

# [***Moms for Liberty faces new challenges and growing pushback over its conservative education agenda***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B7W-YXM1-JBSS-S006-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

February 3, 2024 Saturday 2:48 PM GMT

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**Length:** 2427 words

**Byline:** By Denise Royal, Carlos Suarez and Ray Sanchez, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

Viera, Florida (CNN) &#8212; In Florida, where the right-wing [*Moms for Liberty*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/30/politics/moms-for-liberty-2024/index.html) group was born in response to Covid-19 school closures and mask mandates, the first Brevard County School Board meeting of the new year considered whether two bestselling novels - "The Kite Runner" and "Slaughterhouse-Five" - should be banned from schools.

A lone Moms for Liberty supporter sat by herself at the January 23 meeting, where opponents of the book ban outnumbered her.

Nearly 20 speakers voiced opposition to removing the novels from school libraries. One compared the book-banning effort to Nazi Germany. Another accused Moms for Liberty of waging war on teachers. No one spoke in favor of the ban. About three hours into the meeting, the board voted quickly to keep the two books on the shelves of high schools.

"Why are we banning books?" asked Mindy McKenzie, a mom and nurse who is a member of Stop Moms for Liberty, which was formed to counter what it calls a far-right extremist group "pushing for book banning and destroying public education."

"Why are we letting Moms for Liberty infiltrate our school system?"

Moms for Liberty, founded in 2021, expanded its mission to include efforts to ban certain books from schools, outlaw the teaching and discussion of gender and sexuality by teachers and halt the teaching of [*critical race theory.*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/14/us/critical-race-theory-what-is-it/index.html)

Now the group is at a crossroads.

"One of their major challenges is the fact that most Americans are actually pretty positive about their own children's schools," Jack Schneider, a professor of education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, said via email. "Although their message may have appeal in the abstract, at least to conservative voters, families aren't clamoring for disruption in their own children's schools."

After effectively channeling conservative anger over cultural issues into action on the ground, from supporting candidates in school board races to spearheading campaigns against teachers, administrators and other political foes, Moms for Liberty's burgeoning influence in Republican national ***politics***may be faltering, observers say.

A [*sex scandal involving the husband*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/19/politics/sarasota-police-opt-to-not-charge-christian-ziegler-with-sexual-battery-saying-sexual-encounter-was-likely-consensual/index.html) of Moms for Liberty co-founder Bridget Ziegler, a Sarasota County school board member, has not helped the group's cause.

Ziegler has been on the forefront of the cultural battles GOP Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has waged in the public schools. DeSantis named her to the board now overseeing the Walt Disney Company's [*special tax district*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/27/politics/desantis-disney-reedy-creek/index.html) in central Florida amid his clash with the entertainment giant over a state law that restricted how sexual orientation and gender identity could be taught in the classroom. Ziegler remains on the school board despite calls for her to step down.

"It seems to me a bit premature, or more than a bit premature,to write it off entirely," Glenn Altschuler, an American studies professor at Cornell University, told CNN, referring to Moms for Liberty. "Will it have national prominence that resembles the prominence that it had early on in its founding? I think that's unlikely."

'Don't mess with America's moms'

Moms for Liberty first garnered national attention in 2021 in the same vast room where the Brevard County School Board met recently.

One of its founding members, Tina Descovich, a former Brevard County School Board member, became an outspoken critic of mask mandates during the pandemic. The group's popularity exploded as it accused public schools of indoctrinating children with a liberal learning agenda. Soon, the number of chapters and membership across the country began to take off.

"To say it's waning, I think that's ridiculous," Descovich told CNN, referring to the organization's influence. "We are just doing the work that we're doing."

Moms for Liberty bills itself as a protector of parental rights at all levels of government, an opponent of government overreach and intimidation and a non-political grassroots organization.

The Moms for Liberty summit in Philadelphia last June was headlined by former President [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/specials/politics/president-donald-trump-45) and other Republican White House hopefuls in a sign of the group's growing influence in GOP ***politics***.

"In school board races, PTA meetings and town halls across the nation, you have taught the radical left Marxists and communists a lesson they will never forget: Don't mess with America's moms," Trump told the summit. **"**You're the best thing that's ever happened to America."

The summit also heard from [*DeSantis*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/25/politics/ron-desantis-agenda-president-court-fights/index.html) and former South Carolina Gov. [*Nikki Haley*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/04/politics/nikki-haley-cnn-town-hall-takeaways/index.html).

