



Right wing targets gender identity

Conservatives wage a well-coordinated, anti-LGBTQ+ culture war in school districts across California.

By Kevin Rector, Howard Blume and Mackenzie Mays

In May 2022, Bryce Henson stood up to speak at a San Diego school board meeting.

“This is my first time,” he said, his voice jittery. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

Henson said he was the father of two elementary school students and was there to ask that he be notified if they ever attended a meeting of the campus LGBTQ+ student club.

“I know what you’re thinking: This guy’s probably a right-winger: Big, buff, good-looking white guy with American flag tattoo on his arm,” Henson said. “That’s not the case.”

Henson said he just wanted the board to “be reasonable” about his parental rights.

Fast-forward to this August, and Henson was more than a hundred miles north, helping lead about 150 protesters against LGBTQ+ school policies in Los Angeles. He wore a “Dad Army” T-shirt, waved an American flag, wrangled the crowd using a bullhorn and gave interviews — including to The Times — using a fake name.

“We believe that there is a radical indoctrination system that has seeped from academia and now into K through 12,” he said.

The San Diego County father is now a regular face on the front line of right-wing activists barnstorming through school districts across Southern California to demand they backtrack on LGBTQ+-inclusive policies and begin forcing teachers and administrators to out queer kids to their parents.

They have tapped into a vein of concern among parents — even some liberal ones — who are struggling with the fact that students experiment with gender identity at school, that some will pursue gender-affirming care, and that state law places limits on how gender identity can be shared with parents.

The agitators and their backers have exacerbated concerns using a decades-old playbook of casting queer people as “groomers” and an amalgam of misinformation about what’s actually

happening in California schools, including baseless claims that teachers are “indoctrinating” students into being queer.

They also have won support from more moderate parents who believe “parental rights” are paramount in schools as well as those who worry about children receiving irreversible gender-related medical care they will later regret.

Parental notification policies, which require schools to notify the parents of any child who asks to change their name, pronouns or gender presentation, have become the latest school-related wedge issue of the political right, which has previously focused on COVID-19 precautions and critical race theory. And the effort has drawn national attention, including at the most recent Republican presidential debate.

Some of the traveling activists, such as Henson, are parents in one district who want to spread their message into other districts, too. Others have no kids — or they home-school or privately educate their children — but have concerns about the direction of public education arising from their political or religious convictions. Others, including some Armenians and Latinos, cite cultural reasons for weighing in.

The activists have built burgeoning communities around simplified mottos, such as “Leave Our Kids Alone,” which they wear on T-shirts. They also have a large presence on social media, where they demand changes to school policies and state

law.

In the process, they have turned normally bureaucratic school board meetings into chaotic flashpoints in the modern American culture wars, with rowdy protests and scattered fights breaking out in places such as Glendale and North Hollywood. Three more-liberal school board members walked out of one meeting, professing fear for their safety. Outside such meetings, right-wing extremists with ties to the Proud Boys have faced off with queer advocates and some far-left counterprotesters.

Loud and on the ground, the traveling activists have had the highest public profile in the debate. But they aren't acting alone.

Backing them are conservative strategists, think tanks and institutions at the state and national level that have deep pockets, core beliefs that run counter to LGBTQ+ rights and vested interests in energizing Republicans and raising doubts about the effectiveness of public education in the nation's most populous liberal state.

Those groups include the California Policy Center, Moms for Liberty, the Leadership Institute, Turning Point USA and evangelical megachurches. They have invested time and resources into training conservative Californians to run for school board seats and push to eliminate LGBTQ+ education.

Henson has referred publicly to his connections to outside

groups but said he is getting no financial support from them. Instead, he stressed the ways in which the movement has grown organically. And he said he has come to accept a label first coined for the group by its critics — the “Traveling Road Show” — because it captures their organizing success.

A military veteran who declined to give his age but whose public records say is 37, Henson said he started going to other school districts after becoming discouraged by the resistance he encountered in San Diego and realizing he could push the needle further in more-conservative areas. The more he traveled, he said, the more he found others like him.

