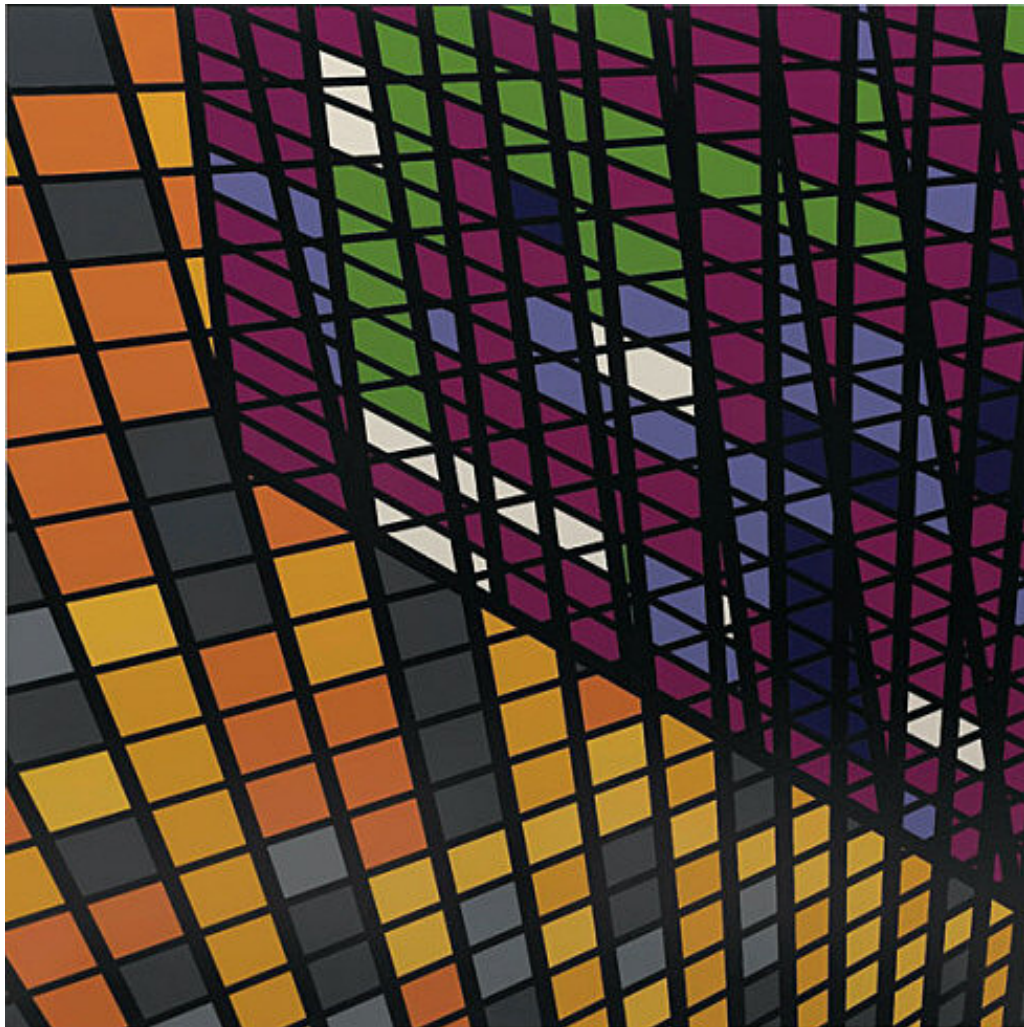


# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## To Educate and Mobilize Voters: Digital Teacher Activism during the 2020 Elections

by Chris Gilbert



SARAH MORRISMANDALAY BAY [LAS VEGAS]. SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK PURCHASED WITH FUNDS CONTRIBUTED BY THE YOUNG COLLECTORS COUNCIL, 2000. © SARAH MORRIS

