

Moms for Liberty Flunks Its Own Morality Test

The conservative education movement's co-founder doesn't follow the "traditional" values the organization wants to force on America.

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By **Mary Ellen Klas**

Mary Ellen Klas is a Politics and Policy Columnist for Bloomberg Opinion. A former capital bureau chief for the Miami Herald, she has covered politics and government for more than three decades.



Be careful, your hypocrisy is showing. *Photographer: Octavio Jones/Getty Images*

(This column originally published on Sunday, Dec. 17. Later that day, the Republican Party of Florida censured Chair Christian Ziegler and stripped him of authority amid a sexual assault investigation.)

Moms for Liberty, the conservative education movement, has a hypocrisy problem. And a trust problem. It's time they disband, or start over.

The Florida-based organization, with more than 300 chapters in 48 states, purports to advocate for “parental rights at all levels of government.” It’s pushed for bans of classic children’s books and literature, fought against equal treatment for LGBTQ children, and railed against sex education and the teaching of Black history. Its members falsely claim there’s a widespread conspiracy in American schools to expose children to concepts about sexual orientation and gender identity that don’t conform to the Moms’ idea of traditional family values.

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Now Bridget Ziegler, the group’s co-founder and a member of the Sarasota County School Board in Florida, is caught up in a sex scandal with her husband, Christian Ziegler, who has been accused of rape. He also happens to be chair of the Republican Party of Florida.

Bridget Ziegler told police that the woman who accused her husband of rape had a three-way sexual encounter with the couple last year, according to the the non-profit Florida Center for Government Accountability, which first reported the story. Christian Ziegler has denied the accusation and claims the encounter between him and the woman was consensual. Investigators recovered a videotape of the tryst. No charges have been filed.

News of politicians embroiled in sex scandals hardly elicits more than a smirk from Americans anymore. And the personal lives of the most prominent conservative Republican couple in Florida wouldn’t be anyone’s business except for the Zieglers’ very public morality crusade.

The couple has made a career out of promoting “traditional” family values, inciting bigotry and intolerance, and using Moms for Liberty to fuel the culture wars that have divided the country.

When Bridget Ziegler was first elected to the school board, she was pregnant with the couple’s first child. Now, at 41 and the mother of three, she is in her third, four-year term,

has served as the board's chair, and has made it her mission to codify a moral code that we now know she doesn't follow.



Bridget Ziegler, a member of the Sarasota County School Board and co-founder of Moms for Liberty *Photographer: Zack Wittman/Bloomberg*

Ziegler boasted that she helped write Florida's infamous "Parental Rights in Education Act," also known as the "Don't Say Gay" law. It aims to "protect children in Kindergarten through 3rd grade" from "sexual indoctrination" by banning gender discussions in schools. Neither Ziegler, nor the legislators who passed the bill, ever provided any evidence that age-inappropriate gender discussions were happening in elementary schools.

Ziegler has also gone out of her way to help foster homophobia. When a woman accused the only openly gay Sarasota County School Board member of being a "groomer" during a

public hearing earlier this year, Ziegler offered no defense of her colleague. She told the jeering crowd to let the woman finish speaking.

As their stature grew, the Zieglers were feted in national conservative circles as experts in “training the next generation of conservative leaders.” Bridget Ziegler was named education director at the conservative Leadership Institute. The couple hosted media training workshops, taught school boards how to become morality police and, when Walt Disney Co. pushed back against the “Don’t Say Gay” law, Governor Ron DeSantis named Bridget Ziegler to the oversight board tasked with retaliating against the company.

In a Bloomberg News podcast earlier this year, Ziegler told the reporters about being bullied by mean girls in high school, how she didn’t finish college, and how her “research” led her to believe that trans children have caught a social disease – a notion that has been widely disproven in pediatric studies.

The Zieglers are imposters whose own lifestyle parents might find hard to explain to young children, but Moms for Liberty has remained silent. The organization will only say Bridget Ziegler “resigned her role” in 2021, shortly after the group’s founding. In a statement, Christian Ziegler’s lawyer said: “We are confident that once the police investigation is concluded that no charges will be filed and Mr. Ziegler will be completely exonerated.” Bridget Ziegler did not respond to requests for comment made through the school board.

But Moms for Liberty is also a fraud, and its silence is proof it’s only in it for political power, not because of a desire to be honest advocates for improving children’s education.

The group began in Florida during the pandemic to protest the uneven and often illogical mask and classroom-closing policies that emerged after the Trump and Biden administrations botched the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic in schools. Organizers quickly learned the power they could wield by tapping into parental angst and anger.

As students returned to classrooms, the group could have marshaled its energetic parents network to advocate for resources to improve student achievement, address the rise in mental health problems in children and push for programs to help close the learning gap. Instead it allowed itself to be co-opted by those with political agendas.

The ambitious Moms used parents as pawns and became tools of right-wing extremists intent on fighting imaginary demons.

Their reward has been growing political power. Funneling millions of dollars into secretive political committees designed to avoid disclosure, its members have won seats on dozens of school boards across the country. Their universal goal: elevate culture wars and downplay diversity in the name of academic progress.

DeSantis has called for Christian Ziegler to step down as chair of the Republican Party of Florida. It wasn't a hard call. The governor views him as a Trump ally. The party's executive board will decide Ziegler's fate on Sunday.

As for Bridget Ziegler, DeSantis has remained silent. But on Tuesday, Ziegler's colleagues on the conservative-dominated school board supported a non-binding resolution asking her to resign. They said her presence on the board would bring "irreparably harmful distractions to our critical mission."

Ziegler, who has left her post at the Leadership Institute, refuses to resign.

In ordinary times, we could just ignore the Ziegler follies and the Moms' damaging fear-fomenting approach to education. But, given that US student achievement on standardized tests is falling behind most other developed nations, and Moms for Liberty has consumed all the oxygen by fighting imaginary foes, their existence is not a benign distraction. It's a dangerous one.

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To contact the author of this story:

Mary Ellen Klas at maryeklas@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story:
Victoria Benning at vbenning@bloomberg.net



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