"It's because they know that moms are passionate about these issues," Descovich said of the conservative politicians making the summit a mandatory stop on the GOP presidential primary campaign trail.

Unfulfilled pledge to shake up school boards

Moms for Liberty has grown dramatically. It claims to have 130,000 members in 300 chapters across 48 states, according to the organization. In late 2021, months after it was founded, the group said it had 70,000 members in 167 chapters across more than 30 states.

But its track record of supporting winning candidates in school board elections took a hit last year.

In 2023, Moms for Liberty said 43% of the 202 candidates they endorsed won their school board election, the organization said. In 2022, the group endorsed 500 candidates, with 55% winning their elections.

"This will be our third election cycle getting involved in school board races," Descovich said. "I'd say the first year was kind of happenstance."

Still, the organization's pledge to shake up school boards across the nation has widely not materialized.

"If you go to their claims about wins, they are in districts that tilt very heavily toward a friendly constituency," Altschuler said. "The mark of a movement, its success is when it begins to spread beyond that rather predictable constituency. And right now, they haven't done that."

The group's unrelenting attacks against books that take on difficult issues, the rights of LGBTQ students and diversity initiatives have not translated into electoral success, according to observers.

"Sowing chaos is a lot easier than governing," Schneider said. "It's one thing to smear teachers or to level outrageous claims about the curriculum. It's another thing entirely to convince local voters - people who have a stake in the schools actually functioning - that you have the good sense and the practical skills to oversee school district operations."

State GOP circles reel from sex scandal

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights watchdog group, [*has labeled Moms for Liberty*](https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/moms-liberty)"far-right organization that engages in anti-student inclusion activities and self-identifies as part of the modern parental rights movement."

Among the public comments flagged by the SPLC was a tweet that year from the group's account that called gender dysphoria "a mental health disorder that is being normalized by predators across the USA."

Meanwhile, a movement that says it seeks to protect children against the dissemination of material deemed to be sexualized has been rocked by a sex scandal.

The scandal sent shockwaves through GOP circles in Florida, where Ziegler and her husband, Christian Ziegler, the former chairman of the state's Republican Party, were considered political stalwarts. The couple rose from their base of power in Sarasota County into significant statewide figures under the Florida governor.

Christian Ziegler had been [*under investigation*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/30/politics/florida-gop-chair-investigation/index.html) since October, after a woman accused him of raping her at her apartment after she canceled a three-way sexual encounter with him and his wife, according to a search warrant affidavit, which CNN obtained from the Florida Center for Government Accountability.

The Sarasota Police Department said last month Christian Ziegler will not be charged with sexually assaulting the woman, but authorities will seek to charge him with video voyeurism over an alleged recording of the encounter.

An investigation concluded the sexual encounter between Christian Ziegler and the woman was "likely consensual," the police department said.

Ziegler was [*ousted from his role*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/08/politics/florida-gop-removes-christian-ziegler-party-chairmanship/index.html) as Florida GOP chairman last month amid the investigation.

Police said the woman told investigators she did not consent to the recording of the sexual encounter. Investigators said they prepared a probable cause affidavit against Ziegler for the felony crime of video voyeurism. In Florida, videotaping a sexual encounter without consent is a [*third-degree felony*](https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2018/810.145).

The case was turned over to the state attorney's office for review, according to police.

Ziegler's attorney Derek Byrd said in a statement to CNN his client's reputation and professional life have suffered "irreparable harm."

"At the beginning of the investigation we asked and warned the public to withhold judgment of criminal wrongdoing until a thorough investigation of the facts was complete," Byrd said in the statement.

"Sadly, many people and media outlets refused to give Mr. Ziegler that courtesy. That was unfair and unfortunate and has caused irreparable harm to Mr. Ziegler's reputation, his personal life, professional life, and his family."

Byrd said he was "disappointed" police "punted" the remaining part of the case to prosecutors but "we strongly believe that the State Attorney will not prosecute Mr. Ziegler for any crime."

The attorney said Ziegler will fully cooperate with the investigation and declined further comment until it's completed.

Ziegler told investigators the sexual encounter was consensual. According to an affidavit, [*Bridget Ziegler*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2023/12/14/bridget-ziegler-sarasota-school-board-suarez-ac360-vpx.cnn) told detectives about an alleged previous three-way rendezvous with the woman who accused her husband of rape.

