afterschool, summer and expanded learning. Unfortunately, in these highly politicized times, certain concepts and especially acronyms and initials are magnifying the polarization. Because of the benefits seen for many years of bipartisan support for more and better afterschool and summer opportunities and partnerships, I think we have a special obligation for our children, youth and families served by afterschool, summer, and expanded learning to try to stay above these battles when representing the afterschool, summer, expanded learning and community school movements.*



*One way to stay above the fray is to go back to our simple roots and concepts, like expanding opportunities and developing more community connections for children, youth and families that want and need afterschool and summer programs to better succeed in school and life. By the way, this is not just good education and youth development but good "politics". Most voters and parents of most political persuasions appreciate terms like "expanding opportunities" and building more "community connections" and "local partnerships."*

*Another way is to approach voters and parents differently using everyday common-sense ways. For example, we know that in some localities, states and nationwide, certain terms like SEL and related terms are "offending" some Republicans and even Independents. While operating in the afterschool, summer, community schools and expanded learning arenas, why not use concepts that are similar, but that parents of many political persuasions approve of?*

**Q: There is a myth that Republican parents do not support funds for afterschool programs. Do we have research that suggests something different?**

**A:** We have found that Republican parents support funding afterschool and summer programs as well as Democratic and Independent parents. Interestingly and importantly, they all support very similar content in the programs. And this content is similar to the research evidence too.

Unpublished analyses by the Afterschool Alliance done very recently, found:

- Support for afterschool and summer learning programs is strong among Republican parents. More than 8 in 10 parents who identify as Republican agree that all young people deserve access to quality afterschool and summer programs (82%).
- From providing children opportunities to building life skills, to helping working parents keep their jobs, Republican parents overwhelmingly agree on the positive role afterschool programs play for children and families.

Strong majorities of parents who identify as Republican agree that afterschool programs:

- help young people engage with their peers and reduce unproductive screen time (85%);
- learn life skills, like the ability to communicate and work in teams (81%);
- have opportunities to build confidence (80%);
- provide opportunities to build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (76%);
- and become more excited about learning and interested in school (74%).

Republican parents also agree that afterschool programs provide working parents peace of mind knowing that their children are safe and supervised (83%), help working parents keep their job (81%), and keep kids safe and out of trouble (74%).

Focusing on activities and supports, Republican parents are as likely as parents overall to report that opportunities for their child to build life skills were important in their selection of afterschool and summer programs.

Similar to parents overall, most Republican parents report that opportunities for their child:

- to build life skills, such as interacting with their peers, developing social skills, and responsible decision making, were important in their selection in their child's afterschool program (88% vs. 87%)
- and what their child did during the summer (94% vs. 94%).

Republican parents want public investment in afterschool and summer programs. 85% of parents who identify as Republican report that they support public funding of afterschool programs and 86% support public funding of summer learning programs.

## **HOW TO AVOID ENTANGLEMENT IN THE EDUCATION CULTURE WARS**

**Be aware of current partisan or education “cultural” issues that are emerging**

**“In this environment, anything can be politicized,” said John Bridgeland, the CEO of Civic Enterprises, a public policy firm, who has worked extensively on building bipartisan support for SEL programs in schools.”<sup>9</sup>**



To raise awareness of the current education culture wars, we cite some of the titles and quotes from articles that have been published recently. Links to these articles can be found in the End Notes section.

