

STEVEN P. DINKIN A Path Forward

UKRAINIAN CONFLICT BEGS QUESTION: WHY FIGHT A CULTURE WAR?

As the conflict in Ukraine continues, I am taken by the stories and pictures of the Ukrainian people proudly defending their families, their homes and their way of life.

Video clips show Ukrainians gathered in front of the Russian embassy in the capital city of Kyiv to condemn the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin. They are holding signs and chanting: "We are not afraid."

Still, more than a million people have left the country.

Others have resolved to stay and help with the resistance, however they can. When Ukraine's deputy defense minister urged civilians to take up arms, online searches for "how to make a Molotov cocktail" spiked. (It's a simple bomb fashioned out of a glass bottle, fuel and a fuse.)

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy tossed a bomb of his own at President Joe Biden, who offered assistance with evacuation from Kyiv. Zelenskyy said, "The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride. We will be defending our country, because our weapon is truth, and our truth

is that this is our land, our country."

In the U.S., we are witnessing a fight of a different sort: a culture war. And it's stirring a great deal of passion.

The battleground is schools, across the country. Parents are speaking up — loudly — and fighting on multiple fronts, with COVID-related concerns at the head of the class.

To be sure, the pandemic has been terrible for everyone. But it's been especially hard on parents. For two years, unpredictable school closures turned household schedules upside down. Millions of parents chose to leave the workforce altogether, pinching budgets. Their kids have suffered: Remote learning hasn't worked well for most, and research has found alarming rates of childhood depression and anxiety. Existing disparities in learning only got worse.

And yet the return to in-person instruction has been fraught with conflict, too, largely over COVID protocols. School board meetings have become ground zero for parents who are angry about mask

and vaccine mandates.

It's a fight that feels manufactured, especially when compared to a fight for democracy.

Curriculum controversies have escalated, too, with growing concern among parents about classwork that is overly conscious of racial differences. They worry, specifically, about the teaching of critical race theory, which looks at race and racism in society and the way it impacts people. Opponents allege that CRT advocates discrimination against White people as compensation for past injustices.

It's not the first time that parents have voiced displeasure with what is being taught in public schools and how; nearly 10 years ago, there was outcry as the country transitioned to Common Core standards, which changed the way math and reading were taught.

And book banning is back, with parents pressuring lawmakers to clear school bookshelves of certain genres or titles, in the name of protecting children. Many of the books considered offensive — like "To Kill a Mockingbird" — deal with challenging is-

suces, like racial inequality.

Frustration with public schools led to record turnout in Virginia's gubernatorial election last November. Republican Glenn Youngkin handily beat his Democratic opponent; parents were angry that the incumbent governor (also a Democrat) had been largely absent on COVID-related school policy.

Voting is the most democratic way to effect change. But the process takes time. That's led to a call by anxious parents to put cameras in school classrooms and microphones on teachers. Lawmakers in two states are currently considering bills that would allow livestreaming of all K-12 classes, viewable by parents. Already, West Virginia, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia and Florida have laws that placed cameras in special education classrooms.

The turmoil in public schools today is unprecedented. In response, student populations are shrinking across the country. Families with means are turning to private education, leaving behind kids from low-income households with fewer choices

and, often, greater needs.

Teachers — a frequent target of parental angst — are resigning in record numbers (or thinking about it); a survey by the National Education Association last year found that one in three teachers have considered leaving the profession. School boards are shedding members amid threats and harassment by parents.

When I was growing up, schools were a source of community pride. They reflected the hopes and dreams of neighborhood residents. Now, they've become a microcosm of the factionalism that has swept our country.

Whether fighting in distant Ukraine or in our neighborhood schools, conflict resolution begins with finding common ground. That requires talking, rather than taking up arms. These are urgent conversations, and they need to start now.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based group working to create solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. To learn about NCCRC's programming, visit nccrconline.com.

CEO

FROM B1
ways. She sometimes stays until 8 p.m., working after hours to do paperwork after a long day of staff interactions from her open-door policy.

The San Diego native who has helped the recovery of countless others faced her own sobriety in 1956, a time when addiction and alcoholism often were misunderstood.

"I went to my doctor and asked, 'Do you think I drink too much?'" she recalled. "And he said, 'No, you're only 24.' People were really in the dark about alcoholism."

A mother at 16, McAlister said she was always able to care for her daughter as she struggled with her addiction.

"I slept on boats, I slept in cars, because it takes you there," she said about alcoholism.

McAlister lived in a downtown San Diego residential hotel where she worked as a cocktail waitress. A man she was interested in dating invited her to a meeting across the street, where she found people discussing their recovery.

She thinks her date may have suspected she had a drinking problem after she went to his room and passed out on his bed, she said with a laugh. They later married.

McAlister found the meetings interesting, but nothing clicked for her until she heard someone's story that she could relate to.

"It just made sense to me, like when you're in bed in a room by yourself and the light bulb is hanging down from the ceiling, and all of a sudden it goes on," she said. "It's called a miracle. I got sober right away."

