

COMMENTARY

Oklahoma Republicans pave the way for the Supreme Court to end secular education

A new taxpayer-funded religious school is a Christian nationalist move to destroy separation of church and state

By **AMANDA MARCOTTE**
Senior Writer

PUBLISHED JUNE 7, 2023 6:06AM (EDT)



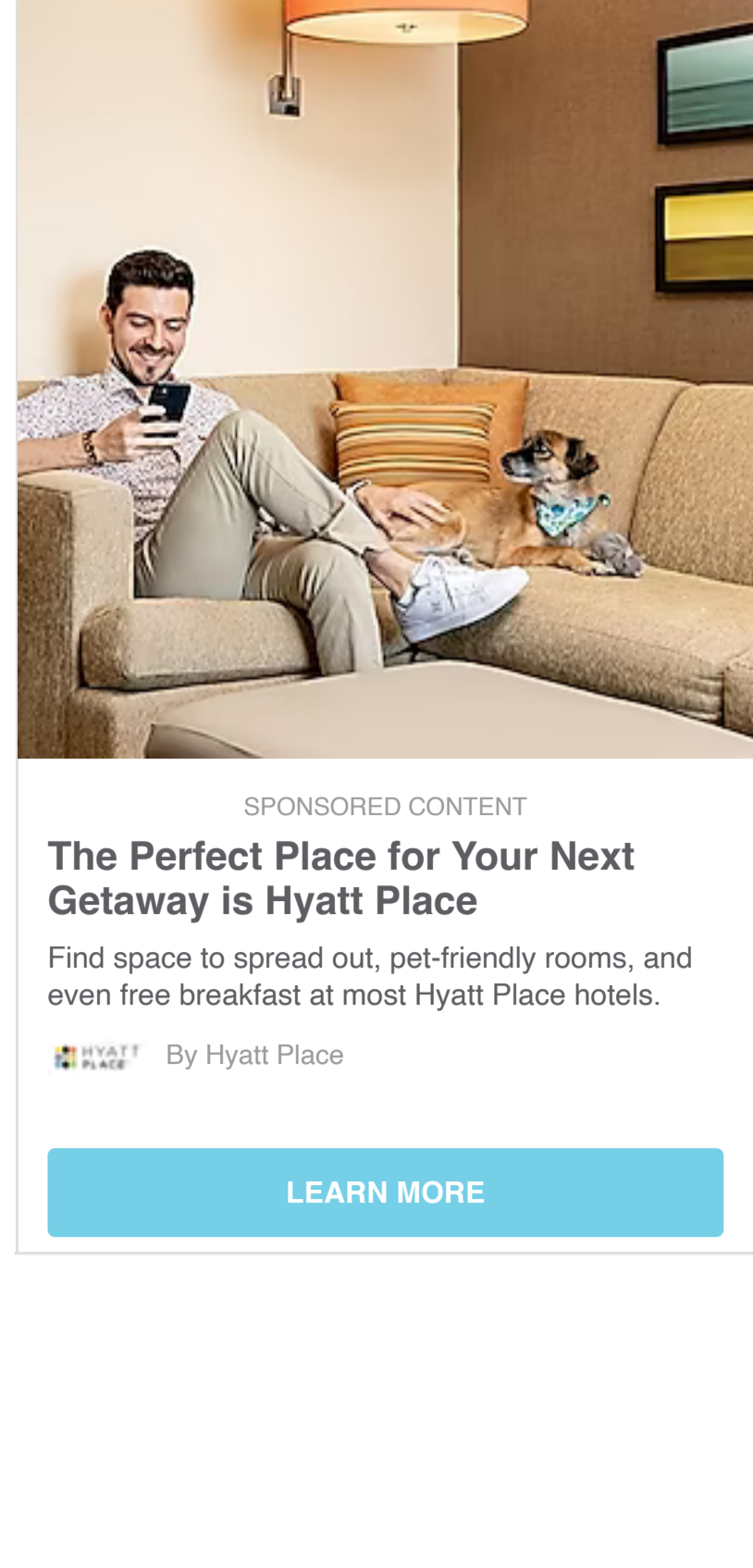
Supreme Court | Cross on a Bible | Piggy bank with a graduation cap (Photo illustration by Salon/Getty Images)

Facebook Twitter Reddit Email save

The latest addition to the Oklahoma charter school world doesn't seem like much of a school at all. St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School doesn't offer in-person classes, despite the end of a pandemic that illustrated how crucial real world contact is to education. Its first application to be a charter school in Oklahoma was rejected, **because it failed to meet the not-exactly-high state standards set by Oklahoma law.** If providing quality education to Oklahoma students was the goal, then the choice to approve this school doesn't make any sense at all.

But, of course, Oklahoma is run by far-right Republicans who are far more interested in pushing a Christian nationalist agenda than serving the needs of their constituents. Republicans didn't approve St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School to be funded by the taxpayers because of its educational value. There is only one, shameless reason for this: To give the far-right Supreme Court a chance to destroy the separation of church and state, a founding American principle.