### **Social Emotional Learning**

- ***Socio-Emotional Learning (SEL) Is Anti-White, Anti-Christian, and Anti-American Indoctrination*** <sup>10</sup>
- ***Schools Face Fears of ‘Critical Race Theory’ as They Scale Up Social-Emotional Learning***  
*“SEL has a history of both challenges and bipartisan support. SEL has faced political headwinds in some places before current debates over how schools discuss issues like racism and sexuality. But as interest in social-emotional learning rises among educators and policymakers, it’s also increasingly the target of ire from some conservative groups.”* <sup>11</sup>
- ***Social-Emotional Learning: K–12 Education as New Age Nanny State***  
*“This curriculum goes far beyond helping first-graders get along with their peers and delves into political manipulation. It’s never too early, apparently, to use SEL to create little community organizers.”* <sup>12</sup>
- ***Social Emotional Programming: The SEL Agenda to Enforce Thought Reform, Conformity, and Control*** <sup>13</sup>
- (VIDEO) ***Stella Morabito Presentation on Social Emotional Programming*** from Child Protection League Action on YouTube. <sup>14</sup>

### **EQUITY**

- ***When Did Equity Become a ‘Trigger’ Word?*** <sup>15</sup>  
*“Do you know what the trigger word down here is? ‘Equity,’” Joseph Cousins, a minister in Cherokee County, Ga., told me about a year ago. “To me, equity means fairness, compassion, goodness, honesty, decency...In today’s political environment, system leaders who take on these challenges face not only the problem of designing new policies but also in trying to communicate them without setting off a firestorm.”*

***“Equity had suddenly become a code word for scary-sounding things: race-related trainings, quotas, ‘Marxist’ theory.”***

### **MINDFULNESS**

- ***Stop Forcing Buddhist Meditation on Kids in School***  
*“Students in several US states are forced to participate in Buddhist-based meditation. If a child refuses, he or she is moved to the hall as if being punished. These schools are indoctrinating kids. This cannot stand. We’re demanding this end.”* <sup>16</sup>
- ***An Attack on Mindfulness in Schools: How Christian organizations are attempting to get rid of mindfulness programs in our public schools*** <sup>17</sup>
- ***Does Mindfulness Belong in Public Schools?***  
*“No public school district, public charter school, or public virtual charter school teacher, administrator, counselor, employee, or volunteer shall use any curricula with content related to social emotional learning in the training, instruction, or education of Students,” the bill reads. “The provisions of this subsection shall apply to all learning resources.”* <sup>18</sup>

- **Mindfulness meditation is now a staple in public schools, and thanks to Zoom, widely accessible**  
*“Many Christians, especially evangelicals, worry that public school use of mindfulness practices that originate in Buddhism (or, in the case of yoga, Hinduism) remains inherently religious and may lead children to abandon their Christian faith. They say it’s hypocritical for public schools to offer such practices while maintaining a ban on school prayer and Bible readings.”<sup>19</sup>*

## **BOOK BANS**

- **The Spread of Book Banning**  
*“Book-banning attempts have grown in the U.S. over the past few years from relatively isolated battles to a broader effort aimed at works about sexual and racial identity.”<sup>20</sup>*
- **Is Your School Facing a Book Challenge? These Online Resources May Help**  
*“Book challenges, restrictions, and outright bans on materials in K-12 classrooms and school libraries are popping up more and more across the country these days. Though such challenges are a perennial problem, school districts have seen an uptick in requests to ban books about LGBTQ characters, race, and racism. A PEN America report found that 2 million students in 86 school districts across the country have had their access to books restricted this past school year. And the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom is now getting reports of at least two—and sometimes three or four—book challenges a day, when in the past they would get that many cases per week, said the office’s director, Deborah Caldwell- Stone.”<sup>21</sup>*
- **12 Books That Have Been Famously Banned**  
*“The Catcher in the Rye has the fascinating double distinction of being both the most banned and the second most taught book in American schools.”<sup>22</sup>*



Source: [www.ala.org/bbooks](http://www.ala.org/bbooks)

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:**

- [Banned and Challenged Classics](#)
- [Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books, 2010-2019](#)
- [Most Frequently Challenged Authors of the 21st Century](#)

## **When Describing the Afterschool Program, Sharpen the Message; Avoid Acronyms and Jargon**



Source: [www.unsplash.com](http://www.unsplash.com)

When describing your program in written outreach documents, remember your audience are not afterschool insiders- they might be parents and community members. It is very useful to have parents and community members review the text to ensure that it is understandable to an outsider. This is also a good way to build parent advocates for the program who can speak out and support if the program comes under scrutiny.