Years passed, and McAlister worked as a bookkeeper for her husband before her marriage ended after he was convicted of a tax charge. She never remarried.

In the 1970s, McAlister became interested in what was called the human potential movement and led what she now calls "touchy feel groups."

"I was doing all those groups on the weekends and was really good at it," she said. "I had lots of people come and share their feelings."

McAlister said she had discovered she liked working with people while undergoing therapy, and she studied drug and alcohol counseling at UC San Diego in the early 1970s. She became intrigued by someone who was working in recovery and known to be "avant-garde," and tracked down psychiatrist Dr. David Rusk, who soon offered her a job.

"He believed people who had life experience were much more effective than people in his profession, so he asked me to come to work for him," she said.

Rusk decided he did not want to continue working with the county, but McAlister wanted to stay on. In 1977, she was awarded a county contract to open the McAlister Institute for Treatment and Education, a drug and alcohol recovery program for indigent people with offices in Escondido and Carlsbad and a staff of 15.

In the 45 years since, the institute has expanded to include recovery programs specifically for women who need child care, outpatient services, prenatal programs, residential treatment programs, withdrawal management, homeless out-



Jeanne McAlister takes a call at her office in El Cajon recently. She usually arrives at work with her dogs, Joey and Oliver.



Marisa Varond (left), executive director and McAlister's granddaughter, talks with Michelle Zvirzin.

reach, adolescent outpatient services, a safe haven for women and children and a program for women and men who are getting out of prison.

"I just get up every day and put on my suit and say,

"What do you want me to do today?" she said about how the institute has grown.

Most programs are funded by the county, some are funded by different cities, and a bingo game and thrift store run by the insti-

tute cover gaps in services that aren't funded.

Piedad Garcia, deputy director of San Diego County's Behavioral Health Services department, said about a third of the 15,000 clients who receive drug and alcohol recovery services through the county each year go to the McAlister Institute.

"To this day, she often joins our meetings," Garcia said. "She's a luminary in her work, a trailblazer."

Garcia said McAlister developed a person-centered approach based on life experiences, which many professionals in the field do not have.

"In my mind, when you speak of Jeanne, she's very inclusive, very motivated, very committed," Garcia said.

Steve Allen is chairman of the McAlister board of di-

rectors, and also a graduate of one of its programs.

"I was in the throes of an addiction," he said. "I got into a place where active addiction takes people, and I knew I couldn't do it alone."

Allen remembers looking up the institute in a phone book and making a call that changed his life. He checked into a detox program and stayed about a week, and then began attending recovery meetings.

On May 13, he will be 38 years sober, and Allen sees his work on the board as giving back.

"Jeanne, well, she's a miracle," he said about McAlister. "She has incredible energy and the ability to reach out to people and be so accessible. I think one of the strongest suits of Jeanne is she's so forgiving and understanding. She knows people don't get it the first time. She'll give people a second chance."

McAlister is the face of the institute, but she is quick to credit her staff with doing what she calls the heavy lifting. As she reflects on what she is most proud of, McAlister thinks of small but meaningful encounters with people who turn to her for help.

Like the woman whose dog was taken away from her when she was unstable and hospitalized.

"She called and said, 'I have a place to live but don't have a dog, and last week I felt like killing myself because I felt so lonely,'" McAlister said.

A McAlister homeless outreach worker knew someone on the street whose dog had puppies that needed a home. McAlister rescued a puppy, and maybe did the same for the woman who took it in.

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JUDGE

FROM B1
lack of testing and unsafe inmate transfer practices.

The declarations also described the impact the virus seems to have had on jail operations, such as lockdowns that led to a reduction in maintenance and routine cleanings, causing black mold and insect infestations.

Inmates also described a lack of access to health care.

"I had to sleep on the floor of a holding cell for about three days back during my Booking," James Neely wrote in his declaration.

Neely, 57, suffers from degenerative bone disease and spinal stenosis that leaves him in constant pain.

"It felt like I was almost going to be paralyzed. I asked for some medical treatment and they said when I got upstairs I could have some Tylenol, but I never got the Tylenol," he said.

During the hearing Friday, ACLU staff attorney Jonathan Markovitz told the judge that sheriff's deputies are not distributing vaccine information to help convince inmates to get immunized.

"The defendants have acknowledged that vaccine hesitancy is an issue," Markovitz said. "The (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) has said it's really important for detention facilities to encourage vaccine support. ... Outbreak after outbreak after outbreak and they won't take this step," he added. "This is the definition of deliberate indifference."

Deputy County Counsel Steven Inman said the Sheriff's Department has seen only a handful of deaths and 42 hospitalizations from

COVID-19 since the pandemic erupted.

"We are always looking for ways we can do more, but in a congregate setting, to have deaths limited to three over a two-year period is truly remarkable," he said. "I am absolutely proud of the men and women of the San Diego Sheriff's Department."

In its opposition to the ACLU's lawsuit, the county described a new study by Colleen Kelly, a biological statistician and associate professor at San Diego State University.

The study, which examined COVID-19 infection rates among everyone booked into San Diego County jail custody between January 2020 and August 2021, concluded that infections were much lower than might have been expected.

