

The Public Problems of Private Schools



MY PATERNAL GRANDPARENTS grew up in Germany. My grandmother was raised in a small village near the Black Forest. My grandfather was from a small town in Bavaria. Both escaped Nazism and came to America in 1940, carrying no money and speaking little

English. Most of my grandmother's family made it out of Germany. My grandfather's parents did not.

My grandparents met and married in New York and worked odd and menial jobs. Observant and deeply involved in their German-Jewish community, they instilled the values of study, hard work, family, and tradition in their children. My father absorbed those values and earned a place at one of New York City's selective high schools and one of New York's top state universities. After working for several companies, he went out on his own and built a successful importing business.

I share my family history not because it is particularly interesting

or unique, but because it isn't: It's a typical Jewish-immigrant story, a textbook example of the American Dream. Rags to relative riches in two generations through sacrifice for one's children, a tight-knit family and a supportive community, high-quality, affordable education, hard work, talent, and luck.

Today, however, the kinds of opportunities that made the American Dream possible for countless Jewish immigrants are threatened by an ideological movement that seeks to eradicate the values that make the American Dream possible. It goes under the benign-sounding name of "diversity, equity, and inclusion," or DEI. Our country's education system has become the citadel for this movement, and our schools—particularly our elite schools—are the recruitment centers and training grounds for its foot soldiers. It is a crucial battleground in today's culture war, and it presents a particular threat to Jews.

Quite accidentally, I found myself on the front line.



Like my father's, my story is a familiar one. I grew up mostly in a New Jersey suburb, the product of decent public schools. My Jewish education ended with my bar mitzvah. I attended elite private universities, started a career in finance, married, and, with my wife, raised our only daughter in New York City—not, now, in Washington Heights or the Bronx, like my grandparents, but on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

When my daughter was five, we embarked on the stressful admissions process for private Manhattan kindergarten. We wanted to give our daughter the best possible start. But because we were unconnected, not "diverse," and not especially wealthy by the crazy standards of Manhattan private schools, the preschool director of our daughter's small Jewish nursery school told us to apply broadly: twelve schools. My daughter did well in the admissions process, and we wound up with choices. We selected Brearley, an all-girls

K–12 school renowned nationally for its strong academics, dedicated educators, well-rounded students, and supportive community.

Academically and socially, my daughter thrived during her first six years. In hindsight, there were signs of educational derailment, but they were easy to dismiss at the time. We sat through holiday assemblies with songs in what seemed like every language but English. There were institutional tears and offers of counseling over the election loss of Hillary Clinton. In fourth grade, Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories* disappeared from the curriculum, abruptly removed from the classroom because it contained an admittedly highly offensive word—but one in a story the class was not reading.

There was what I would call “oversharing” by teachers about their personal lives that seemed designed to expose even kindergarten students to sexually diverse identities. There was quirky but minor language policing: A math problem could not be “easy” lest you embarrass a peer. It could only be “quickly manageable.” Perhaps most noticeable was the near total absence of men from a social-studies curriculum that focused on the civil rights movement to the exclusion of the Civil War and included plenty of discussion of suffragettes but nary a word on the Constitution. My daughter absorbed an intensely ideological, chronologically muddled, partial presentation of American history and culture.

In the summer of 2020, things accelerated: George Floyd, the coming of age of Black Lives Matter, and the appearance of an Instagram account publicly airing the grievances of black Brearley alumni. Nearly identical “Black At” Instagram accounts appeared simultaneously from alumni of private schools all across the country.

Everything about the school seemed to change. “Antiracism” (defined by Ibram X. Kendi, its most prominent proponent, as opposing any ideas and policies that fail to produce or at least work toward the equal representation of different racial groups in any desirable societal situation, whether it be places at Harvard or owner-occupied housing) was now almost the only thing that mattered. Social justice became the new mission. Critical thinking

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and intellectual curiosity were out, indoctrination and activism were in. The community, already isolated and reeling from Covid restrictions, felt fractured and divided. The administration, previously filled with exuberance and optimism, now seemed cult-like, its mood stern, humorless, and laden with guilt.