CNN has reached out to Bridget Ziegler for comment.

The allegations were followed with [*calls for the Zieglers*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/03/politics/florida-gop-chair-defies-desantis-wont-step-down-as-new-details-of-sexual-assault-allegation-emerge/index.html) to resign from their high-profile positions. Christian Ziegler refused and was voted out of his leadership role. Bridget Ziegler, who was never accused of criminal wrongdoing, has faced calls to step down from the Sarasota County School Board.

A Moms for Liberty chapter in Pennsylvania split from the national organization over the scandal, according to chair Clarissa Paige, who said the group is now called the Northumberland County Academic Alliance.

"I think that ... was a very sensational headline that went around the world very quickly. That's not, you know, who Moms for Liberty is. We stay focused on defending parental rights," Descovich said of the scandal.

Moms for Liberty is still trying to grow in liberal states. The group held a town hall in New York City in early January. The event drew protests from parents, teachers, and members of the LGBTQ community.

"We've learned a lot the last two years," Descovich said. "You've got to remember we've never done this before. Other than my school board campaign, I have never run a campaign. We've learned a ton, and I'm really excited to see what 2024 looks like."

'People are finally standing up'

Jennifer Jenkins, who defeated Descovich to win her seat on the Brevard County School Board in 2020, said the influence of Moms for Liberty is fading as more parents begin to question the group's positions.

"I think that things have gone too far and people are finally standing up to say, you know, 'This is my choice. These are my kids as well too. You don't get to make these decisions for us,'" Jenkins said.

"People are seeing, you know, news cycle after news cycle, the hypocrisy of the things that they advocate for and they say they stand," she said.

At the first Brevard County School Board meeting of 2024, not one speaker defended a proposal to ban Kurt Vonnegut's classic "Slaughterhouse-Five" or Afghan American author Khaled Hosseini's "The Kite Runner."

The lone Moms for Liberty supporter at the meeting declined to speak with CNN, referring all questions to the national organization.

"I'm thrilled that there was one there, and that's all it takes," Descovich said. "She can report back everything that needs to be reported back. If she feels like she needs to sign up to speak, then she can sign up to speak and represent the whole chapter."

One of the first speakers, Rise Walter, a member of Brevard Democrats, praised "The Kite Runner" as a "powerful, gut-wrenching, thought-provoking book."

"I also remember the backstory and the growth of the Taliban and its repressive autocracy in the name of religious nationalism," she said. "It struck terror in my heart then, and it does again today, with the rise of parental rights groups that want to limit what students learn."

Krissy Goss, another speaker, said: "Ironically, Moms for Liberty are doing exactly what they say they are against as they are pushing their ideology on all children in public schools. It's clear Moms for Liberty are not for liberty at all."

"Do we want to go back to Nazi Germany?" said Beverly Marker, a grandmother in the district. "That's pretty much what a lot of you seem to want to do. Florida right now has an ugly, ugly image in many parts of the country. And that's because the issues like this."

Ava WolfenKoehler, a high school student, told board members "It's really sad" that students are "begging" them not to ban certain books. She said she had just turned 18 and "can't wait" to vote for the first time against a board member who wants books removed from the schools.

About half a dozen people at the meeting wore red T-shirts with the word 'STOP!' on the front, signaling they support Stop Moms for Liberty.

Jenkins believes the challenges are mounting for Moms for Liberty. "More and more people are voting against them," she said. "Perception is power, and right now, they look weak."

Before next Tuesday's Brevard school board meeting, students, parents and teachers plan what organizers are calling "[*a rally against academic censorship."*](https://www.mobilize.us/mobilize/event/595042/)

Students will speak out against removing books from schools, some banned titles will be distributed, and new voters will be registered to send a message to "Brevard's rogue school board," according to organizers.

"The longer that Moms for Liberty has been on the scene, the more we've seen local communities organize against them," Schneider said. "Organized opponents often include coalitions of families, educators, and even students themselves - folks who are well positioned to counter baseless accusations, and who are themselves often quite compelling as voices for less politicized school governance."

This story was reported by CNN's Denise Royal, Carlos Suarez, Ray Sanchez, Gregory Krieg, Leyla Santiago, Sara Weisfeldt, and Steve Contorno. It was written by Sanchez.

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**Load-Date:** February 27, 2024

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