



EDUCATION

# Christian Activists Set Their Sights on School Board Seats

By Ann Bradley — October 07, 1992 ⌚ 13 min read



Local school board races have become the new battleground for politically conservative Christian activists who believe that the public schools must be purged of their prevailing “atheist” philosophies in favor of a biblically based approach to education.

Robert Simonds, the president of Citizens for Excellence in Education, who is leading the major national effort to elect conservative Christians to school boards, said his group is “at war with an ideology that is destroying our children and our nation.”

On Nov. 3, Mr. Simonds predicted, as many as 3,000 Christians who share his views will be elected to boards across the nation. Last year, he estimates that 1,250 like-minded Christians won office with C.E.E.'s support.

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Mr. Simonds, a former pastor and college professor, founded the Costa Mesa, Calif.-based organization in 1983. Today, he says it has 1,085 chapters in all 50 states.

The group identifies itself as a “grassroots Christian ministry” dedicated to restoring “academic excellence, Godly morals, and traditional American values to the classroom.”

According to its literature, C.E.E. wants schools to emphasize basic subjects, revive patriotism and promote the “prominence of the Christian movement,” instill better discipline in students, and refrain from “liberal social programs” that displace regular curricula and interfere with parents’ authority over their children.

“I believe that what C.E.E. advocates is what every American who believes in family values and Western culture believes in,” Mr. Simonds asserted in an interview.



But critics of Mr. Simonds’s organization and other similar groups charge that they are promoting a narrow view of Christianity that is at odds with the views of the majority of Americans. It is a view, they say, that poses a serious threat to the welfare of the public schools.

Moreover, they accuse school board candidates who are being supported by C.E.E. of disguising their true beliefs during campaigns.

“They have an extreme, right-wing fundamentalist agenda for public education,” said Michael Hudson, the vice president of People for the American Way, which has opposed C.E.E. in a number of battles over curricula and textbooks. “Once their agenda is uncovered, it’s very obviously out of line with mainstream America.”

### Censorship Attempts

Observers say there is no way to verify Mr. Simonds’s claims about the number of conservative Christian candidates who have been elected to school boards.

But Mr. Hudson and representatives of education organizations say that complaints by conservative Christians about education programs have increased dramatically in recent years.

Frequent targets are self-esteem and health-education programs and textbooks and teaching methods that have been criticized for promoting so-called “new age” religious beliefs. The emphasis on teaching students to think critically and to work in groups also has been assailed.

In its 1991-92 report on attempts to censor school materials, People for the American Way, a constitutional-liberties watchdog group, calls C.E.E. “easily the most destructive censorship organization active in the schools today.”

Tying specific conservative Christian groups to education-policy challenges is difficult, Mr. Hudson said, because of the diffuse nature of the organizations. But the report notes that the language used by the protesters in many of the censorship attempts the group documented “bore the rhetorical and ideological imprint” of religious-right organizations.

The report ties C.E.E. to attempts to remove three self-esteem programs from schools in more than a dozen communities. In Meridian, Idaho, the report says, a C.E.E. affiliate called for the firing of a school nurse who responded to questions from students about *áéäó* after the basketball star Earvin (Magic) Johnson announced he is infected with the virus that causes the disease.

Mr. Simonds responds that his organization has “not once, ever, been involved in a censorship attempt.”

### Many Educators Unaware

Many local educators do not realize that there is organized, national opposition to “restructuring” efforts and to particular curricula and teaching methods, said Arleen Arnsperger, the director of communications for the Education Commission of the States.

In response to the escalating criticisms, the E.C.S. and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development will jointly publish a book this fall to help school districts develop a communications strategy for handling such opposition. The book also will include a chapter on C.E.E. and its goals.

The intention is not to take a position on such groups, but to help school districts explain their programs more clearly and to sort out “what is a community concern and what is being orchestrated from outside,” Ms. Arnsperger explained.

The National PTA also recently issued a “Guide to Extremism” to help its members combat groups that “try to impose their values and views on others.”

## 'Impact Evangelism'

The battle over whose views the public schools should reflect is not new, but observers say it has taken on a new character with the stepped-up political activity of many national conservative Christian groups, including C.E.E.

These organizations, such as the Rev. Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, have made no secret of their desire to see politically conservative Christians elected to local offices.

The emphasis on winning low-level elected offices began after leaders of the movement realized that their influence in national politics had begun to wane, said Skipp Porteous, the president of the Institute for First Amendment Studies in Great Barrington, Mass., which conducts research and publishes a newsletter on conservative Christian groups.

