

How News Reporters Are Being Deceived By Fake Groups Of ‘Moms’ And ‘Parents’ Attacking Public Schools

03-21-2025 ~ *These groups are the creation of deep-pocketed conservative networks, not “grassroots” advocates.*



“If your mother says she loves you, check it out” is a [bromide](#) drilled into every journalist. So it is baffling why, if an interest group includes the words “moms” or “parents,” it is just taken at its word, especially when a little digging can reveal that many of these groups are the creations of billionaires out to destroy public education.

As the author of [Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization](#), I have been following billionaire-backed education interest groups for more than a decade. Since big money lacks public credibility, it often masquerades as organizations claiming to represent the interests of “parents,” “moms,” “educators,” and “families.” The concocted stories about how these groups were created are often repeated by an incurious press, which misses the opportunity to tell its readers a more interesting story: how billionaires and right-wing activists pour money into upbeat-sounding organizations to further their aim of privateering our public school system.

These astroturf operations have been proliferating resulting in serious negative impacts. Consider the [havoc](#) wreaked on some school boards by Moms for Liberty (M4L). M4L even got into presidential politics in 2024, [boosting](#) Donald Trump, at the behest of the donors, who co-founder Tina Descovich termed as M4L’s [“investors.”](#)

Consider a November 2024 Washington Post [story](#) on Linda McMahon’s

nomination to be secretary of education. The article contrasted remarks from National Education Association (NEA) President Becky Pringle with an alternative view from Keri Rodrigues, founding president of the National Parents Union (NPU), which the reporter Laura Meckler called “a grassroots group,” thus giving the impression that NEA and NPU are similar organizations.

They are not. NEA is a well-established teachers’ union that credibly claims [3 million members](#) and is governed by a democratic structure. NPU appeared on the scene in 2020, surfing in on millions of dollars from the [foundations of American oligarchs](#), including the Walton family, [Mark Zuckerberg](#), and Charles Koch.

In 2024, Rodrigues, a fixture at education privateering groups, [told the Boston Globe](#) that NPU could get its message to “250,000 families to vote against” a ballot question sponsored by the teachers’ union and would “put that network to work.”

There is zero evidence that this extensive network exists or that it did anything on the ballot question. There is also no proof to validate Rodrigues’s [claim](#) that the organization has 1.7 million members nationally.

A 2021 Washington Post article [introducing](#) Moms for Liberty chronicled its claimed rapid rise without raising questions about how it grew so fast. The story simply provided the M4L narrative of its creation story, centered around former Florida school board members Descovich and Tiffany Justice. It omitted M4L’s third co-founder Bridget Ziegler, though it did quote her husband, Christian Ziegler, about the group’s political potency.

Bridget Ziegler served briefly on the M4L board and was replaced by GOP campaign consultant [Marie Rogerson](#). Christian Ziegler was then the powerful vice-chair of the Florida Republican Party and a [key Trump supporter](#). (In 2023, the Zieglers became famous for a threesome [scandal](#). She quickly resigned from her executive position with the Leadership Institute, an established training institution for right-wing activists. Christian was [removed](#) from his perch as chair of the Florida Republican Party.)

The Post October 2021 story [featured](#) a photo of Descovich pulling aside, Superman style, a white jacket to reveal the group’s logo t-shirt while posing next to an American flag. The questions about the group’s ties to the Republican Party

and suspicious financing were laughed off by the founders of M4L. The Post followed up a month later by printing an [op-ed](#) by Descovich and Justice.

NPU, M4L, and similar groups organize as nonprofit corporations under sections 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) of the Internal Revenue Service Code. As nonprofits, their Form 990 tax returns are made public but only in November, following the tax year. The information is skimpy but valuable. Journalists can access the Form 990s by requesting them directly from the nonprofits or from the [ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer](#), which helps trace donors as well.

These groups leave clues that no reporter can miss:

1. Don't buy the phony origin stories: These organizations all claim to be about moms joining together to improve education. But in no time, they have access to millions of dollars in donations and have the services of elite law firms, pollsters, media consultants, and often, ties to the Republican Party.