We were required to sign a “community agreement” pledging to support the teaching of antiracism not only in the school but also at home. We refused. After several phone calls with the head of the middle school, the school acquiesced—but said we would have to sign the following year. We were also obliged to participate in two mandatory antiracism Zoom sessions for parents, taught by a firm prominent for training schools in DEI and critical race theory. (CRT in the law schools is the theoretical parent, and DEI in grade school and college the activist child—a topic for another day.)

We were alarmed. I spoke to many parents over the school year. Nearly all shared similar concerns, but getting them to speak out proved impossible. In February, re-enrollment contracts came out, and the message was plain: Brearley was now an antiracist school. Families not fully on board were no longer welcome.

It was clear to us that Brearley was no longer a place where our daughter, or any curious, outspoken, free-thinking girl, could get

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a good education. DEI had been infused into every aspect of the curriculum, eradicating the traditional teaching of literature and history so important to a sound understanding of America.

We decided not to re-enroll. With my family’s permission, I sent a letter to every Brearley parent, decrying the school’s obsession with race, its change of mission, and its cowardly failure to stand up to the forces of illiberalism. My purpose was simply to get other unhappy parents to speak up. Unexpectedly, however, the letter went viral, and the media attention it generated contributed to the nascent national movement against critical race theory.



I have been asked many times if I have any regrets about the letter. I stand by every single word I wrote save one. I objected to “Brearley’s vacuous, inappropriate, and fanatical use of words such as ‘equity,’ ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusiveness.’” My mistake was to regard Brearley’s use of language as “vacuous.” On this, I now realize I was wrong. It is through the redefinition of benign language—who, after all, could object to “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusiveness,” as those words have long been understood?—that a malign movement is advancing objectives inimical to fundamental American ideals in both schools and society.

Several months ago, I was given access to nearly 100 hours of

leaked videos from the 2021 National Association of Independent Schools’ (NAIS) People of Color Conference (PoCC), which was held late last year virtually. NAIS is an umbrella-like organization that influences the missions and directs the policy of more than 1,600 of the most elite private schools in the country, including Brearley. Its annual PoCC conference is perhaps the leading K–12 professional-development conference for the implementation of DEI in schools.

For the first time, I understood what diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners and consultants mean when they use these three words, and what the true objectives of the movement are, whether it appears as DEI or as one of its many synonyms: antiracism, anti-bias, anti-oppression, critical race theory, critical social justice, and woke education. I also understood the danger that DEI poses to Jews in particular.

The stated goal of DEI, whatever name it goes by, is “equity.” Diversity and inclusion are the mechanisms by which it is to be achieved. In each case, however, the words mean something quite different from what you will find in the dictionary.

Diversity divides students into “oppressed” and “oppressors” on the basis of race, gender, and sexual orientation. (The primary axis is black vs. white, but women vs. men, gay vs. straight, and trans vs. “cis” also play a role.) The intention is for those who are categorized as oppressed to be radicalized into believing they are being harmed by entrenched systems of law, government, and economics under which they can never succeed. Feelings of trauma and violence are even inculcated in segregated “affinity groups” through cult-like practices such as the “racial healing circles” adapted from Native American culture. Grievances, sometimes real but often manufactured, are used to turn these groups—even those seen as oppressors—into zealous advocates for institutional change.

Inclusion requires all students and teachers in the oppressor group to become “allies” to the oppressed. It is not enough for the oppressors merely to be sympathetic and self-reflective. They must become activists. In addition, inclusion insists that DEI be integrated into every aspect of the school—every assembly, club, subject, and class.

Every supposedly oppressed student must be able to see his or her (or “their”) identity in the curriculum. Potentially offensive books must be removed from classrooms and libraries. Inclusion, via the rhetoric of “belonging,” also requires that schools become a “safe space” for oppressed children, who must be spared all microaggressions and sheltered from words or actions, books or activities, that might make them uncomfortable or potentially cause them “harm.” Because we are talking about *felt* harm, only the oppressed, through their own “lived experience,” can be the arbiters of what constitutes harm. The inevitable result is the loss of objectivity (allegedly an aspect of white-supremacy culture), the discouragement of disagreement, and ultimately silencing of dissent—and consequently the condemnation of free speech, too.