"They are a potent force on the political scene," he said, "especially at the local level."

These conservative Christian groups, Mr. Porteous said, adhere to a doctrine called "Christian reconstructionism," which calls for believers to establish a biblically based society on Earth in preparation for Jesus's return.

"I have no doubt that they are trying to form a theocracy in this country," he said. "By and large, they all work together pretty closely."

Mr. Simonds explained the emphasis on gaining influence on school boards in a January newsletter distributed to C.E.E. members.

"This great C.E.E. work is called IMPACT EVANGELISM, beloved!" he wrote. "God is using you and I (C.E.E.) to save our dear children."

Mr. Simonds believes that the public schools are run by "secular humanists" and atheists who are intolerant of Christian parents and promote a wide range of objectionable practices.

"What do public schools teach?" asks one of C.E.E.'s brochures. "There is no right and wrong--you determine your own values based on your situation. Creation is a myth; evolution is a fact. New-age meditation will help you relax, study better, and find your hidden power within. You must have good self-esteem (forget about Godly humility). You must accept alternative lifestyles like homosexuality as normal. Abortion is often your best option. Sex is O.K.--just have 'safe' sex. A global economy is our only hope for world peace."

One hope for solving such problems lies with the movement to give parents more choice over the schools their children attend at public expense, Mr. Simonds wrote in a March newsletter urging support for the movement to put a private school choice referendum on the California ballot.

### Churches Target of Activity

Mr. Simonds spends a great deal of his time traveling around the country, attending banquets at which he encourages parents to start up C.E.E. chapters. Membership in the organization costs \$20 a year.

Each chapter is then encouraged to identify at least 10 churches in the school district and to organize their members into committees with the help of C.E.E.'s "public school awareness kit."

The kits sell for \$195, but are available to churches for less. They include workbooks and "parent action guides" that explain how to participate in petition drives, organize letter-writing campaigns, and speak "appropriately" to school officials. They also include audio-cassette tapes, copies of Mr. Simonds's monthly education bulletins, and the booklet "How to Elect Christians to Public Office."

"Holding up Christian standards can only be done by electing Christian officials," he writes in the booklet, which was published in 1985.

Mr. Simonds lays out a step-by-step process for getting Christians elected that relies on such time-honored strategies as breaking down areas geographically and appointing precinct chairmen, captains, block workers, and poll checkers.

Organizing people who attend the local evangelical churches, he writes, is the key to success.

"Remind every Christian to vote on Election Day," he advises. "Most elections are won on 1 percent to 3 percent of the vote. If only 10,000 vote in your district, that means 100 to 300 voters could elect the entire new school board."

Because C.E.E. is a nonprofit organization, it is barred from endorsing candidates or offering them financial support. But chapters do interview candidates on issues of concern to their members and publish reports that are circulated in churches, Mr. Simonds said.

### 'Stealth Candidates'

Critics of C.E.E. and its tactics accuse school board candidates who are aligned with C.E.E., but do not make the fact known during their campaigns, of running "stealth campaigns."

In some Pennsylvania districts, conservative Christian candidates who were unknown to the general public have won school board seats thanks to write-in campaigns, said Carolyn Trohoski, the assistant executive director of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators.

“The public has to be very knowledgeable about the true beliefs of people running for the school board,” said James L. Neeley, the curriculum director for the Humboldt, Ariz., schools.

Some of the candidates now running for the school board in Humboldt are affiliated with C.E.E., Mr. Neeley asserted, but are not disclosing such ties.

The community became aware of C.E.E. when its members protested the use of the “Quest” substance-abuse program, he said, which teaches self-esteem, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills.

“They are against teaching those concepts,” Mr. Neeley said. “They want straight lecture and pouring in the facts.”

A citizens’ group has formed to encourage Humboldt voters to turn out in the election.

“It’s downright scary to think of what the goals of these people are,” said Sheryl McBurney, the mother of two children who is active in the citizens’ group. “They are calling you the agent of the Devil because you don’t think like they do.”

### San Diego Victories

The Christian right had perhaps its greatest electoral success to date in 1990 in San Diego County, when 50 of 88 candidates backed by a number of conservative Christian groups won seats governing fire and water districts, schools, and municipal governments. Sixteen candidates won seats on 28 school boards.

The victories, which came as a surprise to more mainstream politicians, came to be known as the “San Diego surprise.”

