



Testimony of Nicole Neily
President, Parents Defending Education
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Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education
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“Academic Freedom Under Attack: Loosening the CCP’S Grip on America’s Classrooms”

Chairman Bean, Ranking Member Bonamici, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to appear today.

My name is Nicole Neily, and I am the president and founder of Parents Defending Education – a national membership association that gives parents the knowledge and tools they need to be more effective advocates for their children’s education. I am also the executive director of PDE Action, a 501(c)4 advocacy organization.

Our research into foreign funding in K-12 schools began in March of this year, when a parent at Virginia’s Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology provided records showing that the school received over \$1 million in donations from various entities linked to the Chinese government; on August 29, Fairfax County Public Schools provided Education Secretary Aimee Guidera with information¹ about donations from Chinese entities, which was nearly four times higher – \$3.6 million – than we knew.

A former PTSA board member told our staff that in exchange for these funds, the donors were allowed to “look under the hood” at how the school was run – including floor plans, lesson plans, and student research projects – some of which were completed in conjunction with federal agencies such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency.

This intellectual property has been used to replicate the Thomas Jefferson model in China²³ – and now, mired in equity fights, TJ itself has fallen in the rankings and can’t compete against its foreign competitors.

We wondered: was this happening elsewhere? And if so, where?

¹ Fairfax County Public Schools, “Letter from Superintendent Reid to Virginia Secretary of Education 8/29/23,” <https://www.fcps.edu/news/letter-superintendent-reid-virginia-secretary-education-82923>

² Ambright Education Group, “What We Do,” accessed September 16, 2023
<https://www.ambrightgroup.com/business#K-12>

³ Thomas Schools of China, “About the Thomas Schools,” accessed September 16, 2023
<http://m.thomasschools.com/>

Unfortunately, trying to nail down the scope of this problem is difficult – which is by design. These programs have existed in American schools for many years, but much of the activity went underground following Secretary Betsy DeVos and Secretary Mike Pompeo’s efforts⁴ to rein in the university-level Confucius Institutes. In many places, the university programs had served as the organizing hub for partnerships with nearby K-12 districts.

Over the course of several months, my colleague Rhyen Staley combed through publicly available information and filed 42 public records requests across the country to gain access to district contracts governing these programs, obtaining hundreds of pages of primary source documents.⁵ He traced money flowing through intermediary organizations such as the Asia Society and the College Board⁶ to districts. The College Board’s partnership with Hanban, the Chinese agency that ran the Confucius Institutes, has been well-documented by the National Association of Scholars.⁷

First, there is the money.

Our research found that over the past decade, over \$17 million has been given to 143 school districts and private K-12 schools across 34 states (plus DC) – impacting over 170,000 students in 182 schools. We acknowledge that this is likely a low figure, given that other organizations (including the U.S. State Department⁸ and the U.S. Senate⁹) have estimated hundreds more in existence, so this is simply the sum that our team was able to verify.

Interestingly, the money doesn’t just flow from China to US schools – in some districts, they were paying for this programming as well. One such example is Clark County School District in Nevada, which paid over \$250,000 in salary and benefits to Chinese teachers.¹⁰ We learned that we need to follow not only inflows, but also outflows.

Second, there are the teachers.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of State, “Letter to State Commissioners of Education,” October 9, 2020 <https://oese.ed.gov/files/2020/10/State-ED-Joint-Letter-to-Chief-State-School-Officers-re-PRC-Influence-Oct.-9-2020.pdf>

⁵ Parents Defending Education, “Little Red Schoolhouses,” July 26, 2023 <https://defendinged.org/investigations/little-red-classrooms-china-infiltration-of-american-k-12-schools/>

⁶ School Board of Broward County Florida, August 2, 2016, [http://bcpsagenda.browardschools.com/agenda/01114/Item%20GG-1%20\(27365\)/SUPP_DOCS/Exhibits/Doc3.pdf](http://bcpsagenda.browardschools.com/agenda/01114/Item%20GG-1%20(27365)/SUPP_DOCS/Exhibits/Doc3.pdf)

⁷ Rachele Peterson, “Corrupting the College Board,” National Association of Scholars, August 30, 2020 <https://www.nas.org/reports/corrupting-the-college-board/full-report>

⁸ U.S. Department of State, “‘Confucius Institute U.S. Center’ Designation as a Foreign Mission,” August 13, 2020 <https://2017-2021.state.gov/confucius-institute-u-s-center-designation-as-a-foreign-mission/>

⁹ U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “China’s Impact on the U.S. Education System Staff Report,” February 28, 2019

¹⁰ Clark County School District school board document, “Chinese Guest Teacher Program,” February 13, 2020 [https://go.boarddocs.com/nv/ccsd/v/Board.nsf/files/BLHTJR77286B/\\$file/02.13.20%20Ref.%204.02.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/nv/ccsd/v/Board.nsf/files/BLHTJR77286B/$file/02.13.20%20Ref.%204.02.pdf)

Many districts benefitted from labor – in the form of educators provided by the People’s Republic of China.

