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How a Lancaster charity linked to a private Christian college influences public school policy in Pa.

BRETT SHOLTIS | Staff Writer

May 19, 2024



A building on the Lancaster Bible College campus.

BRETT SHOLTIS | Staff Writer

Thank you, for being a subscriber and supporting local journalism.

The Eden Bridge Foundation tells prospective donors that their support will help build “the Kingdom of God” on Earth with money flowing to Lancaster Bible College and other ministries. Over the past 14 years, the nonprofit has steered tens of millions of dollars to Christian schools, churches and charities.



But some donations to the 501(c)(3) Eden Bridge Foundation routinely go to Republican-aligned groups at the center of conservative political advocacy.

An analysis of tax records shows donations associated with the private, religious school are used to shape public school policy. The money helps advance evangelical Christian positions in secular spaces while rejecting the separation of church and state promised in the U.S. Constitution and state governing documents.

One of the foundation's grant recipients, Pennsylvania Family Institute, helps public school boards remove library books and restrict LGBTQ+ students. Another, Alliance Defending Freedom, has fought in court to ban same-sex marriage and abortion and has helped state lawmakers write anti-abortion legislation. A third, Donors Trust, serves as a financial hub for libertarian and conservative causes.

While Pennsylvania Family Institute, Alliance Defending Freedom and Donors Trust are technically all nonpartisan, tax-exempt groups, they almost exclusively advocate for Republican policy positions and politicians. According to a tax law expert, this poses a potential legal problem for the Eden Bridge Foundation. According to its articles of incorporation and bylaws, it is barred from "carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting to influence legislation."

"It definitely is political," said Evelyn McGravey, a nonprofit tax lawyer at Philadelphia-based Cheshire Law Group. "I think they're very strategic in how they're funding these things. They're trying very carefully to walk this line."



[Local News](#)

Eden Bridge Foundation donated to Tioga County retreat, autism services nonprofit linked to board members

[Eden Bridge 051924 New 2](#) by [Travis Kellar](#) on Scribd



PRIVATE DOLLARS, PUBLIC INFLUENCE

Christian nonprofit donations are going to groups that work to change policies on race, books and gender in local public schools

\$49M

The total amount Eden Bridge donated July 2010 to June 2022.



EDEN BRIDGE FOUNDATION

Manheim Township

The Eden Bridge Foundation is a supporting organization of Lancaster Bible College. Since 2010, it has given \$49 million to donor-advised funds, churches, private schools and other Christian-oriented charities.

Among these are groups active in efforts to influence public schools in Lancaster County and around Pennsylvania. The policies they advocate for often involve young people and issues of race, sexual orientation and gender identity.

\$230K

\$136K



DONORS TRUST

Arlington, Virginia

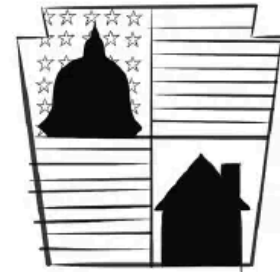
Libertarian and conservative fund supporting Republican-aligned causes.



PENNSYLVANIA FAMILY INSTITUTE

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Family Institute's legal arm, Independence Law Center, helps schools set policies to remove library books discussing race and sexuality and restrict the speech and behavior of LGBTQ+ students.



\$104K

ALLIANCE DEFENDING FREEDOM

Scottsdale, Arizona

Religious legal advocacy group known for opposing LGBTQ+ rights



\$900K

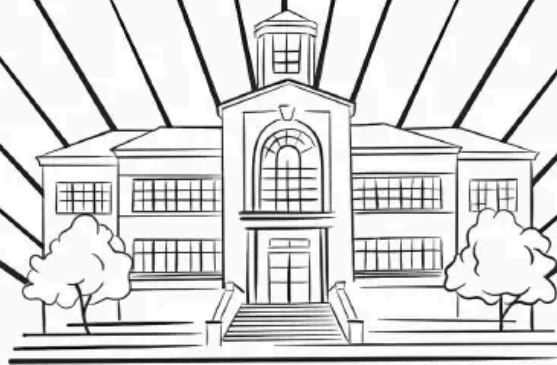
Amount Donors Trust gave to Alliance Defending Freedom since 2010.

\$102K

Amount Alliance Defending Freedom gave to Pennsylvania Family Institute since 2010.