But the tactics that some candidates used--leafletting cars in church parking lots and refusing to attend public forums to discuss their views--fueled criticism that the candidates were hiding their agendas.

In response, a group called the Mainstream Voters Project formed to educate voters. The project publishes a newsletter and a list of candidates it has reason to believe are tied to “extremist groups,”

said Kathy Frasca, a founder of the group and a candidate for a school board seat in Jamul, Calif.

This year, anti-abortion and other conservative Christian groups have endorsed 51 candidates for 33 school board seats in the county, she said.

If it is true that conservative Christian candidates advocate positions that most Americans reject, observers say, then it is essential that voters cast their ballots during elections. And in some cases, a majority of the voters in a given community may support such views.

“I don’t fault the religious right for what they’re doing, because they’re practicing democracy,” Mr. Porteous of the Institute for First Amendment Studies said. “I fault the apathetic voters who don’t bother with the democratic process.”

In addition to California, experts say, conservative Christian groups have been active in school board politics in Pennsylvania, Arizona, the Carolinas, Texas, Ohio, Oklahoma, Alaska, and Hawaii.

### Tips for Candidates

In his book, Mr. Simonds advises candidates to “avoid saying ‘kooky’ things that may cause a backlash effect.”

“Be able to clearly explain why you believe what you do,” he writes. “Don’t avoid religion, but don’t come across ‘all’ religious.”

In a section on dealing with the media, Mr. Simonds advises candidates that “good press is what we’re looking for.”

“Be well prepared and don’t try to totally ‘educate’ people,” he advises. “Persuasion comes now-- education, after the election.”

In an interview, Mr. Simonds said that some school board candidates do not reveal their ties to C.E.E. out of fear that they will be “persecuted.”

“We’re saying you don’t have to run as a C.E.E. candidate,” he said, “but most of our candidates do.”

Citizens for Excellence in Education shares its materials with about 30 major politically conservative Christian organizations, Mr. Simonds said, including Focus on the Family, Concerned

Women for America, the Eagle Forum, the Family Research Council, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

In San Diego County, the C.E.E. chapter has been holding prayer meetings with the local coordinator of the Christian Coalition, Mr. Robertson's group.

"We have done nothing here but pray for almost two years for the upcoming election," said Linda Steele, the C.E.E. director, "and it looks wonderful. I am very encouraged."

Ms. Steele said C.E.E. members are hoping that newly elected Christian candidates will restore "common sense" to the schools.

The group opposes the current movement to merge social services with schools, she explained, saying that the move would drain money from school's academic missions.

"We should not be getting kids used to government giving them everything," she asserted.

Programs that emphasize developing children's self-esteem as a prevention against drug abuse and other ills are also misguided, she said.

"We see a religion being taught in self-esteem," she said. "It's self, self, self. If we're going to have self-esteem, let's find a program that teaches absolutes, right and wrong."

In Spring Valley, Calif., a suburb of San Diego, two board members who were elected in 1990 with the support of conservative Christians objected to a plan to begin serving free breakfasts in an elementary school. They were unsuccessful in blocking the program.

### Pennsylvania Targeted

Pennsylvania, where the state board of education is moving toward an outcome-based approach to education, is also the site of a great deal of C.E.E. activity, educators in that state say.

While no school board in the state has a majority of Christian-right members, according to the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, C.E.E. has been active at the state level in opposing the move to outcome-based education.

"Very rarely do people overtly say, 'I'm a member of C.E.E.,"' said Donald Owen, an assistant executive director of the association. Instead, "it's accusations and outright denials."

The inclusion of ethical values and other “affective” topics in the state’s goals for quality education has prompted charges that schools are trying to usurp parents’ moral authority over their children.

“What we need to do is focus on academics,” said Nancy Staible, the Pennsylvania director of C.E.E. “Outcome-based education is very high on the nonacademic, affective nature of education.”

The proposed changes do require serious consideration, educators in Pennsylvania say. And so do many of the societal and educational changes that have drawn the ire of conservative Christian groups.

“One of the things that’s unfortunate in all of this is, if you really look at the concerns that are voiced, there are some that a lot of people might agree with,” Ms. Arnsperger said. “But those issues that bear discussion can’t come to the fore.”

Mr. Simonds said he believes public school educators “censor out any viewpoint that doesn’t coincide with their atheist viewpoint.”

“This is not going to get resolved unless they start listening” to their constituents, he warned. “If you want to fight, then we’ll fight. I think the odds are for us.”

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Ann Bradley formerly was a Staff Writer for Education Week.

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