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Sean Kaufman (R), a candidate for the Cherokee County School Board with his son Sean Patrick (Courtesy of Sean Kaufman)

EDUCATION & FAMILY NEWS

'Fight Like Hell With a Smile on Our Face:' CRT Debate Spurs Parents to Run for School Boards

By [Terri Wu](#) | June 15, 2022 Updated: June 15, 2022

A **A** Print

As [parents](#) across the nation fight to have a say in their children's public education, more are taking things into their own hands: running for local [school boards](#).

Sean Kaufman in Woodstock, Georgia, is one of them. And his journey began with a school assignment on the American dream.

Before that, he never felt any reason to question what schools were teaching his children, and he would always check on whether his kids had done what their teachers had asked them to do.

“It was this ultimate trust [in the school system],” said the father of three, a small business owner and part-time professor at a local university.

During the pandemic, however, the virtual learning in public schools allowed him a closer look at what his children were learning.

In November 2020, his middle child Aiden, then a junior at the Woodstock High School, got an assignment in his advanced placement (AP) English class to write a paper on whether the American dream was dead or alive. He was also assigned to peer review two other students' essays.

“Every single child wrote the American dream was dead. And that really bothered me,” Kaufman told The Epoch Times about the three papers he read.

While Aiden wrote that the American dream was “dwindling” and “unable to be fulfilled by the current American society,” his classmates described the ideal in their essays as a “delusion,” “fallacy,” and a “broken dream.”

One cited George Floyd's death as the reason the American dream was “an illusion” and “broken.” The 46-year-old black man died after a police officer held his knee on Floyd's back and neck while pinned to the ground in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May 2020. His death prompted mass demonstrations across the globe as protestors called for racial justice.

Kaufman asked his son why wrote the essay in that way.

“Dad, it's easier,” replied Aiden. “They [the teacher] give you argumentative papers [papers provided for background]. Three say the American dream is dead, and one says it's kind of alive.” And according to Aiden, if he “went along” with the main theme that the American dream was dead, the teacher wouldn't ask him to defend his position.



Sean Kaufman (2nd R) with wife Jacqueline and sons Sean Patrick (L) and Aiden, and daughter Jamielynn (Courtesy of Sean Kaufman)

Kaufman thought his public health students at the Kennesaw State University might know more than high schoolers.

During the same week, he conducted an ad hoc survey in class, “How many of you believe the American dream is dead?” He asked his class of about 25 students.

“Ninety percent raised their hands,” said Kaufman. “I was just blown away.”

He asked his college students what the American dream was. Not getting an answer, he defined it for them, “The American dream is, in this country, if you work hard, you sacrifice, and you never quit, you will find some type of success in your life.”

After giving the students his definition, he tried again, “How many of you still believe the American dream is dead?”

Still, 90 percent raised their hands.

“If you believe the American dream is dead in this country, why are you sitting in a college classroom?” he asked. The class was silent. Students looked shocked, and one said he hadn’t thought about that.

To Kaufman, associating the death of George Floyd with the end of the American dream reflects a tenet of [critical race theory](#) (CRT). “CRT believes that everywhere you are, the system is rigged against persons of color.”

CRT is a quasi-Marxist framework that argues that America is systematically racist. Supporters say it’s a college-level theory course not taught in K-12 public schools, yet critics beg to differ.

Kaufman is not alone in Georgia in believing in the American dream.

In a June 2021 poll, eighty-one percent of voters in Georgia agreed with the following statement: “Children should never be taught that their destiny and inherent value depends on their skin color. Instead, American schools should be teaching American children about the American Dream that is available to them.” The Georgia statewide survey was conducted by Heritage Action for America, the political action committee of the conservative think tank the Heritage Foundation.

The percentages of agreement in Democrat, independent, and Republican groups were 62, 85, and 97, respectively. The survey’s sample size was 600, with 38 percent Democrats, 15 percent independents, and 41 percent Republicans.

Running for School Board and Raising Awareness

Fast forward to this February, an 11th-grade English language arts class assignment prompted Kaufman to file a formal lesson challenge and speak at the Cherokee County School Board meeting.

The assignment asked students to read the book “Desiree’s Baby” by 19th-century American author Kate Chopin and write an extended ending. Students should “stay true to the tenet of the literary period” and write in the original third-person point of view or as any of the characters.

In the short story written in 1893, Desiree, abandoned as a baby and raised by a wealthy family in Louisiana, married Armond, a son of a plantation owner. When it turned out that their baby's skin was black, Armond blamed Desiree for being part black and drove her away. However, when burning Desiree's belongings, he came across a letter between his parents that revealed the secret they kept from him: he was the one who was part black.