***“The first question they [parents] had was, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’” he said. “I get math. I get reading. What the hell is social-emotional learning? ‘When commissioners explained they wanted schools to nurture qualities such as discipline, self-management, and relationship skills, “they’d [parents] say, ‘Oh yeah, we’re for that,’” - John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic Enterprises<sup>23</sup>***

*“Working on education improvements and reforms for almost fifty years, I have observed that almost any education innovation using initials is likely to invite pushback. Also, describing development and learning in shorthand “buzz words,” not mainstream terms, also invites problems. Case in point: We give very conservative critics great aid by providing them both initials, SEL, and words like social emotional learning. Instead, say practically that we are working to strengthen: self-management skills, social awareness skills, responsible decision-making skills, and teamwork skills” - Terry Peterson, Afterschool Alliance <sup>24</sup>*

## **Double Down on Commitment to Program Values**

While it is important to steer clear of trouble, we have to remain committed to our views. Below are some inspirational statements taken from [As Terms Like ‘SEL’ Draw Fire, Organizations Supporting Schools Sharpen Their Message](#) by Libby Stanford for ED Week. <sup>25</sup>

***“We all just have to continue to believe in what we do and stick together and not back down.” - Bridget Laird, CEO of WINGS for Kids***

*“Although the rhetoric surrounding critical race theory and SEL can be loud at times, it has not deterred education organizations from being vocal about their work. ‘If anything, we’ve doubled down on our values, we’ve doubled down on our program,’ Peter Shulman (CEO of Urban Teachers) said.”*

*“Urban Teachers isn’t coy about its stance on race and racism in its messaging. On its website, the organization writes “Structural racism and inequality have kept generations of urban children from receiving the education they deserve.”*

## **Get Involved, Especially Locally**

Support for afterschool is not guaranteed thus it is vital that we get involved in community decision making. Below are some suggestions.

**AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS**  
**Use By: 12/2024**

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**Serving size            5 Days a Week**

**INGREDIENTS:**  
***Social Emotional Learning, Growth  
Mindsets, Equity, Racial Identity  
Sexual Identity, Mindfulness, and more!***

MAY CONTAIN HEALTHY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Source: Temescal Associates

- Support candidates and groups that agree with your values.
- Vote for local, state and federal candidates that agree with your values.
- Participate by:
  - Running for school board or a local office
  - Follow or attend local school board meetings. They are often televised, or video recorded and publish their notes on community websites. You can view a [recorded school board meeting](#) from Polk County, Florida, as they discuss the banning of books.
- Seek resources and tools to assist in combatting misinformation and criticism.

The efforts to spread misinformation and attacks on education and afterschool are very sophisticated. Afterschool leaders should take advantage of resources and tools that have been developed by afterschool advocates. Below are some examples.

### ***New National Coalition to Fight Misinformation, Protect Social and Emotional Learning in Schools***

*“The Leading with SEL coalition was created to represent research-based information on social and emotional learning and help broaden awareness of the benefits of supporting the social, emotional, and academic development of all children. Rather than politicize social and emotional learning, coalition members are focused on making sure every student has what they need to succeed in schools, prepare for the future, and achieve their goals.”<sup>26</sup>*

### ***Is Your School Facing a Book Challenge? These Online Resources May Help***

*“The American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom website offers a toolkit for anyone who wants to advocate against book bans in their community with social media templates, information on what data to collect for grassroots organizing, and guides on contacting state and local officials and working with media outlets. One can also send an email to [oif@ala.org](mailto:oif@ala.org) or call the helpline at (312)280-4221.”<sup>27</sup>*

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND TOOLS:**

- Communication resources: [\*Making the Case for SEL\*](#)
- Take action: [\*Leading With SEL\*](#)
- [\*Education Culture Wars and Maintaining Bipartisan Support for Afterschool: A Webinar\*](#) with speakers Terry Peterson (Afterschool Alliance), Michael Funk (California Department of Education), Bridget Laird (WINGS for Kids) and Melissa Schlinger (CASEL). Hosted by Dr. Femi Vance (American Institutes for Research) and sponsored by Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation.





