

October Meeting Summary: Fighting the Attack on Public Education: A Night of Learning & Giving with Derek Black

10-17-2025 at The Lodge in Clinton

Derek Black is a professor of law, and Ernest F. Hollings Chair in Constitutional Law, at the University of South Carolina School of Law. He also directs the law school's Constitutional Law Center. His areas of expertise include education law and policy, constitutional law, and civil rights. The focus of his current scholarship is the intersection of constitutional law and public education, particularly as it pertains to educational equality and fairness for disadvantaged students.

We were honored to hear Mr. Black's thoughts about the current attack on public education, and the historical and social underpinnings, he has learned from his research.



The way public schools have been described has changed in the past few years. Schools were respected in the past; however, now are often described as indoctrinators, or worse. The rhetoric is that of populists & white nationalists. The State Superintendent of Oklahoma was documented making racist comments and endorsing Trump. Rhetoric shapes how institutions are viewed in society.

For the first time in American history, we saw one person try to dictate what will be taught to children. And enforced through the Trump loyalty pledge sent to all State Superintendents. Historically, the Supreme Court had protected school children's rights to not stand or recite the Pledge of Allegiance – those days are gone.

The year 1822 connects to today through history. Before the Civil War there were black people running schools, including schools for enslaved children. A formerly enslaved man, Denmark Vesey, was able to purchase his freedom and co-founded the AME Church. He also was educated and a thought leader regarding slavery, and he used his education in writing letters to countries profiting in the slavery business regarding the evil of slavery. He also used his platform to help organize a slave insurrection. The South Carolina legislature reacted and concluded that to control people they needed to control who had the ability to read and write.

Vigilante groups began burning educational materials in black communities and enforcing speech about abolition – depriving both the black and white people in those communities of the materials. They also destroyed textbooks when they realized the books contained information about northern practices of merit, such as new farming methods. During this time it was not safe to voice any opposition.

Today, all 50 states have a provision to provide public education. Approximately 26 state prohibit expending public funding to private schools. Rural Republicans, historically, were opposed to vouchers. But that changed on January 6th when the elected officials learned they would be in election jeopardy if they opposed vouchers. Even Mike Huckabee was pro public education 20 years ago.

Some of the allure of private schools is wanting teachers to have more freedom in what they teach – as long as that freedom is used in harmony with their religious values. However, graft and corruption are rampant and have soured the sentiment amongst people in the know. But the average pro private school parent does not know how corrupt many of the school operators are. Private schools also don't want the hard to teach, including special needs or financially stressed students. The “freedom of choice” is really the school's freedom to choose its students – not freedom of choice for the parents.

Churches that have never run a school, and do not know how to run a school, see a financial incentive to start schools. It's the students' education that ultimately suffer. Performance statistics, when they are captured, don't tell the whole picture. It is important to understand the social context behind the numbers. For instance, one high school with just 3% of the students at the poverty line is judged the same as one where the student body has 50% at the poverty line.

There was a lively question and answer opportunity following the talk. Mr. Black was available to sign books as well. Two of Derek's books specifically address the evening's topic of the intersection of democracy, public policy, and public education: “Dangerous Learning: The South's Long War on Black Literacy” and “Schoolhouse Burning: Public Education and the Assault on American Democracy.”

All the proceeds from the evening will go toward supporting Anderson County Democratic candidates in the upcoming fight to take back Anderson County.