Henson said he is fighting on behalf of all the “momma bears” who feel as he does but are afraid to say so. He dismisses teachers unions and liberal politicians as the “enemy” and those who have counterprotested his messaging as “antifa,” which stands for “antifascist” but has become slang on the political right for those who stage protests in opposition to their agenda.

Henson has spoken against “radical gender ideology,” critical race theory and vaccine and mask “tyranny” at school board meetings, and he routinely goads his liberal antagonists online. He blamed antifa for the confrontational tone that has become common at local school board meetings. He also blamed his opponents for intimidating conservative parents by “doxxing” people like him who speak out, posting their personal information online.

Five women — two mothers of Southern California students, two liberal activists and an independent photojournalist — told The Times they made it their mission to identify Henson. They said they realized he was not just belittling LGBTQ+ people and policies but also getting in the faces of women at school board meetings across the region and screaming about things such as being owed respect.

“We were all like, ‘Who is this guy who is harassing all of us?’ ” said Kelly Stuart, the photojournalist, who has been documenting the far right in Southern California since 2020.

Asked by The Times why he used the fake name Ben Richards — after Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character in the 1987 dystopian film “The Running Man” — Henson said he initially was concerned for his safety. Now, he says, he does it to make an ideological point. He said transgender people shouldn’t question his decision to “identify” as a fictitious movie character if they want him to “respect their crazy identity.”

“I identify as a male lion, whose pronouns [are] Lion Daddy,” he said, “and if they don’t call me that, they’re bigots.”

Henson denied being aggressive and said he opposes bullying and discrimination. But he also said he will not denounce anyone from the “parental rights” camp until supporters of LGBTQ+ protections call out aggression from some of their supporters as well.

Left-wing activists from the groups Revolutionary Communists, or Revcom, and By Any Means Necessary, or BAMN, have been among the counterprotesters at recent events.

Critics say Henson and others like him are good at attracting attention, but they are also just bit players in a much larger conservative advance into California's public schools. That's one of the only arenas in which conservatives can affect policy, given Democrats' supermajority in the state Legislature.

Kristi Hirst, a former Chino Valley teacher and parent, said she co-founded the group Our Schools USA to inform liberal parents and voters about these efforts by conservatives.

“We are trying to empower them, to help them educate their communities on how important these school board races are, because historically they have not been paid attention to,” Hirst said. “These extremists have capitalized on that and riled up their bases by relying on fear and intimidation tactics.”

Intimidation tactics from the far right

Milo Easley, a 16-year-old transgender junior at Redlands High School, had written a speech on his phone to deliver at a recent school board meeting in his small city of Redlands in San Bernardino County.

But he hesitated when he saw how agitated the backers of a

parental notification policy in the district were. Milo's mom, Amber Easley, has become a leading voice in a parent-led effort to counter the message from the right, and she said she was nervous for his safety. So he stayed quiet.

Still, when the meeting ended, Milo and his mom said they were followed into the parking lot by people trying to intimidate them. One person who pursued them, according to video, was Adam Kiefer. He's a far-right extremist who has marched with the Proud Boys wearing their insignia and colors, though he has denied membership in the group.

Kiefer was in Washington during the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, has attended right-wing protests across Southern California for years and was filmed calling people "tranny-loving faggots" outside another recent school board meeting.

Kiefer could not be reached for comment, though on the video he and those he was with defended their actions outside the school board meeting as a response to Amber Easley taking their pictures.

On the way to the car, Milo pulled his hoodie up over his bright red hair to be less conspicuous. He left that night feeling scared of the agitators, he said, and unsure if he'd ever get to speak.

"It felt threatening," he said. "You feel like you don't have any

power against them.”

LGBTQ+ families, progressive advocacy groups and teachers unions have been voicing similar concerns.

At least seven California districts have passed parental notification policies requiring administrators to notify the parents of gender-nonconforming students. Some of these districts and others have challenged LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum mandates and tried to strip schools of Pride flags and queer-related books.

