

Amid Pandemic Turmoil and Curriculum Fights, a Boom for Christian Schools

Ruth Graham

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Kaelyn Ball, a 15-year-old ninth grader, during physical science class at Smith Mountain Lake Christian Academy in Moneta, Va., on Oct. 6, 2021. (Veasey Conway/The New York Times)

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Five years ago, the school in southwest Virginia had just 88 students between kindergarten and 12th grade. Its finances were struggling, quality was inconsistent by its own admission, and classes met at a local Baptist church.

Now, it has 420, with others turned away for lack of space. It has grown to occupy a 21,000-square-foot former mini-mall, which it moved into in 2020, plus two other buildings down the road.

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“This is a once-in-100-year moment for the growth of Christian education,” said E. Ray Moore, founder of the conservative Christian Education Initiative.

In the 2019-20 school year, 3.5 million of the 54 million American schoolchildren attended religious schools, including almost 600,000 in “conservative Christian” schools, according to the latest count by the Education Department.

Those numbers are now growing.

The median member school in the Association of Christian Schools International, one of the country's largest networks of evangelical schools, grew its K-12 enrollment by 12% between 2019-20 and 2020-21. The Association of Classical Christian Schools, another conservative network, expanded to educating about 59,200 students this year from an estimated 50,500 in the 2018-19 school year. (Catholic schools, by contrast, are continuing a long trend of decline.)

When the pandemic swept across the country in the spring of 2020, many parents turned to home schooling.

Others wanted or needed to have their children in physical classrooms. In many parts of the country, private schools stayed open even as public schools moved largely online. Because many parents were working from home, they got a historically intimate look at their children's online classes — leading to what some advocates for evangelical schools call “the Zoom factor.”

“It's not necessarily one thing,” said Melanie Cassady, director of academy relations at Christian Heritage Academy in Rocky Mount, Virginia, about 25 miles southwest of Smith Mountain Lake Academy. “It's that overall awareness that the pandemic has really brought to light to families of what's going on inside the schools, inside the classroom, and what teachers are teaching. They've come to that point where they have to make a decision: Am I OK with this?”

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“It has been absolutely shocking,” said Jeff Keaton, the founder and president of RenewaNation, a Virginia-based conservative evangelical organization whose work includes starting and consulting with evangelical schools. One of his brothers, Troy Keaton, is a pastor and the chair of the Smith Mountain Lake board.

In Virginia, much of the recent controversy has focused on new standards for teaching history, including beefing up Black history offerings. Starting next summer, public-school teachers in the state will also be evaluated on their “cultural competency,” which includes factors like using teaching materials that “represent and validate diversity.” School districts have also grappled with new state guidelines this fall on transgender students' access

to bathrooms and locker rooms of their choice, and rights to use their preferred names and pronouns.

“Of course we do not teach CRT,” said Jon Atchue, a member of the school board in Franklin County, Virginia, adding that teaching about historical injustices is not the same thing as Marxism or critical race theory, which is an academic framework for analyzing historical patterns of racism and how they persist. “It’s a windmill that folks are fighting with.” Atchue emphasized that he was speaking only for himself, not the board.

Jeff Keaton called this period “the second Great Awakening in Christian education in the United States since the 1960s and ’70s.”

That previous “Great Awakening” was spurred by a number of factors, starting when white Southern parents founded “segregation academies” as a backlash to racial integration created by the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Other Supreme Court rulings on school prayer and evolution in the 1960s, debates about sex education, desegregation busing, and fears of “secular humanism” in the 1970s contributed to the alienation of many white conservatives.

Before the pandemic, private school enrollment overall had declined gradually since the turn of the millennium, while the subset of non-Catholic religious schools held steady, suggesting that the recent growth in conservative evangelical schools is a distinct phenomenon rather than part of a general retreat from public schools.

Today, some schools — generally newer and smaller — advertise themselves directly as standing athwart history. “Critical Race Theory will not be included in our curriculum or teaching,” promises a new school opened by a large church in Lawrence, Kansas. “The idea of gender fluidity has no place in our churches, schools or homes,” the headmaster of another new school in Maricopa, Arizona, writes on his school’s website.

But most schools do not make such overt references. “They use words like alternative or Christian or traditional,” said Adam Laats, a historian at Binghamton University.

Academic quality and costs vary widely, with some schools led by people without educational credentials and others touting more rigorous standards than public schools. Smith Mountain Lake uses curriculum from Bob Jones University Press, which says it offers “Christian educational materials with academic excellence from a biblical worldview.”

More significant, said Laats, are the words that conservative schools do not use, like “inclusion” and “diversity,” in contrast with a growing number of public and private schools. About 68% of students at conservative Christian private schools are white, according to the Education Department, a figure that is comparable to other categories of private schools but significantly higher than public schools.

Conservatives reject comparisons between their opposition to critical race theory and the desegregation backlash of the last century. “I don’t know a single school that even comes close to promoting that kind of concept,” Jeff Keaton said. “What they don’t like is critical theory, where they pit kids against each other in oppressed and oppressor groups”.

If many conservative Protestant schools in the 1960s and 1970s were founded to keep white children away from certain people, then the goal today is keeping children away from certain ideas, said J. Russell Hawkins, a professor of humanities and history at Indiana Wesleyan University. “But the ideas being avoided are still having to do with race,” he said.

Skepticism of public education is a long-running theme in American conservatism. But the specter of critical race theory is now a constant topic on conservative talk radio and television news. In a speech in May, former Attorney General William Barr referred to public schools as “the government’s secular-progressive madrassas.”

Like many Christian schools across the country, Smith Mountain Lake has benefited not just from national controversies but intense local battles. A school board meeting in July in Franklin County, Virginia, from which the school draws many of its students, attracted about 180 community members for a heated discussion of critical race theory and masking in schools. Smith Mountain Lake does not require masks.

In Franklin County, public school enrollment has dropped to 6,125 this year from 7,270 in 2017-18. Over the same period, the number of home-schooled students in the district almost doubled to 1,010, including 32 students who withdrew after a new mask mandate was put into place in mid-September.

Although the district does not count the number of students in other schools, Kara Bernard, the district’s home-school coordinator, said, “We are losing students to private Christian schools.”

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“We’re just so grateful that the Christian academy is here,” she said.

Some teachers are grateful, too.

Shelley Kist, who is in her first year teaching Spanish at Smith Mountain Lake, took a pay cut to come to the school after 17 years in public schools.

In her classes at the Christian school, she leads students in prayers in Spanish, assigns Bible verses they must memorize in Spanish, and discusses career opportunities in overseas missionary work. And she is comfortable weaving cultural commentary into her lessons. She recently made a connection in class between the fact that each Spanish noun is assigned a gender and the concept of “God’s assigned genders” for men and women.

The question for private schools is whether growth in reaction to a pandemic and a culture war is sustainable after concerns about both have receded. “This will be a blip in some places,” Troy Keaton, the chairman of Smith Mountain Lake’s board, conceded while seated at a conference table at his church. “But this is a long-term opportunity for people that know how to love, care, teach and do high-quality things.”

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