A contract between Simpson County Public Schools in Kentucky and North China Electric Power University¹¹ contains a provision about “NCEPU-provided teachers,” while on a now-deleted page saved by PDE, the Sisters School District in Oregon boasted that its Chinese program featured “three native speaker Chinese teachers sponsored by Hanban, a part of the China Ministry of Education.”

These teachers are not neutral.

In 2019 Freedom House’s Sarah Cook wrote “The Party’s system for influencing students depends in large part on their teachers and professors. In a speech at a Beijing seminar attended by teachers from across the country in March, Xi called on educators to instill patriotism in the country’s youth and reject ‘wrong ideas and ideology.’”¹² Educators who have expressed opinions about the persecuted minority group Falun Gong or criticized party leadership have lost their jobs – which means those teachers who remain are either true believers or have been cowed into silence.

Two Chinese nationals taught Mandarin at Appoquinimink School District in Delaware during the 2012-2013 school year. According to a district webpage, these teachers underwent a “rigorous selection process” in China. This includes interviews with Chinese government officials “at the national level.”¹³

A recent FOIA we received from Fairfax County Public Schools provided names of teachers who visited in 2017; 5 of the 6 were CCP members, with one receiving an award “Outstanding Communist of Haidian District.” Another delegation several months later featured a VIP guest – the Party Secretary from Zhejiang Provincial Education Department, who was described as more powerful than the general director of the Zhejiang Provincial Education Department.¹⁴

As employees, foreign nationals are given access to district servers and student information; in Carroll County Kentucky, a contract stated that the district would “Provide each Teacher with access to a computer, electronic mail (including a School e-mail address), School libraries, facilities, events, and activities, consistent with School policies applicable to other teachers at

¹¹ Parents Defending Education, “Implementation Agreement Between Simpson County Board of Education (“SCBOE”) and North China Electric Power University of the Development of the Confucius Institute of Western Kentucky,” June 19, 2019 <https://defendinged.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CI-Agreement-Simpson-County-Schools-KY-June-19-2019.pdf>

¹² Sarah Cook, “The Chinese Communist Party’s Latest Propaganda Target: Young Minds,” Freedom House, April 30, 2019 <https://freedomhouse.org/article/chinese-communist-partys-latest-propaganda-target-young-minds>

¹³ Appoquinimink School District, “Middle Schools to host guest teachers from China,” https://www.apposchooldistrict.com/apps/news/show_news.jsp?REC_ID=245796&id=0

¹⁴ Parents Defending Education, “FOIAs Reveal Additional Details on TJ’s Foreign Partnerships,” September 12, 2023 <https://defendinged.org/investigations/foias-reveal-additional-details-on-tjs-foreign-partnerships/>

School.”¹⁵ Considering that PDE’s work identified 20 districts around the country located near military bases, base commanders deserve to know that potentially hostile foreign nationals may have access to data about the children of military personnel.

Finally, there is the curriculum.

Multiple contracts reference books and curriculum being provided from university-based Confucius Institutes or from partner universities in China. In North Carolina, a contract with Winston-Salem Forsyth Schools notes that the Confucius Institute would “apply to the Headquarters for 1,000 volumes of books, audio-visual, multimedia materials and courseware, and for authorizing of using online courses.”¹⁶ In California, documents from the Hacienda La Puente Board of Education stated that “textbooks, reference materials, and audio-visual materials” would be provided by Yunnan Normal University¹⁷ – a school that has been designated “medium risk” by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute as a result of the university’s research on ethnic minorities and ties to the government’s ethnic affairs bureaucracy.¹⁸

Why does this curriculum matter? A senior fellow at the Asia Program of the German Council on Foreign Relations told Voice of America “Propaganda and political instruction have been part of education in China since 1949, as the Communist Party understands exactly the power of shaping people's minds, especially when they are young and malleable.”¹⁹

Beginning in 2021, all elementary and secondary school students in China have been required to take a mandatory class: “Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.” Is this curriculum in American classrooms? We have no idea – because most administrators and parents don’t speak Mandarin themselves, and thus must defer to these teachers who were hand-selected and vetted by the PRC.