In July, California State Supt. of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond, who is running for governor, was escorted out of a Chino Valley Unified School District meeting while arguing against a proposed notification policy there.

The board, whose conservative members have the backing of local evangelicals, passed the measure and notified the parents of more than a dozen students. The state sued to stop such notifications, saying they violate students’ privacy rights, and a judge ordered that they stop while the litigation plays out.

Protests and rallies also have cropped up in solidly blue districts such as Los Angeles Unified. Local conservative school leaders have become heroes on the right. Sonja Shaw, the Chino Valley board president, recently spoke alongside former President Trump in Washington.

Those on the left have themselves been organizing, and they have a lot of political backing among the state's liberal leaders. But they say they are being outflanked by a right-wing movement with far more support at the national level, and they worry things will get worse as the 2024 presidential race heats up.

“When do we say enough is enough, and where is the line drawn?” asked Karen Poznanski, a middle school reading teacher in Murrieta whose gay, nonbinary child Avery graduated from the local school system. “I think the line has been crossed.”

When evangelicals start playing politics

At a rally outside the state Capitol in August, hundreds of people waved their hands and fell to their knees in prayer as Pastor Jack Hibbs preached against legislation requiring LGBTQ+-inclusive textbooks and teacher trainings.

“When churches get involved and get informed, people vote,” Hibbs said.

As leader of the evangelical Calvary Chapel megachurch in Chino Hills, Hibbs has made politics part of his pitch from the pulpit for years. Hibbs did not respond to a request for comment.

A decade ago, Hibbs tried to rally opposition to a law that granted transgender students access to the bathrooms and sports

teams of their choice. He has called “transgenderism” a “fallacy” and a “cult” and the LGBTQ+ rights movement a government-controlled “social experiment.” He alleged that state officials want to “sacrifice,” “mutilate” and “steal” children from parents.

In April, Hibbs issued an “urgent call to action” asking school boards nationwide to pass parental notification policies. He offered template language and urged thousands who stream his sermons online to advocate for those policies at meetings, even if they don’t have children.

“We are launching right now a campaign to equip and mobilize every citizen to petition — every parent, every grandparent — to petition their local school board no matter where they live,” Hibbs said on YouTube.

Three months later, the Chino Valley board approved its notification policy after Shaw cut off state Supt. Thurmond. Hibbs had endorsed Shaw, and his church’s political action arm, Real Impact, had supported her candidacy.

Hibbs “is the puppet master,” said Naomi Minogue, the parent of a recent Chino Valley graduate. Minogue said she has worried about Hibbs’ influence since the district was sued in 2014 over its board members proselytizing at meetings.

Hibbs is among an increasing number of religious leaders getting involved in school politics.

Pastor Tim Thompson, leader of the 412 Church in Murrieta, also has involved himself in local school board politics for years and urged opposition to LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education and LGBTQ+-inclusive textbooks. Last year, his nonprofit group Our Watch filed a pending lawsuit against the state after Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a law shielding transgender youths and their families from out-of-state bans on gender-affirming medical care.

Thompson is affiliated with the conservative Inland Empire Family PAC, which he helped create to skirt restrictions on tax-exempt churches raising campaign funds. The group has raised tens of thousands of dollars for conservative school board members, per campaign finance records, and helped elect boards that have passed parental notification policies.

Thompson's team interviewed potential school board candidates ahead of local elections. Then the team provided those he believed best suited to spread his "biblical worldview" with political consultants and volunteers to design campaign materials, knock on doors and work phone banks.

Some church-backed school board members have attended Thompson's sermons and have been featured on his 13,000+-subscriber YouTube show, where he has called being transgender a "mental disorder," derided gender-affirming healthcare as "child mutilation" and rallied for parental notification policies.

In an emailed response to questions from The Times, Thompson said his focus on LGBTQ+ issues in public schools was necessary because state officials are trying to “deliberately cut the parents out of decision making.” He said liberals are “attempting to pervert our wholesome way of life.” He said he is working to preserve it, and anyone complaining about him doing so will only spur him on.