What, finally, of *equity*? Out of the pursuit of diversity and inclusion, an equitable school in which all things are fair to all students will emerge. Here we see the difference between the idea of equity and the classical-liberal notion of “equality of opportunity.” It is fundamental to DEI thinking that there can never be equality of opportunity if the “system” itself is unfair—which includes a history of unfairness.

But what does “fair” mean? Fairness is measured not by inputs, but by outcome. In other words, it is irrelevant if, within a school, all children have access to the same fancy facilities, expansive course offerings, and competent teachers. What matters is that all identity groups achieve the same outcomes, measured by grades, test scores, and college admissions. An antiracist lens must be applied to every subject, including math and science. Grading policies must change to even out disparities between different racial groups. Any result in which certain oppressed groups of children are underrepresented is, by definition, unfair. Innate abilities, work ethic, family support, even luck—none of these is acceptable to the purveyors of DEI thinking as an explanation of a disproportionate result. Nor is individual racism, which could be addressed within the traditional systems of American society. The only acceptable answer is “systemic racism,” which makes a mockery of individual justice and responsibility. As a result, equality

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must be replaced with equity, and the system rebuilt top to bottom.

The most fervent DEI zealots are honest about their objectives. They openly admit their desire to tear down the institutions of capitalism, liberalism, and the nuclear family, and destroy alternative belief systems such as religion in order to replace them all with a neo-Marxist model.

Many other advocates for DEI, typically sincere and naïve, may not have thought their beliefs all the way through. But they clearly believe that American society is “systemically racist.” More and more traditional ideas and practices are denounced as white supremacy—and counter-assertions about the possible role of other factors are themselves deemed racist. Like the true ideologues, they too believe, if somewhat less zealously, that variables such as ability, work ethic, and family support are symptoms of “white-supremacy culture.”

To understand why DEI poses a particular threat to Jews, one need only recognize that the characteristics of white-supremacy culture condemned by DEI practitioners are by and large the characteristics often considered to be typical components of Jewish culture. I have already mentioned capitalism, liberalism, and the nuclear family. Other purported features of white-supremacy culture include such things as perfectionism, punctuality, niceness, worship of the written word, intellectual rigor, individualism, meritocracy, a good work ethic, and respect for tradition. To demonstrate the overt connection to Jewish culture, I will remark on a few of these attributes.

Perhaps nothing is more fundamental to Judaism, from both a religious and cultural standpoint, than the written word. As Jews, we have always been taught to treat the Torah and the other texts of the Hebrew Bible with the utmost reverence. For almost 2,000 years after the exile, the study of these texts and of the Talmud that codifies the development of Rabbinic Judaism from the Torah has been central to Jewish life everywhere. Even today, the religious among us devote a great deal of time to textual study. The words of the Torah and the commentaries of the Talmud prescribe our relationship with God and with one another. For the non-religious, the words of these texts communicate the traditions, wisdom, and stories that we tell our children and grandchildren, keeping us bound together as families and as a people.

We don't need a physical space or synagogue to worship as long as we have sufficient numbers for a minyan and the words written down centuries and even millennia ago. This belief that words and not physical space bind us together has allowed us to survive pogroms and persecutions since time immemorial. Moreover, it is our culture's respect for words that has encouraged countless Jews throughout history to become scholars, teachers, lawyers, and philosophers. Criticism of the "written word" as white supremacy is a fundamental attack on Judaism and Jewishness.

Another trait attributed to white-supremacy culture is objectivity, defined as follows in a document entitled "White Supremacy Culture in Organizations," referenced in one of the PoCC videos I watched:

- The belief that people can be (and can choose to be) objective or neutral in their viewpoints and analyses
- Requiring people to think in a linear or logical fashion and ignoring, invalidating, or being frustrated by those who think in other ways

- Taking certain voices more seriously than others: always giving more weight and authority to certain people's perspectives.

It should go without saying that each of these beliefs is inimical to Jewish practice and tradition, from our belief in the concept of an objective truth beyond individual opinions and narratives, to our faith in the power of reason, to our deep respect for certain rabbinical sources, from Hillel to Maimonides to Sacks.