STUDENTS



PUBLIC SCHOOL CONTROVERSY



LAWYERS



Pennsylvania Family Institute's legal arm, Independence Law Center, helps schools set policies to remove library books discussing race and sexuality and ban transgender students from using bathrooms and playing sports that align with their gender identity. Hempfield and Eastern



Alliance Defending Freedom takes these issues to the courts, often using religion to argue against the rights of gay or transgender people. In Pennsylvania, the firm was behind a 2018 failed effort in Berwyn



...with their gender identity. Hempfield and Eastern Lancaster County School District are contracted with Independence Law Center, along with nearby school districts in York and Cumberland counties.

...behind a 2018 failed effort in Boyertown, Berks County, to keep a transgender teen from using a school restroom.

ANGEL LUCIANO | GRAPHIC ARTIST

SOURCE: LNP | LANCASTERONLINE ANALYSIS OF TAX RECORDS FILED TO THE INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE

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Focus on public schools

The Eden Bridge Foundation, formed in 2003 as the Ambassador Foundation, lists an address on the Lancaster Bible College campus in Manheim Township on its incorporation and tax documents. It exists to support Lancaster Bible College and other churches, schools and Christian organizations, these documents state. According to the most recent data available, for the period from July 2021 through June 2022, it had \$18.7 million in assets and gave away \$7.7 million.

Since July 2010, the earliest year for which some records were available, it has given about \$49 million to nonprofits — typically more than 100 entities each year. These range from a recent \$2.2 million to the [Everence Foundation](#) to gifts of \$10,000 or less to recipients such as the ALS Foundation and the Hatfield Volunteer Fire Company in Montgomery County.

One group that benefits from Eden Bridge Foundation money is Independence Law Center, a Harrisburg-based religious rights law firm that exists as a subsidiary of the Pennsylvania Family Institute.



[Local News](#)

Hempfield graduates reflect on how Independence Law Center policies affected them

Long active in taking Christian causes to the courts, Independence Law Center has turned its focus to reshaping public school policies and curriculum. The law firm has helped school boards develop a raft of rules focused on young people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, or who otherwise are exploring their gender or sexual identity. And it has crafted regulations that make it easier for school boards and individual parents to demand that a school library remove books. Often, these books deal with race, sexuality or gender.

Parents in some districts represented by the law firm, including Hempfield and Eastern Lancaster County, have said these rules are geared toward giving them more control over what their children are taught at a time when they feel public schools are too liberal. But other parents say these policies favor conservative Christians when the law demands that students be treated equally regardless of religion, sexual orientation or gender identity.



The law firm's policies have divided school districts around Pennsylvania. In Lancaster County, Hempfield and Elanco used the firm to block transgender teens from playing on sports teams that align with their gender identity, while Elanco passed a similar policy pertaining to school restrooms. Warwick School District will vote Tuesday on whether to use the firm amid vigorous public outcry. At the same time, its policies are sparking protests and heated conversations in York and Cumberland counties.



Supporters of trans student inclusion gather outside the Hempfield School District Administration Building at 200 Church Street in East Hempfield Township Tuesday, June 28, 2022.

BLAINE SHAHAN | Staff Photographer

It's not just Pennsylvania, either, said Rachel Laser, who leads Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. Across the U.S., billions of dollars are being routed to state evangelical groups "to infuse conservative Christianity into our laws in order to give special privilege to European Christians in our country," Laser said.

That's something her group opposes, based on the idea that it's an intrusion of one particular religion into constitutionally-protected public spaces that should not prefer one religious view.

"The Constitution requires the separation of church and state," said Laser, a lawyer. "The Constitution bases the power in the people in our country, and does not reference God."



Two groups connected by one person

The link between Eden Bridge and [Independence Law Center](#) is Michael Geer, the founding president and CEO of the 501(c)(3) Pennsylvania Family Institute. Geer has helmed the Harrisburg-based Christian rights lobbying and advocacy group since 1989. Geer is also president of the closely related 501(c)(4) Pennsylvania Family Council.

Geer did not respond to requests to talk for this story. Lancaster Bible College spokesman Keith Baum initially fielded a request to talk with school President Thomas Kiedis and board member Phil Clemens. However, Baum stopped responding to emails and phone calls as of late March.

Reached by phone, Eden Bridge Executive Director Robert Teague declined to comment.

Two Independence Law Center lawyers, Randall Wenger and Jeremy Samek, are listed among the Pennsylvania Family Institute's top-paid staff, its tax forms show. Samek is a registered lobbyist in Harrisburg for both the Pa. Family Institute and Pa. Family Council, state records show. Wenger and Samek did not respond to emailed requests for comment for this story.