As **USA Today explains**, the school will be fully funded by the government, even though "the school will promote the Catholic faith and operate according to church doctrine." This doesn't just violate "a state law requiring public schools to be free of control from any religious sect." It's a direct attack on the First Amendment, which bars the government from promoting one faith over another, or over any faith at all.



Want more Amanda Marcotte on politics? Subscribe to her newsletter **Standing Room Only.**

Indeed, this is such a flagrant violation of long-standing constitutional law that the Oklahoma attorney general Gentner Drummond, who is a Republican, felt the need to speak out against it, warning it was a "slippery slope" towards state-funded religion and warned that state school board members have "exposed themselves and the state to potential legal action that could be costly."

There is only one, shameless reason for this: To give the far-right Supreme Court a chance to destroy the separation of church and state, a founding American principle.



He's right, of course. But Oklahoma Republicans want the state to be sued. Indeed, the whole purpose of propping up this half-baked school is to draw a legal challenge, with an eye towards giving the Supreme Court an excuse to legalize taxpayer-funded religious education. The end goal, which some Republican leaders barely bother to hide anymore, is to destroy the concept of secular education entirely.

The state's Republican school superintendent, Ryan Walters, is not discreet about his contempt for the existence of secular, reality-based education. His hatred of schools that teach real science and history is so intense, in fact, it **makes Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis look less fascist** in comparison. During the campaign, Walters didn't just demand that schools whitewash history and complain that **learning facts leads students to believe** "this country is an evil place full of bigoted racists." He also called for teacher training and real history books to be **replaced with materials from the far-right Christian Hillsdale College.**

Related **Salon investigates: The war on public schools is being fought from Hillsdale College**



After he was elected, educators across the state started to speak anonymously with reporters about their new boss. Unsurprising, as he **demonizes public schoolteachers** as "Marxist" and falsely accuses them of pressuring kids into gender transition. He and his second-in-command, Matt Langston, reacted with a Donald Trump-level of emotional regulation to these whistleblowers by **sending out a letter complaining of victimization** at the hands of those "pushing pornography in schools."

The link between Walters and Hillsdale is alarming. As **investigative reporter Kathryn Joyce revealed** in a multi-part series for Salon, Hillsdale is the center of a Christian nationalist movement to replace secular public education with right-wing schools that promote Christianity, deny science, and teach kids a false version of American history that valorizes white supremacy. Charter schools are at the center of their strategy to destroy secular public education. Under the guise of "school choice," charter schools can be used to siphon money out of public schools into private-but-taxpayer-funded centers that favor right-wing indoctrination over real education. Eventually, the hope is that parents will only have two choices left for their kids: A Christian nationalist program or no school at all.



Want more Amanda Marcotte on politics? Subscribe to her newsletter **Standing Room Only.**

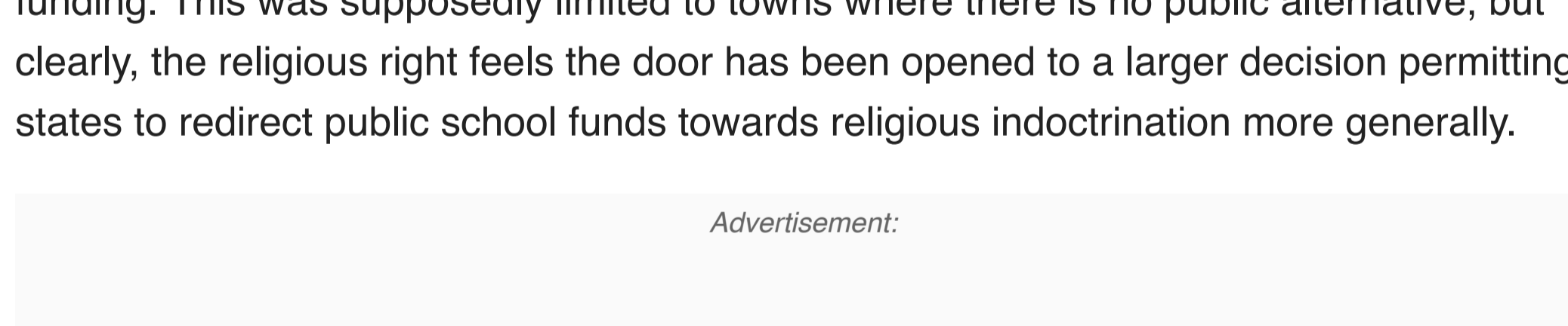
While there's sadly been a lot of success for the right's plan to privatize education, the First Amendment has been an obstacle to the goal of replacing secular education with religious indoctrination. Charter schools are only able to offer themselves up as taxpayer-funded alternatives to traditional public schools by respecting the separation of church and state. After the 6-seat Republican majority on the Supreme Court signaled a total disregard for legal precedent, by overturning *Roe v. Wade*, however, the Christian right has come to believe they have a shot at blowing a hole through any other long-standing legal principle that gets in their way.