What this might look like in practice, however, is troubling: in the 2017 documentary “In the Name of Confucius,” a student at the University of Michigan sings an opera at a Confucius

¹⁵ Parents Defending Education, “Chinese Guest Teacher Program 2011-2012 Program Terms and Conditions,” <https://defendinged.org/investigations/foias-reveal-additional-details-on-tjs-foreign-partnerships/>

¹⁶ Parents Defending Education, “Agreement Between the Center for International Understanding and Career Center on the Establishment of the Confucius Classroom at Career Center,” approved by school attorney on December 2, 2014 <https://defendinged.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Career-Center-Contract.pdf>

¹⁷ Hacienda La Puente Board of Education, “7.03.a - Instruction - Approve agreement between Yunnan Normal University and Cedarlane Middle School for the development of a Confucius Classroom at Cedarlane Middle School,” August 26, 2010 <https://go.boarddocs.com/ca/hlpusd/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=8AAK434BD351>

¹⁸ Australian Strategic Policy Institute China Defence Universities Tracker, “Yunnan Normal University,” accessed September 16, 2023 <https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/universities/yunnan-normal-university/>

¹⁹ Bo Gu, “China's New Mandatory Curriculum Focuses on ‘Xi Thought,’” Voice of America, August 25, 2021 https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_chinas-new-mandatory-curriculum-focuses-xi-thought/6209984.html

Institute concert about how Chairman Mao “nurture[s] the people on this land”²⁰ – no small slap in the face to the families of the estimated 23-40 million Chinese citizens who died on Zedong’s watch during the Great China Famine.²¹

As parents, we deserve to know whether hostile nations are pumping propaganda into our children’s heads, so at a minimum we might provide a more balanced view of world history. Some parents may wish to ask school administrators about perhaps hiring a teacher from Taiwan instead, while others may suggest that their student take a different foreign language class. I am a mama wolverine, and I want my son and daughter to be taught “true history” about the Uyghur genocide,²² one child policies,²³ and the repression of brave dissidents like Jimmy Lai²⁴ – not the alleged virtues of communism.

I ask for your help in ensuring that there is greater transparency around foreign funding in America’s schools. Families currently lack information about these programs, which means they are unable to make informed choices about whether they want their children to participate in these programs – or whether their taxpayer-funded public school is complicit in such whitewashing.

This is a matter of national security.

When my brother was serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, our family was acutely aware of the operational security risk to him and his colleagues while he was in a war zone, cognizant that a casual word about where his battalion was could be used by malign forces. Over the past year, it has become abundantly clear that America has not fully appreciated that foreign threats today aren’t just overseas – but that they are also on our shores. From farmland purchases to spy balloons, secret police stations to battery factories, our country’s openness is being weaponized against us. We are calling on leaders at every level of government to take action and protect our country from these security vulnerabilities.

This past July, we sent letters to 34 governors and the DC mayor urging them to open their own investigations into what is occurring in their states; in the House, Rep. Jim Banks asked Secretary Cardona to open a formal investigation by the federal Department of Education,²⁵

²⁰ Doris Liu, “In the Name of Confucius,” 2017 <https://tubitv.com/movies/561847> (referenced excerpt is [15:41-16:03])

²¹ Vaclav Smil, “China’s great famine: 40 years later,” BMJ, December 18, 1999 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1127087/>

²² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Chinese Persecution of the Uyghurs,” accessed September 16, 2023 <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/china/chinese-persecution-of-the-uyghurs>

²³ Emily Feng, “China’s Former 1-Child Policy Continues To Haunt Families,” NPR, July 4, 2021 <https://www.npr.org/2021/06/21/1008656293/the-legacy-of-the-lasting-effects-of-chinas-1-child-policy>

²⁴ Jillian Kay Melchior, “The People’s Republic vs. Jimmy Lai,” Wall Street Journal, May 21, 2020 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-peoples-republic-vs-jimmy-lai-11590100278>

²⁵ Jeremiah Poff, “Jim Banks demands Cardona investigate Chinese influence in K-12 schools,” Washington Examiner, July 26, 2023 <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/house/jim-banks-cardona-investigate-china-k-12-schools>

while on the Senate side, a similar request was led by Senator Tim Scott.²⁶ Unfortunately, very few states seem to consider this an issue of concern; it is our hope that you might all use your influence to communicate the acute nature of this danger to the elected officials in your respective states in order to spur action.

My other request is one of oversight: we believe that it would be a constructive use of the FBI's investigative power to research China's influence in American education, so that action can be taken to monitor programs still in existence and perhaps determine the extent of the damage that has been wrought to date. This seems like it might be a better use of the Bureau's finite resources than investigating school board parents, which to this day remains part of its purview because Attorney General Garland's October 4, 2021 memo on that topic has never been retracted, and accordingly, remains in effect.

As members of Congress, you swore oaths to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic. I ask you today to uphold this oath in order to protect not only our Constitution, but our children. Thank you for your time, and for your consideration of this issue.

²⁶ Senator Tim Scott, "Sen. Scott, Colleagues Demand Biden Administration Investigate Chinese Communist Party Influence in American K-12 Schools," September 1, 2023 <https://www.scott.senate.gov/media-center/press-releases/sen-scott-colleagues-demand-biden-administration-investigate-chinese-communist-party-influence-in-american-k-12-schools>