The 2020 elections were crucial for education in North Carolina. They offered public education supporters an opportunity to halt, or at least slow, the sustained attack on the state's PK-12 public school system. Since 2010, residents had witnessed the dismantling of this system, as the North Carolina General Assembly implemented a series of destructive policies. Legislators expanded school choice initiatives, removed career status and advanced degree pay for teachers, and slashed funding for teacher assistants, among other harmful initiatives. These attacks were part of a broader assault on the public sector, one deeply rooted in the neoliberal project. Fundamentally, as Harvey (2018) noted, "the [neoliberal] project...is about concentrating and accumulating more wealth and power within a very small faction of the capitalist class and corporate world." Given that public schools derive much of their funding from income taxes on individuals and businesses, public education serves as a powerful economic drain on the wealth of the corporate capitalist class and presents a threat to the neoliberal project. Over the years, business-friendly legislators in North Carolina blunted the impact of public school funding on the corporate elite via a series of tax cuts:

Since the major tax-cut package of 2013, the Republican-majority legislature has slashed both corporate and individual income tax rates. It replaced the long-standing graduated income tax with a one-rate "flat" tax. It also dropped the state corporate income tax rate to the lowest in the nation...state fiscal analysts have calculated that the tax cuts of 2013 and subsequent shifts reduced annual revenue by \$4.2 billion. (Guillory, 2021, para. 2)

Remarkably, legislators even proposed to eliminate the corporate income tax entirely, a move that along with additional cuts would potentially decrease annual revenue by around \$2 billion (Guillory, 2021, para. 3). As the elections approached, it was clear that North Carolina had become a model state for neoliberal economic policy, as ever-deepening tax cuts had eroded education funding and augmented the already substantial wealth of affluent residents and big businesses.

Given these troubling developments for public education supporters, it was beyond time for change. In the run-up to the elections, educators in the state mobilized, and North Carolina's education advocacy organization, the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), got to work promoting pro-public education candidates who would challenge the neoliberal attack on public schools. Importantly, through their electoral efforts, these educators took up the role of activist and rejected the widespread cultural and institutional expectation, particularly dominant in the South, that teachers should remain apolitical; as Oyler et al. (2017) observed, "societal transformation has not, typically, been a goal of public education systems, [and] teacher activists are not what state governments...have typically desired" (p. 229). Heightened neoliberal assaults on democratic institutions such as public schools, though, have led many educators to expand their professional identity by incorporating outside-the-classroom activism into the labor process of teaching (Oyler et al., 2017). Thus, activism involves a broadening of teachers' pedagogical

work beyond what is typically sanctioned by state institutions; in the context of this article, teacher activism consists of radical pedagogical practices, or forms of education and action occurring beyond the classroom to contest the neoliberal project and support public education.

## Exploring Digital Teacher Activism

As a public education advocate, former high school teacher, and someone who has both participated in and written about teacher activism (Gilbert, 2022), I wanted to learn more about the radical pedagogical practices NCAE and individual activist educators employed to get pro-public education candidates elected. More specifically, I was interested in teacher activism involving the use of digital technologies, an interest that stemmed in part from the presence of COVID-19 during the 2020 elections. Because of the pandemic, much of daily life had navigated online, and I wondered if, and how, teacher activists had also utilized digital technologies to adapt. Additionally, while some research has illuminated how teachers employ digital media, such as social media, for activist purposes (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2020; Hogan, 2018; Krutka et al., 2018; Shiller, 2015; Thapliyal, 2018, 2019), there is a need for additional inquiry in this area (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2020; Shiller, 2015; Thapliyal, 2018). All of this inspired my research into digitally-connected forms of North Carolina teacher activism related to the elections. I reviewed and analyzed pertinent activity in multiple online spaces including the social media accounts of NCAE; Facebook and Twitter accounts of NCAE President Tamika Walker Kelly; Facebook and Twitter accounts of local NCAE chapters and members; websites of two popular North Carolina teacher bloggers, along with their Facebook and Twitter accounts; and the North Carolina Teachers United Facebook group, an online community of thousands of teachers. I also communicated with several NCAE leadership figures to learn more about the organization's efforts during the elections.