"Based on my analysis," Kelly wrote, "I found that the observed number of COVID-19 cases in the (county) jail system is a fraction (18.0%) of the expected number in the community, and the observed number of deaths due to COVID-19 is an even lower fraction (8.3%) of the expected number in the community."

According to court filings, Kelly was paid \$450 an hour to produce her report, although it's not clear how much time it took to complete.

Some researchers took issue with Kelly's methodology.

Zachary Goodman, a data scientist with Recidiviz, a nonprofit that analyzes incarceration data, said Kelly's report failed to consider things like testing rates in jail compared to testing rates across the community.

Goodman also said Kelly's reliance on booking numbers — rather than the

jail system's average daily population — ignores how much time each arrestee actually spends in custody.

Some people are incarcerated for days or hours, making them less likely to contract the virus, Goodman noted, yet Kelly's analysis looks at all inmates equally.

Goodman said it would be useful to know whether being booked into a San Diego County jail increased a person's risk of contracting COVID-19, but Kelly's analysis fails to answer that question.

"Unfortunately, significant data and methodological limitations of (Kelly's) analysis prevent us from reaching any sound conclusions," he said.

Kelly is the same statistician who conducted an analysis of suicides in San Diego jails in response to reporting by The San Diego Union-Tribune and an investigation by the watchdog group Disability Rights California.

Kelly in her earlier report similarly relied on booking data, rather than daily inmate population data, even though the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics recommends looking at a jail's average daily population to calculate its mortality rates.

Wohlfeil said he is grateful for the arguments presented by both sides at the hearing Friday and would consider all of the information before issuing a final ruling.

"I've made lots of notes, much of which you put into your papers," the judge said. "We will get a minute order out as quickly as possible."

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SMOLENS

FROM B1
necessarily suggest a diminishing of the so-called "parents' rights" movement embraced by Republicans that focuses on concerns about education and interactions with school boards. A major thrust of that campaign has been to limit educational materials about race.

Opposing book bans and encouraging parental involvement in what information their children can access are not mutually exclusive, according to Jonathan Friedman, director of free expression and education at PEN America, a nonprofit organization that defends literature and human rights.

"There is a way to create systems in school libraries that don't result in books being banned for everybody else and we have to embrace those solutions here to how we operate in a diverse society," he told station WUSA in Washington, D.C.

A group called Red, Wine & Blue (whose motto is "Channeling the Power of Suburban Women") has created a "Book Ban Busters" offshoot. The organization's politics are not expressly stated on its main website, though there is a photo feature titled "The Suburban Housewives of Trump's Nightmares."

The Busters' webpage includes an interactive map of the United States that shows where books have been banned and urges followers to send information of other bans that have taken place or are being contemplated. The group says it provides guidance for those seeking to oppose or

undo book bans.

"We call this our troublemaker training," Katie Paris, an Ohio mother who founded Red, Wine & Blue, told WUSA.

The recent uproar has centered on conservative efforts to ban or restrict books. But it's a bipartisan sin in the view of Jonathan Zimmerman, a professor of education and history at the University of Pennsylvania.

In a 2020 column in the Dallas Morning News, Zimmerman noted that liberals ridiculed a school district in Alaska that banned books by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Joseph Heller and Tim O'Brien. The school board noted the authors' use of profanity, racial slurs and sexual allusions.

"So where were my fellow lefties last year, when two Democratic state legislators tried to remove 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' from New Jersey schools?" asked Zimmerman, author of the book "Free Speech: And Why You Should Give a Damn."

"Silent, for the most part," he answered. "And that speaks to a big contradiction in the way we approach censorship. When conservatives try to ban a book, we liberals get up in arms. But when the threat comes from our own side, we often sit on our hands."

Mark Twain's famous novel is widely interpreted as taking a position against racism and slavery, but his use of the n-word more than 200 times has generated controversy. Zimmerman noted the proposed New Jersey resolution said the book's language can cause students to feel upset, marginalized or humiliated and

can create an uncomfortable attitude in the classroom.

"Of course it can," Zimmerman wrote. "All great literature makes us uncomfortable, because it addresses what makes us fully human. That includes our worst traits, like hatred of those who are different from us. So if your goal is to shield kids from discomfort, you're going to have to censor a lot of really good books."

Banning books is a bad idea. At the risk of being repetitive, that's different from parents debating whether some books are appropriate for their children in certain grades — though too often that discussion gets hijacked by moralists and politicians across the spectrum.

It's a never-ending struggle so ingrained in American society that there's an annual Banned Books Week sponsored by the American Library Association to "celebrate the freedom to read."

Meanwhile, the battle continues in the Wentzville School District, where some of the other books continued to be banned.

Tweet of the Week

Goes to Kira Rudik (@kiraincongress), member of the Ukraine parliament reflecting on a recent interview.

"There are questions you don't have good answers to.

"You are on Putin's kill list, how do you feel about that?"

"Well, I'm also on Ukraine's top 10 bachelorette's list. Hope it balances it out."

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