Oklahoma Republicans want the state to be sued. Indeed, the whole purpose of propping up this half-baked school is to draw a legal challenge, with an eye towards giving the Supreme Court an excuse to legalize taxpayer-funded religious education.



There's little effort to conceal that St. Isidore, which doesn't even open until 2024, was started for the purpose of getting a First Amendment-decimating case before the Supreme Court. Brett Farley, the executive director of the Catholic Conference of Oklahoma, told USA Today that they expect this to result in "years of litigation," but "our intention is to see this through" because getting the government to fund religious institutions is "a major priority for us."

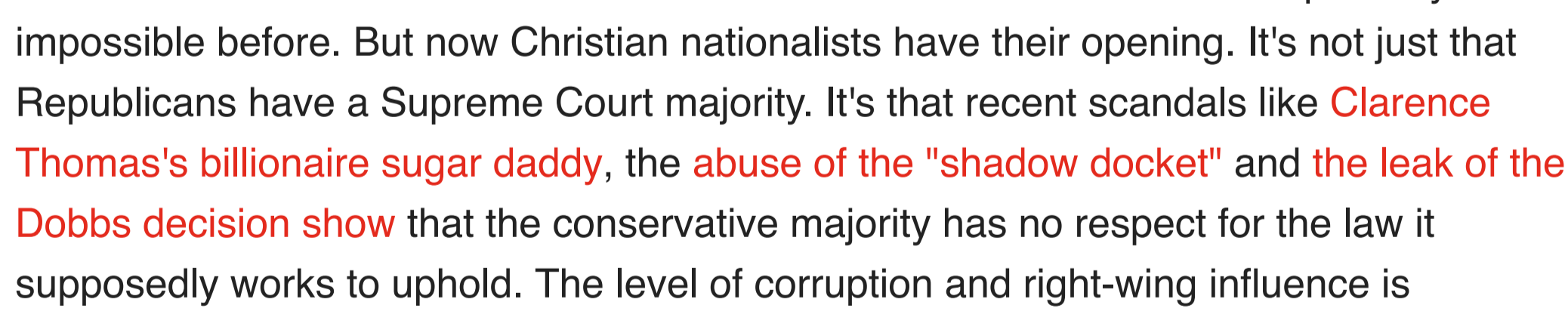
As **Lisa Needham at Public Notice reports**, the "Supreme Court has been chipping away at this particular portion of the First Amendment for a while now." The court **backed a high school football coach who held** showy public prayers at the 50-yard-line during games, in a case which Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote required ignoring "decades" of precedent. They've also ruled in favor of private religious schools demanding state funds to build playgrounds or for scholarships. Last year, the court went a step further, **by allowing an overtly religious school in Maine** to get charter approval and taxpayer funding. This was supposedly limited to towns where there is no public alternative, but clearly, the religious right feels the door has been opened to a larger decision permitting states to redirect public school funds towards religious indoctrination more generally.



Related **Is Justice Thomas the worst Supreme Court justice ever?**

Most public attention on the education issue has been focused recently on GOP efforts to prevent public schools and libraries from offering a full and honest education to students. Across the country, Republicans are passing laws empowering the dumbest bully in the PTA to ban any educational material that offends her illiterate sensibilities, leading to bans on works by **youth poet laureate Amanda Gorman**, books about **Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks**, and **even a song by Dolly Parton** because a parent didn't like the "free to be who you are" lyrics. In Utah, **one hero parent trollishly forced the school to ban Bibles** under the same "one parent gets veto power" rules.

Book banning is terrible, but it's only one part of the larger picture. Working through Hillsdale and right-wing legal organizations, the Christian nationalist movement has a plan to eradicate public secular education completely, replacing it with privatized schools that are more focused on right-wing propaganda and religious indoctrination than education. Such a radical transformation of America's education landscape likely felt impossible before. But now Christian nationalists have their opening. It's not just that Republicans have a Supreme Court majority. It's that recent scandals like **Clarence Thomas's billionaire sugar daddy**, the **abuse of the "shadow docket"** and **the leak of the Dobbs decision** show that the conservative majority has no respect for the law it supposedly works to uphold. The level of corruption and right-wing influence is unimaginable, creating a real opportunity for the court to simply disregard the plain reading of the First Amendment, all to give Christian nationalists what they want.



Read more **about this Christian nationalism**

- **Donald Trump and his evangelical followers are back for more: I know how to beat them**
- **A new Daughter of the Confederacy**
- **"Protect the kids" exposed as a lie after Tennessee's drag ban gets knocked down by a Trump judge**

By **AMANDA MARCOTTE**

Amanda Marcotte is a senior politics writer at Salon and the author of "Troll Nation: How The Right Became Trump-Worshipping Monsters Set On Rat-F*cking Liberals, America, and Truth Itself." Follow her on Twitter @AmandaMarcotte and sign up for her biweekly politics newsletter, Standing Room Only.

MORE FROM **AMANDA MARCOTTE**