2. Follow the money: It isn't easy in the first two years of a nonprofit's existence, but there are signs: easy access to right-wing media, hiring expensive consultants, and big-budget conferences.

3. Watch how these groups work: The founding leadership usually consists of veteran right-wing operatives or communications professionals with years of experience in privateering organizations.

4. Get the big picture: Right from the beginning, M4L had obvious ties to Republican and right-wing organizations that often went unreported.

5. Keep following the money: When nonprofit tax forms finally become public, they'll reveal how much was donated and can help identify the top contractors and how much they were paid.

Let us expand on these insights to show how these secretive operations can be exposed right from the beginning by using Form 990.

Don't Buy the Phony Origin Stories

The typical "moms" or "parents" creation story goes something like this: outraged by some aspect of their children's public school education, two or three "moms" band together to attract other like-minded parents to cure the deficiencies of the system, which are always the fault of the teachers' unions. In truth, the "moms"

are agents of far-right billionaires often tied—like M4L and Parents Defending Education (PDE)—to the secretive Council for National Policy, which [seeks](#) to privateer K-12 for profit, expand Christian education, and promote homeschooling.

According to the [billionaire-funded](#) online publication [the 74](#), NPU “is the brainchild of two Latina mothers,” Keri Rodrigues and Alma Marquez, who “had disappointing experiences with education, both as parents and students, and with advocacy groups.”

To its credit, the 74 was [candid](#) about the funding of NPU: the foundations of billionaires, including Bill Gates, the Walton family, the late Eli Broad, and Michael and Susan Dell, and organizations like the City Fund, which gets its [money](#) from Reed Hastings, John Arnold, and Walton family members, inheritors of the Walmart fortune.

Nonetheless, the tenor of the story was of a grassroots moms’ start-up. Other news outlets ignored the 74’s detailing of billionaire funding. An online search through the New York Times website supplemented with a library search through Gale OneFile showed 13 NYT stories or columns that mention the National Parents Union since the group’s public launch on January 1, 2021. Only one column by Michelle Goldberg [noted](#) that “The National Parents Union is funded by the pro-privatization Walton Family Foundation.” The Waltons are, however, the only funders Goldberg mentioned.

The New Yorker came closest to the truth in a June 2021 [piece](#): “The Walton foundation set up the National Parents Union in January 2020, with Rodrigues as the founding president.” A review of Form 990s for NPU and the Walton Family Foundation from 2020 through 2023 that I reviewed shows that NPU accepted more than \$11 million in contributions. The Walton Family Foundation donated around \$3 million of that amount.

The media is failing to cover the single most important fact the public needs to know about “parents” and “moms” groups: who is supplying them with millions of dollars in funding.

As for M4L, although a few media outlets wrote it had [three founders](#), most followed the practice of [CNN](#), which in December 2021 omitted Bridget Ziegler and described “the two women behind Moms for Liberty, a group of conservatives

that came together in January,” downplaying the fact that at that time, the state GOP vice-chair’s wife was also one of the co-founders. By January 9, 2021, soon after its incorporation, M4L’s online store was [offering](#) magnets, t-shirts, and hats, and a “Madison Meetup” package of right-wing materials.

While mainstream media was valorizing M4L’s origin story, right-wing outlets produced a steady stream of propaganda about the organization. Later in January 2021, Descovich appeared on the Rush Limbaugh Show (guest-hosted by Todd Herman). Media Matters for America [found](#) that, by July 2022, M4L “representatives have been regulars on right-wing media, appearing on Fox News at least 16 times and Steve Bannon’s “War Room” at least 14 times.”

Another supposedly grassroots parents’ group that has an origin story grounded in deception is PDE. In lodging a civil rights complaint against the Columbus, Ohio, public schools in May 2021, PDE President Nicole Neily [told](#) the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch, “We just all work from home... We’re all working moms.”