Then there is the assault on individualism and meritocracy. Once again, I quote from "White Supremacy Culture in Organizations":

To us, individualism is strongly linked to the meritocracy myth. Meritocracy is the idea that power, privilege, and wealth are afforded to those who have earned it on the basis of individual achievement, hard work, and/or inherent superiority.

The attack on meritocracy illustrates an even graver danger of DEI ideology to what one might call the "lived experience" of American Jews. I began this essay sharing the experience of my own family: escape from the persecution of the Holocaust and success through individual achievement and hard work. Proponents of DEI would have us believe that this success was wholly undeserved, simply a product of a toxic and unfair system that favors us because of our skin color. For if the success of my family and others like it were deserved, the entire narrative of an oppressed people incapable of overcoming oppression would be undermined. The edifice of DEI would crumble. Jews are deeply vulnerable because our experiences completely disprove the central thesis of DEI ideology. Worse, because of the success of so many Jews, we are considered "white-supremacist adjacent"—and to have taken advantage of our whiteness to become overrepresented in the oppressor group in terms of wealth and power.

DEI rejects color blindness and makes group identity the core feature of American society. DEI practitioners are conditioning

the public to see Jews as a white, overrepresented sub-unit of the oppressor group responsible for keeping other Americans down.



What can we do? More of us need to find the courage to speak up, sound the alarm, and join the fight against the toxic ideology of DEI and its takeover of our institutions. Choosing this path is understandably difficult. Cancel culture is real. We risk losing friends and alienating family. We might jeopardize prominent board seats and spots at prestigious schools for our children. We might even endanger our jobs. But this is the price of freedom.

For several generations, most of us in the United States, Jews especially, have taken our freedoms for granted. Very few of us have risked our lives or livelihoods or asked our children to risk theirs to preserve the values we hold dear. Now we must. We no longer have the luxury of expecting others to fight while we remain uninvolved and silent. Fortunately, for now, our battle remains almost entirely an intellectual and emotional fight.

Of all the freedoms for which we must fight, the most important is free speech. Without it there can be no democracy, no market economy, no scientific progress, and no religious freedom. Obviously, a narrow legal defense of the First Amendment is not sufficient, or we wouldn't be in this situation. We must support organizations that defend free speech, strenuously resist organizations that don't, and assist those individuals who have been silenced or canceled.

And we must confront the problems in education head-on. What happens in school “graduates” to college and from there out into the world: Look how woke our big corporations are becoming.

This will not be easy. A great many of our country's K–12 schools and universities, public and private, are already intellectually corrupt. Like DEI, this is a problem long in the making; it predates the open adoption of the central tenets of critical race theory. So we must be sober in our outlook and realistic

in our expectations. There are no easy or quick solutions here.

Schools such as Brearley are almost certainly lost. It is not enough simply to stop giving to these institutions. We must fund and build new schools. These new institutions should be mostly secular and focus strongly on the liberal arts, history, and civics—this is where the values that matter are taught. They must employ skilled teachers, not activists, and be managed by administrators and principals who are educators before they are fundraisers.

Finally, we must put our primary focus on the children most likely to make up our leadership class. Every culture has an elite. We should make ours as capable as possible, as well as inculcating into those likely to join it a thorough understanding of and appreciation for the founding principles of America. And we should fight hard against any measures that reduce the opportunities for intellectually gifted and hardworking children.



America has been very good to my family, and to Jews in general. Our country has provided us with the freedom to practice our religion, raise our families as we see fit, and speak our minds. Until relatively recently, she has offered our children access to a first-rate education—and with it, the opportunity to succeed in all economic, cultural, and political arenas. Today, those freedoms and opportunities are threatened by an ideological movement that uses race and gender and sexual orientation to destroy the traditional foundations of our society. What is happening in our country must be understood as nothing less than a revolution.

We owe it to the America that welcomed our parents and grandparents with open arms to fight for the traditions of our homeland. And we owe it to ourselves. The DEI-educational complex will ultimately come for any group that opposes its rise. If history is any guide, it will come for the Jews first. *