## END NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Edward Graham, [\*Who is Behind the Attacks on Educators and Public Schools?\*](#)
- <sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, [\*Bipartisanship\*](#)
- <sup>3</sup> Susan L. Webb, [\*Book Banning\*](#)
- <sup>4</sup> Cristin Conger, [\*How Book Banning Works\*](#)
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen Sawchuk, [\*What Is Critical Race Theory, and Why Is It Under Attack?\*](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Milken Institute School of Public Health, [\*Equity vs. Equality: What's the Difference?\*](#)
- <sup>7</sup> Reachout.com, [\*Mindfulness in the Classroom\*](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Casel.org, [\*Fundamentals of SEL\*](#)
- <sup>9</sup> Arianna Prothero & Evie Blad, [\*Schools Face Fears of 'Critical Race Theory' as They Scale Up Social-Emotional Learning\*](#)
- <sup>10</sup> Savannah Hulse Pointer, [\*Socio-Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Is Anti-White, Anti-Christian, and Anti-American Indoctrination\*](#)
- <sup>11</sup> Arianna Prothero & Evie Blad, [\*Schools Face Fears of 'Critical Race Theory' as They Scale Up Social-Emotional Learning\*](#)
- <sup>12</sup> Karen Effrem, M.D. and Jane Robbins, J.D., [\*Social-Emotional Learning: K–12 Education as New Age Nanny State\*](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Stella Morabito, [\*Social Emotional Programming: The SEL Agenda to Enforce Thought Reform, Conformity, and Control\*](#)
- <sup>14</sup> [\*Stella Morabito: Social Emotional Programming\*](#) (Video)
- <sup>15</sup> Stephen Sawchuk, [\*When Did Equity Become a 'Trigger' Word?\*](#)
- <sup>16</sup> American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), [\*Stop Forcing Buddhist Meditation on Kids in School\*](#)
- <sup>17</sup> Heather Hurlock, [\*An Attack on Mindfulness in Schools: How Christian organizations are attempting to get rid of mindfulness programs in our public schools\*](#)
- <sup>18</sup> Candy Gunther Brown and Saki Santorelli, [\*Does Mindfulness Belong in Public Schools?\*](#)
- <sup>19</sup> Yonat Shimron, [\*Mindfulness meditation is now a staple in public schools, and thanks to Zoom, widely accessible\*](#)
- <sup>20</sup> Claire Moses, [\*The Spread of Book Banning\*](#)
- <sup>21</sup> Ileana Najarro, [\*Is Your School Facing a Book Challenge? These Online Resources May Help\*](#)
- <sup>22</sup> Samuel Spencer, [\*12 Books That Have Been Famously Banned\*](#)
- <sup>23</sup> Arianna Prothero & Evie Blad, [\*Schools Face Fears of 'Critical Race Theory' as They Scale Up Social-Emotional Learning\*](#)
- <sup>24</sup> Sam Piha, [\*LIAS Blog: Maintaining Bipartisan Support for Afterschool\*](#)
- <sup>25</sup> Libby Stanford, [\*As Terms Like 'SEL' Draw Fire, Organizations Supporting Schools Sharpen Their Message\*](#)
- <sup>26</sup> CASEL.org, [\*New National Coalition to Fight Misinformation, Protect Social and Emotional Learning in Schools\*](#)
- <sup>27</sup> Ileana Najarro, [\*Is Your School Facing a Book Challenge? These Online Resources May Help\*](#)