In fact, Neily is a well-compensated [political operative](#) in the Koch network. According to the [Koch-connected Speech First’s Form 990 for 2019](#), which was available after November 2020 and thus before PDE was founded in 2021, Neily was paid \$150,000 in 2019.

Follow the Money

Due to the barriers to tracing the funding of such groups, it can be hard to follow the money, especially in the first two years of operation. But in 2021, an [article](#) in the New Yorker described how the [VELA Education Fund](#), a partnership of the Walton Family Foundation and the Charles Koch Institute, had given NPU \$700,000 in 2020 to “help people with fewer resources,” including promoting homeschooling during COVID-19. This is despite the fact that NPU was not familiar with homeschooling.

Press outlets have also overlooked funding sources of M4L. In 2021, co-founder Descovich [told CNN](#) that M4L had raised more than \$300,000 through t-shirt sales, small donors, and fundraising events. However, one such event was a [gala](#) featuring former Fox News personality Megyn Kelly in June 2021, six months into M4L’s first year. The top tickets went for \$20,000. The Celebrity Speakers Bureau [pegged](#) Kelly’s speaking fee as between \$50,000 and \$100,000. The event [raised](#) at least \$57,000.

In July 2021, Descovich [appeared](#) at a Heritage Foundation virtual town hall on “Preserving American History in Schools.” By October 29, 2021, M4L was [referring](#) members to the [Leadership Institute](#) for training and sending members to the [Heritage Foundation](#) for events and other resources. Both these organizations have been part of the right-wing political firmament since the 1970s. A bit of digging [showed](#) that M4L was deeply embedded in far-right politics. But most press [accounts](#) ignored that evidence and the public remained largely in the dark.

In April 2021, PDE headed by Neily, brought on [Elizabeth Schultz](#) as a “senior fellow,” who had worked under Trump’s Education Secretary Betsy DeVos during his first term and was a vocal [anti-LGBTQ activist](#).

Watch How These Groups Work

These groups can be intertwined. PDE, M4L, and another faux-grassroots group, [No Left Turn in Education](#) (NLTE), all came on the scene around the same time, with NLTE being founded in 2020. PDE’s website includes a map called “[IndoctriNation](#)” with lists of affiliates across the nation. The April 15, 2021, [listings](#) (the website appears to have gone live only in March 2021) [showed](#) that most of its allies were chapters of M4L and NLTE with few actual members, according to my research in 2021.

Media reports seemed content to accept the “moms working from home” creation story despite the obvious early support from well-resourced groups.

NPU held its organizing meeting, which it claims drew representatives from all 50 states, in New Orleans in January 2020. To promote the event, NPU [employed](#) Mercury Public Affairs, an international public relations firm. To draw press attention, NPU also commissioned polling from [Echelon Insights](#), a Republican pollster that has also [worked for](#) the Walton family.

In the same year of its [founding](#), in 2021, PDE [published](#) detailed plans, such as “How to Create ‘Woke At’ Pages,” that instruct parents on how to use secrecy to attack “woke activists” in the education system. PDE also began initiating [lawsuits](#) against local school boards, represented by the Republican law firm of [Consovoy McCarthy](#).

William Consovoy, who passed in 2023, was in the Federalist Society, the nationwide network of conservative lawyers that [helped form](#) Trump’s picks for

the U.S. Supreme Court. Consovoy had been a [law clerk](#) to Justice Clarence Thomas and [represented Donald Trump](#) during a congressional investigation. The firm also represented Trump in 2020 as he tried to intervene before the Supreme Court [to stop the vote count in Pennsylvania](#). When PDE's [2021 Form 990](#) became available, it showed PDE paid Consovoy McCarthy \$800,000 in legal fees.

Get the Big Picture

The clues kept coming, only to be ignored by the press.

In 2022, M4L held its first national summit in Tampa, Florida. In its reporting of the event, [NBC portrayed](#) the group as a political powerhouse, reporting that attendees “browsed booths set up by conservative groups, including Turning Point USA, the Leadership Institute and Heritage Action, and the evangelical Liberty University” without describing these organizations for what they are—the critical infrastructure of Christian nationalism.