“The more they seek to silence me, the louder I will get,” he said.

Origins of parental notification policies

Erin Friday, an attorney based in Silicon Valley, made it her mission to pass parental notification policies in California schools a couple of years ago, after her child came out as transgender.

Friday said she wrote a bill introduced by Assemblyman Bill Essayli to create a statewide notification policy. That bill didn’t pass, but it inspired the policies since adopted by local school boards. Others with knowledge of the process have credited her as well; Essayli (R-Corona) did not respond to questions about her claim.

Friday has framed her child’s coming out as personally devastating.

In an interview with The Times, Friday said she rebuffed a recommendation from a mental health provider who cited transgender suicide rates and said she should help her child transition after they changed their name, pronouns, fashion and hair.

Instead, Friday said, she fired her child's psychiatrist, moved her child to a private school, took away their phone and internet access, limited their friend group and sent them to an overnight community service camp.

When asked whether her response was harmful to her child, Friday was adamant that it was necessary — that she “forced [her] child to come back to reality,” and that her child no longer identifies as transgender because of it.

“None of this is natural,” Friday said of kids like hers identifying as transgender. “This is foisted on them.”

Friday has attempted to distance herself from conservative counterparts in the parental notification debate, though, saying she is a longtime Democrat who supports gay rights. But she has become disgruntled with the left in large part because of its support for transgender youth who want to begin transitioning.

Friday helps lead the international anti-transgender group Our Duty, which calls itself a support network for parents who want to “protect their children from gender ideology.” She has called

being transgender “a mental vortex” and “a social contagion.”

She has spoken at school board meetings across the state, testified in the state Capitol against bills protecting the autonomy of transgender youths and followed Newsom on the streets of Sacramento demanding that he focus on the fact that some transgender people — a small minority of them, by various accounts — end up detransitioning.

Gender-affirming medical care for minors generally involves counseling and other mental health services, and only sometimes involves treatments such as puberty blockers to delay development. In rarer cases, breast augmentation is provided to older teens who have gone through extensive counseling. Such treatments are carried out in close consultation with parents and doctors and never provided by school personnel.

Friday is promoting state ballot measures that would ban gender-affirming care for minors, restrict transgender students’ use of the school bathrooms of their choice and participation in sports, and mandate a statewide parental notification policy.

Lance Christensen, vice president of education policy and government affairs at the California Policy Center who lost a bid against Thurmond for state superintendent, said the success of the “parental rights” movement reflects a major policy achievement for his group, which has been organizing conservatives on the issue.

“We mostly direct expertise, resources,” Christensen said.

“Knowledge, manuals, we give people guides on how to work through things, sometimes talking points. We help write op-eds, we help train people to address their schools, their teachers, their unions, how to ask for [public records] requests, open meeting law issues.”

He said the policy center has big donors backing its work, but he declined to name them.

Christensen rejected the idea that transgender school issues are simply a wedge the right is seizing on for political gain, but he welcomed the success his group is having in using the issue to rally people to its causes — which include allowing parents to use public funds for private schools and opposition to teachers unions.

“People are sick and tired of our schools failing our kids,” Christensen said, “so inasmuch as this will let parents know that they have more control over their kids’ destiny and education, then I’m absolutely in favor of that.”

Political targets

and consequences

Many conservatives fighting California’s LGBTQ+-inclusive school policies say their efforts are about protecting children

from a new and extreme liberal left.

Queer advocates dismiss that. Drawing a direct line between today's "Leave Our Kids Alone" campaign and Anita Bryant's antigay "Save Our Children" campaign of the 1970s, they say the modern right's efforts continue the bigotry directed toward queer people for generations.

"We have to be clear this is a backlash — not about parental rights, but against LGBTQ people and trying to make us go back to the 1950s and make us disappear or be invisible," said state Sen. Scott Wiener, a gay Democrat from San Francisco who has been pushing legislation to protect transgender and nonbinary kids.

Many queer kids and their families say they are scared.