Michael Geer

The Pennsylvania Family Institute is one of the "[state family policy councils](#)" loosely tied to the Family Research Council, a Washington, D.C.-based Evangelical Christian think tank.

Family Research Council is controversial for its stances opposing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other queer communities. [LGBTQ+ advocacy group GLAAD](#) says the council uses "homophobic and transphobic discredited research" and "harmful and inaccurate claims" to lobby against people's civil rights.

Author Anne Nelson in 2019 documented Family Research Council's role as a major node in the "[shadow network](#)" of conservative Christian political infrastructure across the U.S.

"The Pennsylvania Family Institute is part of a national network of similar organizations connected to James Dobson's Focus on the Family," Nelson said in an email. "These groups coordinate pressure and promote legislation for measures to roll back access to abortions, and limit the civil and political rights of LGBTQ populations."





Jeremy Samek, left, Gerald Groff, Kelly Shackelford, and Aaron Streett, right, listen to Randall Wenger, second from the left, speak to the media after leaving the U.S. Supreme Court, where the nation's top court heard Groff's case challenging the U.S. Postal Service for scheduling him to work on Sundays, on Tuesday, April 18, 2023.

SUZETTE WENGER | Staff Photographer

Tax expert raises questions

From July 2010 through June 2022, the most recent data set available, Eden Bridge directed \$136,398 to the Pennsylvania Family Institute, records show. That's just a sliver of the institute's \$2.6 million in annual revenue, and much of the group's funding remains shielded from public view due to current laws regulating nonprofits.

In addition to donations from Eden Bridge, Pennsylvania Family Institute got \$101,599 from Christian legal advocacy group Alliance Defending Freedom and \$405,000 from the Iowa-based Family Leader Foundation since 2016, tax records show. That group champions evangelical causes, tracks legislation and points voters to Republican political candidates.

Geer serves as Eden Bridge's vice chairman, documents show. Since at least 2011, Geer has served on the Eden Bridge board while its funds were being directed to the Pennsylvania Family Institute, which pays his roughly \$220,000 salary.

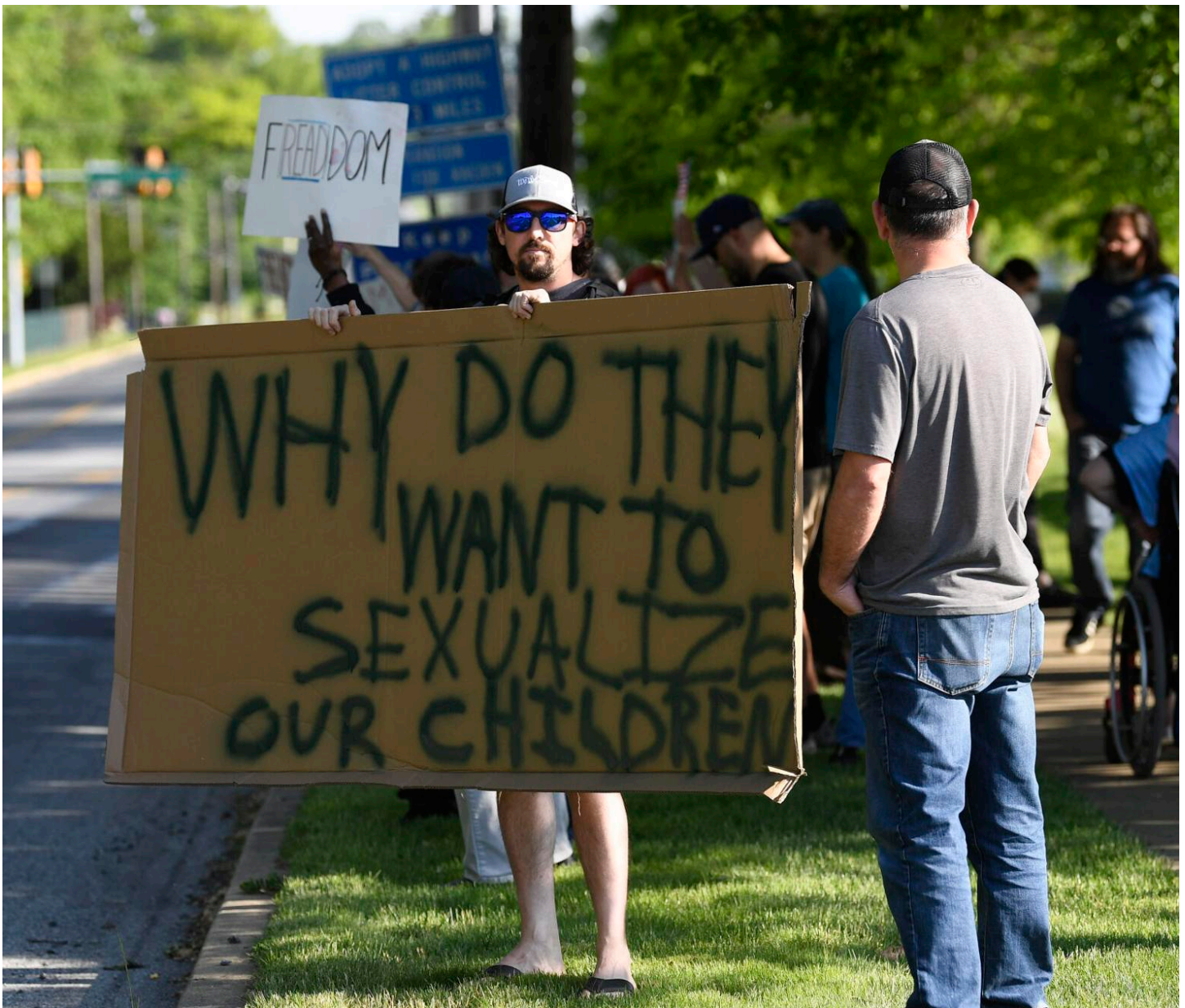
Federal law prohibits nonprofits from making donations that directly benefit board members, said McGravey, the tax lawyer whose firm provides legal counsel to nonprofits. However, depending on a number of factors, the donations to Geer's organization likely falls within the law.