Media reports on the event generally ignored who the [sponsors](#) of the summit were or the amounts of their donations. The Leadership Institute donated [\\$50,000](#). The Heritage Foundation and Heritage Action for America provided \$10,000 each. And PDE chipped in \$10,000. Meanwhile, Descovich was still [peddling](#) the [story](#) that M4L was getting by on t-shirt sales, even though an aide to Leadership Institute's Morton Blackwell [bragged](#) about how the institute had provided the relevant training to help the group “become a national force.”

When there were [questions raised](#) about how M4L could fund such a lavish event with t-shirt sales, M4L denied any connections to deep-pocketed right-wing groups, and most news reporters presented a simple “he said, she said” account and moved on. Reporters generally missed the bigger story that the institutional right was creating and passing off phony “moms” and “parents” operations.

Keep Following the Money

Once Form 990s were filed, the deception became obvious, but that didn't mean it got covered by big media outlets.

The [2022 Form 990](#) for NPU showed that Keri Rodrigues was paid \$410,000 from NPU and a sister organization. She paid her husband, the chief operating officer of both organizations, \$278,529. Yet, in August 2024, CBS Morning News [presented](#) Rodrigues as a typical parent worried about back-to-school shopping.

PDE's [Form 990 for 2021](#) was even more revealing, as [exposed](#) by True North Research's Lisa Graves and Alyssa Bowen for Truthout in 2023. Graves and Bowen showed that PDE is deeply tied with far-right [Supreme Court fixer Leonard Leo](#), even paying \$106,938 to his for-profit consulting firm.

PDE, a brand-new operation, [raised \\$3,178,272 in its first year](#) in 2021. It paid Neily, who is also on the board, a total compensation of \$195,688 for her 40-hour work week.

According to Speech First's [Form 990 for 2021](#), Neily put in an additional 20-hour week for Speech First, earning another \$86,117 and a total of \$281,805 from both Koch- and Leo-funded operations combined. In 2023, PDE [pushed](#) Neily's base salary and other compensation up to \$341,400. This is quite an income for a stay-at-home working mom.

The trail from NPU leads back to the Walton family and billionaire allies who have been working to undermine teachers' unions and siphon public money to charter schools for years.

Scratch the surface of groups like M4L and PDE, and you find the Heritage Foundation, the Leadership Institute, and Leonard Leo—the elite of far-right politics who [work to](#) replace public schools with for-profit schools, religious schools, and homeschooling. These details make for a very important story that most journalists have overlooked.

Stop Being Fooled

Reporters should not be fooled by the techniques used by these fake “mom” and “parent” groups on behalf of their extremist overseers. As Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway show in [Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming](#), these techniques have been used by “scientific” nonprofits created by the same conservative groups, including the Heritage Foundation, to contest climate change.

Many have [tracked](#) the origin of these techniques back to the tobacco industry's fight to protect their profits from the growing body of research linking their products to cancer and other health problems.

In 1994, tobacco giant RJ Reynolds [created](#) the industry front group Get

Government Off Our Back to advance a “smokers’ rights” campaign to fight against the tsunami of scientific evidence exposing the health risks of tobacco. Reynolds kept its backing a secret while promoting it as a movement of “grassroots” smokers.

Meanwhile, in his farewell address, former President Joseph R. Biden warned about how the wealthy are a big threat to democracy:

“Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power, and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead.”

For years, the same oligarchy that threatens basic rights has been threatening our freedom to have access to a high-quality system of public education. There is no reason they should be aided by credulous reporters from trusted news sources. If we can question our moms on whether they really love us, we can question the authenticity of these moms and parent groups.

By Maurice Cunningham

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Our Schools](#). Maurice Cunningham PhD, JD, retired in 2021 as an associate professor of political science at the College of Liberal Arts, University of Massachusetts, Boston, and is the author of [*Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization*](#).