Many students wrote from the perspective of Armond, according to Kaufman.

He quoted one such writing during his speech at the February school board meeting, "Surrounding me were the negroes fueling the fire, their skin now a reminder that I was part of who they were. I felt a horrid disgust inside of me. Oh, how I wished my skin would melt from my bones; I could never be one of them."

"What benefit is there, in my opinion, to make a child write as though he is a racist, bigoted slave owner hundreds of years later?" asked Kaufman.

In response to his challenge, the school's English department formed a review committee with members from the administration, professional learning community, and instruction personnel. A month later, the committee recommended the continuation of the assignment because students could choose any character's point of view for their writing. It also suggested offering alternative assignments and hiding students' names on papers during peer review at parents' request.

Kaufman didn't think alternative assignments were the solution. And he didn't believe the school board listened. Hence, he decided to run for the school board to become a voice for change.

And no surprise, CRT is front and center in his first attempt at public service.

Unlike in most states, some of Georgia's school board elections are partisan. Kaufman was up against two other Republican candidates, Erin Ragsdale and Eric Richards, in the primary on May 24. The Republican incumbent didn't run this time. None of the candidates got over half of the votes. Therefore, a runoff was scheduled for June 21, with early voting between June 13 and 17. The runoff winner will face the Democrat primary winner on Nov. 8.

Kaufman **finished second** at the primary last month, earning him a seat in the runoff. A total of 6,493 votes were cast in the Republican primary, compared to 1,392 votes in the Democrat primary with only one candidate.

Kaufman's opponent **Ragsdale**, a pediatric speech-language pathologist, runs on "making the best [school district] even better." She promised "continued support" of the district's decision to ban CRT on her website.

In May 2021, the county school district passed a **resolution prohibiting the implementation of CRT**. Kaufman said that many voters were thus confused and didn't know that, although banned, CRT had been integrated into the schools' teaching.

"You integrate theory into class; you don't teach the theory," he said. "When people say, 'CRT is not being taught,' it's a lie."

He said Democrats voted for his opponent because she wouldn't change the status quo much. Primaries are open in Georgia, meaning voters can cross party lines to vote. The Epoch Times has reached out to Ragsdale for comment.

"I love our children. Our children are born the way that they are born, and the way they are born is beautiful. They are perfect," he said, explaining his determination to get CRT out of the county schools. "And to tell a child that the way they are born and the color of their skin dictates who they will be in this life, whether they will be an oppressed or an oppressor?"

"It breaks my heart."

After the primary, Richards, who ranked last, endorsed Kaufman. He had run his race on similar stances. If Kaufman can get the votes that previously supported Richards, he may reach the majority and defeat Ragsdale in the runoff. To achieve that, he has continued to post videos on social media, go door to door, and send mailers and text messages.

"Every vote in runoff counts. Every vote," he said. "It's going to be decided very very closely. And I'm praying that Eric Richards' voters get behind me."

However, losing the runoff wouldn't mean the end of his efforts. He said he wanted to be the voice that brought about the change, "I have raised awareness in over 2,000 people in my community."

"That's 2,000 people that believe and have been wakened and will continue to fight beside me as we continue to try and increase awareness about what's happening in our community," he added.



Sean Kaufman (L) with his son Aiden (Courtesy of Sean Kaufman)

'Are You For or Against CRT?'

While the outcome of Kaufman's runoff has still to be decided, halfway across the nation in the south, Stephanie Elad has won her seat in the Frisco Independent School District (Frisco ISD), an area about 30 miles north of Dallas, Texas. It was an open seat as the incumbent didn't seek re-election. She campaigned on academic excellence and teacher retention, and ran as a conservative in the non-partisan race.

Although she didn't run with CRT as her number one issue or mention the term CRT much, it was the number one question she was asked during door-knocking on Republican-leaning voters. The first question they often asked her was, "Are you for or against CRT?"

"Ninety-five percent of them wanted me just to say I'm against it," she told The Epoch Times. "I would say I'm against it. And then my next statement was, 'And we do have it here in Frisco.'"

Some people said they knew, but most were surprised. Then, Elad would provide examples of what she believed to be "CRT inspired." "One of our high schools did a 'privilege walk' last fall. All you had to do is to tell people about that, and they were horrified."

In a privilege walk, students usually stand in a straight line and step forward if they have certain privileges, such as being white and a male. It's an activity stemming from the viewpoint that society doesn't offer equal access to opportunities.