One thing that stands out, McGravey said, is that it appears Eden Bridge is breaking its own rules — known as “articles of incorporation” — which it agreed to when it got its tax-exempt status more than 20 years ago.

“Articles of incorporation are like the birth certificate for the organization,” McGravey noted. “Together with the bylaws, those govern the organization, and the organization is required to adhere to them.”

McGravey noted that the Eden Bridge Foundation's articles of incorporation prohibit it from engaging in lobbying or politics and forbids it from publishing statements for or against any political candidate. The Pennsylvania Family Institute helps change school board regulations and lobbies legislators at the state level. It also publishes voter guides.



A counter-protestor stands next to members of the community gathered ahead of the school board meeting to express concerns about the boards overreach and the dismantling of students' first amendment rights outside of Hempfield High School in Landisville Tuesday May 9, 2023.

CHRIS KNIGHT | Staff Photographer



Though the Eden Bridge Foundation's support may be against the rules, the consequences likely would be minor, she said. The nonprofit could be asked to amend its rules making it clear that it could donate to groups that engage in political activity.

The Internal Revenue Service and the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General regulate this, McGravey said.

"But quite frankly, they're under-resourced, and they're not going to be looking at the 68,000 nonprofits (in Pennsylvania) to see if they are following their governing instrument."

'Dark money'

Alliance Defending Freedom is another politically active group receiving donations from Eden Bridge Foundation. From July 2010 through June 2022, the foundation gave \$145,250 to the Scottsdale, Arizona-based religious legal organization, tax documents show.

Alliance Defending Freedom is known for sharp opposition to women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights in the courts. It has supported criminalizing gay sex between consenting adults, according to the progressive pro-equality group [Human Rights Campaign](#). Alliance Defending Freedom [helped Mississippi lawmakers](#) write 2018 legislation prohibiting abortion after 15 weeks, one of the strictest bans in the U.S at the time.

With a mission "to advance the God-given right to live and speak the Truth," according to its tax documents, Alliance Defending Freedom uses religion to argue against the rights of gay and transgender people. For example, in the U.S. Supreme Court it successfully argued that a wedding cake maker should be allowed to deny service to gay couples. In Pennsylvania, the firm was behind a failed effort in Boyertown, Berks County, to keep a transgender teen from using a school restroom.

Over the same period, Eden Bridge gave \$230,000 to Alexandria, Virginia-based Donors Trust, a \$1.4 billion libertarian megafund dedicated to solving social problems through "private philanthropy and individual giving as opposed to governmental solutions." In 2022, the Pennsylvania Department of State [fined Donors Trust \\$16,000](#) for failing to properly register in the commonwealth.