"It's pretty stressful, because the things I should be focused on now are my grades and my relationships with my friends," said Milo, the 16-year-old junior from Redlands. "This is definitely something that is threatening my privacy, and to an extent it is life-threatening as well — just because I identify a certain way."

Milo loves digital drawing and creating characters who live in their own worlds. He's interested in psychology, "big on anything creative" and has built a solid group of queer friends at school, he said.

He said he first questioned his gender identity in fourth grade, started experimenting with how he presented himself and dressed in sixth grade and benefited from the space provided at school to find himself before coming out to his supportive mother.

Once he'd transitioned, he said, "it was a lot easier to make healthy connections" with peers.

If he had been forced to go through that process at a different pace — including at home before he was ready, as parental notification policies require — it all would have been harder, he said. And some of his friends who aren't out at home and don't expect to be supported there are now terrified of that scenario playing out for them.

Milo said he understands parents wanting to be informed about their children's health, but he thinks many really just want "a sense of control." Maybe parents who are out rallying for parental notification policies should instead spend some of that time considering why "they don't know their child well enough to have them come out to them," Milo said.

In the San Gabriel Valley, a Latina mother of gender-nonconforming kids — who requested anonymity so she could speak candidly without endangering them — said she doesn't understand why parents don't see that the political war being waged around LGBTQ+ school issues is devastating to queer

kids and their families.

“I’ve heard it all. I’ve heard, ‘They’re just kids, and they’re just going through changes.’ I’ve heard, ‘It’s all in their head.’ I’ve heard, ‘I don’t care, my kid is just going to marry the opposite sex and that’s it,’ ‘My religion doesn’t allow them ...,’ ‘God created a woman and a man,’ ” she said.

“I can tell them every day what we go through, and it’s no joke,” she said. “It’s not a choice.”

She said she cries with her kid as they suffer for being in a body that doesn’t match their identity, and she knows from a previous job working with vulnerable youths that it is far worse for transgender kids from less accepting families.

“Parents kicked them out of their homes for being transgender, at a young age, and because of that these kids were exposed to sex trafficking, drug use, rape,” she said. “They were homeless, obviously, and many of them attempted and/or committed suicide.”

Essayli, the author of the state-level parental notification bill Democrats shelved, has said if such notification could expose a student to palpable risk, that family should be reported to an agency that safeguards the welfare of children under existing law.

The mother fears a cultural shift backward to a time when transgender and nonbinary kids were unacknowledged — or ridiculed — in public schools, with no protection from teachers or other staff. Such kids don't deserve to be at the center of a political firestorm.

“They really need a lot of love. They need help,” she said. “They don't need harassment. They don't need attacks.”

A momentum shift toward the right

On a recent evening in Simi Valley, hundreds of “parental rights” supporters gathered in a park for a California Policy Center rally.

Attendees spoke out against COVID-19 mask and vaccine mandates, abortion and teachers unions. A merchandise booth sold T-shirts celebrating Christianity, American patriotism and gun rights.

“Fully Vaccinated by the Blood of Jesus,” one shirt read. White and black “Leave Our Kids Alone” T-shirts, seen at many school board meetings, seemed free on demand.

Sophia Lorey of the anti-LGBTQ+ California Family Council told the crowd they were part of a “spiritual battle, a battle of good versus evil.”

Members of the “road show” roamed around, too, with some called on to speak. But the headliner was Shaw, who brought up

the state's lawsuit over Chino Valley's notification policy.

“I know it feels like we're [on] defense, but God is building a rock star team, and that includes every single one of you, and we are going to be on offense,” Shaw said.

Their liberal opponents, she said, “are so afraid it's not even funny.”

A couple of weeks later, Milo approached the microphone at another Redlands school board meeting, where Pride flags in classrooms were being debated. He and about a dozen others had created their own version of the road show's black-and-white “Leave Our Kids Alone” T-shirts — altered to read, “Leave Queer Kids Alone.”

“My life is controversial,” Milo began, “and so is my body.”

He was frightened, he said, but unbowed.