The school board seat is Elad's first public service job. Her journey began in April 2021 at a school board meeting. She had signed up for public comment to talk about mask mandates but decided to change her topic after the then-board president Chad Rudy told the audience: "Please keep the discussion down. We're trying to get through our meeting tonight. This is our discussion."

"There was a comment made that this was your meeting. [I think this is our meeting,](#)" she told trustees on the school board. The audience applauded.

"I think the parents and the taxpayers deserve a little more respect," she added. "This is our meeting." The audience cheered again.



Stephanie Elad (R) with Marvin Lowe, another conservative who also won a seat on the school board of the Frisco Independent School District in Texas. (Courtesy of Stephanie Elad)

After that, people told her she should run for the school board. And she did. She announced the campaign in January and decided to “lean in” her conservative identity.

She avoided getting into the debate whether CRT was or was not taught in Frisco schools but focused on the outcomes, such as sliding academic standards. For example, to her, the [Integrated Language Arts \(ILA\) pilot program](#) introduced in the 2021-21 school year that combined on-level and advanced-level learning into the same classroom to promote [equity and inclusivity](#) was an outcome of a CRT-inspired approach.

The Frisco ISD serves 66,000 students and spans over two counties: Collin and Denton, which is more conservative than Collin. And all board seats are at-large, meaning they represent the entire ISD. This year's school board election saw a big turnout of around 15,000, compared to 8,000 a year ago.

Elad said everyone told her that, like many conservative municipal candidates before her, she would lose Collin and win Denton and that she needed to make sure the margin in Denton would compensate the loss in Collin. On the contrary, she defeated the runner-up—Dustin Paschal who identified student mental health issues as the biggest challenge—by 400 in Collin County and about 800 votes in Denton.

"I have Democrats donate to me because they hate this [ILA pilot] program so much. Their kids are in it. Some of them have advanced kids, and some don't," she told The Epoch Times. "They just don't like the program and the concept behind it. And they are concerned that it can spread to other subjects."

'Fight like Hell with a Smile on Our Faces'

While both Kaufman and Elad run for an open seat, many candidates run against incumbents.

"School boards incumbents lost at nearly twice the historical average," [Ballotpedia](#), a website that tracks election results, reported at the end of May. The finding was based on candidates who ran on at least one of the three "conflict issues"—identified as race in education, COVID-19 responses, or sex and gender in schools—in 141 school districts in Missouri, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin's school board elections held on April 5. And the sample size involved 334 seats in those 141 districts.

"I think this might be the first time that people are actually paying attention to school board elections," Virginia Beach City school board member Victoria Manning told The Epoch Times.

"Often, people go to the polls, and we're passing out our literature, and I say, 'Do you know whom you're voting for school board?' And they look at me, dazed and confused, 'What's that?'"

Manning, a realtor, won her election in 2016 and was re-elected in 2020.

All three issues—race, COVID-19, and sex education—boiled down to parental rights to her. “Ultimately, it boils down to parents having to be the ultimate decision-makers, parents and guardians.”

According to Tiffany Justice, co-founder of advocacy group Moms for Liberty (M4L), parents are “acting preemptively at their local level” to protect their children and not waiting to fight against “harms that they see coming down the pipe.”

Founded in January 2021, M4L now has over 90,000 members in 195 chapters across 37 states, Justice said. A third of the total membership has been new since November. Hawaii, Louisiana, and Connecticut are the latest states with new chapters.

Justice said that her organization continues to grow across the country, focusing on “unifying, educating, and empowering parents to defend or protect their parental rights at all levels of government.”

The battles were not all victories. M4L supported or endorsed over 40 school board candidates who won in the state of New York but also saw losses. For example, in Dutchess County, every candidate the organization endorsed lost.

Justice described the journey as a “long road.” “We didn’t get to this place in America overnight, and it’s going to take time. But we have found that America’s government does not work without us involved.”

Moms are getting creative, she said. She gave an example: at a chapter chair meeting in mid-May, one of the mothers said she got a meeting with the superintendent in her school district. Although angry, she made sure to sandwich her concerns with positive things she could say about the school district. And slowly, she found that the division leadership began addressing her concerns.

“Our moms and dads know that we are fighting for the survival of America,” Justice told The Epoch Times. “There’s no greater national security threat to the United States than having a generation of children who are not able to read or discern [right from wrong] for themselves.”

Her and M4L members’ responses? “Fight like hell with a smile on our faces. Get as many people out and encourage many parents to go out and vote to have their voices heard.”