Donors Trust writes hundreds of checks per year. Its largest recipient in 2022 was a scientific research facility, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York. Elite universities such as Yale and Brown have gotten money. So have institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Most donations, however, go to political advocacy groups. In 2022, for example, the State Policy Network, which pushes libertarian and conservative policies, was the fourth-largest grant recipient, getting \$8.5 million. Turning Point USA, a campus-oriented group that has funneled money to Republican politicians and helped with "Stop The Steal" rallies, falsely claiming election fraud after the 2020 presidential election, got \$1.4 million that year. Alliance Defending Freedom, noted above, got \$634,000 that year.

Controversial grant recipients include [Project Veritas](#), a political activist group that uses ethically questionable undercover tactics in an attempt to expose hypocrisy or corruption in government or the media. Among other exploits, Project Veritas [purchased the stolen diary](#) of President Joe Biden's daughter in a failed effort to influence the 2020 election. Since 2020, Project Veritas has received more than \$3 million from Donors Trust.

McGravey said Donors Trust is a hub for "dark money," a term for using tax-exempt charities to route funds to political causes while hiding where the money came from.

This has grown since 2010, when the U.S. Supreme Court decision [Citizens United v. F.E.C.](#) made it easier for corporations and other entities to donate to political causes, McGravey said.

"Since Citizens' United was overturned, we're seeing more and more of this dark money, and impermissible use of tax exempt entities to filter through causes."

A 'well-oiled machine'

Geer, who runs Pennsylvania Family Institute and serves on the Eden Bridge board, has close ties to other politically active evangelical groups. Tax records show Geer is a board member at Family Policy Alliance, a Colorado-based 501(c)(4) group. Family Policy Alliance lists Focus on the Family, Family Research Council and Alliance Defending Freedom as its "allies."

Family Policy Alliance seeks to "inspire men and women to live out biblical citizenship that transforms culture," its tax documents state. The Family Policy Alliance [website](#) lists "parental rights," "sexual orientation" and "transgender" among its key issues. It includes a plan for "a pro-life America" in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court decision overturning a woman's right to an abortion. It offers voters resources for the 2024 election. And it claims endorsements from Republicans such as U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana, who as a lawyer [once worked for](#) Alliance Defending Freedom.

To Nelson, the author who studies the Christian right, these ties show the shared values and goals of these organizations. Together, they make up the "well-oiled machine" coordinating political strategy through an umbrella organization, the Council for National Policy.

The council's leaders include Dobson, who created the state policy network system, as well as the leaders of Alliance Defending Freedom, Family Research Council and Donors Trust.

These groups share resources and communicate closely to decide on policy positions to support and messaging to turn out voters.

"So the Pennsylvania Family Institute benefits from long-standing machinery that provides major funding, media platforms, and political advocacy," Nelson said, "all while operating as a tax-exempt, non-partisan 'human services' organization."



To Rev. Naomi Washington-Leapheart, the use of Christian college funds to influence what happens in public schools misunderstands how religious experience works. Washington-Leapheart studied at Lancaster Seminary before taking a job as adjunct professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University outside of Philadelphia.



Naomi Washington-Leapheart studied at Lancaster Seminary before taking on her role as adjunct professor of theology and religious studies at Villanova University outside of Philadelphia.

Submitted

She said Christ's teachings are "an invitation," rather than something to be forced upon people.

"It was always an invitation," Washington-Leapheart said. "But what this does is it imposes a particular religious viewpoint on all people, including people who are not a Christian. It also undermines the divine offering itself to us."

Washington-Leapheart is part of an alliance of faith leaders working with Americans United for Separation of Church and State. She said religious groups trying to force the policies of one sect upon others threaten the community with a form of "religious supremacy."

"The framers of the Constitution were trying to preserve religious separation because they understood the harm and the danger of religious supremacy and they were trying to guard against it. And so for them to try to contradict that original framing is reflecting of an arrogance that is destructive."



This reporter's work is funded by the Lancaster County Local Journalism Fund. For more information, or to make a contribution, please visit lanc.news/supportlocaljournalism.



Local News

Warwick school board plans vote to add religious rights law firm, citing Title IX concerns



Local News

Lancaster mourns death of Ash Clatterbuck, young transgender man who called for love



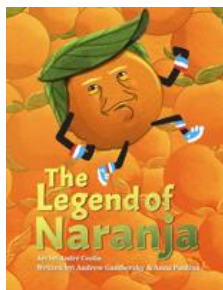
Local News

After bomb threats in Lancaster, extremism experts see a familiar pattern



Parents confront Warwick school board over secret meeting with lawyer who has helped schools ban books [update]





Groups seek to replace Scholastic book fairs with books written by rightwing pundits, election deniers

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