I found that North Carolina teacher activists utilized digital technologies largely for two purposes: 1) to perform public pedagogy to educate voters, and 2) to mobilize voters to the polls to support pro-public education candidates. This article is organized around these two categories of radical pedagogical practice and, within each, I discuss several activist practices that were *highly visible* (i.e., promoted on multiple social media platforms) and/or *innovative* in the context of COVID-19. By focusing on a few practices, as opposed to offering an exhaustive review, I am able to highlight instructive examples potentially useful for other teacher activists while also analyzing each practice's theoretical and practical significance. Therefore, this article has two aims: to provide documentation and discussion of these practices in order to supplement existing research, and to offer ideas and inspiration to feed future activist work. I begin with the first category of teacher activist practice: public pedagogy to educate voters.

## Public Pedagogy to Educate Voters

Public pedagogy refers to "spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of

the institution of schools” (Sandlin et al., 2010, p. 1). Expanding traditional conceptions of teaching and learning, public pedagogy promotes the idea that popular culture, media, digital spaces, forms of social activism, and other informal educational phenomena ‘teach’ by producing knowledge, shaping assumptions, and sustaining and disrupting belief systems (O’Malley et al., 2010; Sandlin, et al., 2010). I found that North Carolina teacher activists engaged in forms of public pedagogy through Apple Cards, video interviews with candidates, and blogs, to educate voters about pro-public education candidates and their political opponents. I explore each of these practices through the lens of public pedagogy while also discussing forms of innovation and adaptation, where apparent, in response to COVID-19.



Chris Tuttell @ChrisTuttell · Oct 18, 2020

Look for these signs at the 20 early polling sites in Wake! You can scan the QR code and take the list with you! @wake\_ncae @ncae @kbeller @CSpEarsEDU

VOTE for STRONG PUBLIC SCHOOLS! Make your plan and VOTE!



FIGURE 1. TWEET DISPLAYING AN APPLE CARD SIGN IN WAKE COUNTY (TUTTELL, 2020)

## Voter Education through Apple Cards

Perhaps the most visible public pedagogical tool utilized by teacher activists during the 2020 elections was the NCAE Apple Card, an apple-shaped document featuring a list of NCAE- endorsed, pro-public education candidates. Each Apple Card featured the same state-level office endorsements, but the remaining content varied by region,

as voters found NCAE-endorsed candidates for local county commissioner and school board races listed on the card.

During previous elections, Apple Cards often found their way into voters’ hands via physical distribution, but COVID-19 clearly complicated the hand-to-hand distribution of paper cards, and this pedagogical text thus took on a heightened hybridized existence in 2020; while paper versions were still made available, it increasingly manifested in digital form. The sign in Figure 1 provides an excellent

example of this hybridity. NCAE placed these signs at numerous polling places throughout Wake County as a form of “contactless poll greeting” (Craig, 2020). Voters could obtain paper versions of the Apple Card from each sign, or they could access the card in digital form by scanning the associated QR code with a smartphone. This same QR code also appeared on picket signs during a socially-distanced rally in Asheville, as teacher activists invited voters to safely learn about candidates through a “paperless Apple Card” (see Figure 2); the use of the QR code for this purpose was a new practice for teacher activists in the Asheville area, and one employed specifically because of COVID-19 (A.P. Cathcart, personal communication, October 18, 2021). The Apple Card also appeared digitally in the North Carolina Teachers United Facebook group, as a group administrator created a post in which teachers educated each other by sharing images of cards from regions throughout the state. Finally, the Apple Card was made available in virtual form through <https://ncaevotes2020.org/>, a website NCAE highlighted more during the pandemic than in previous years (T.W. Kelly, personal communication, August 3, 2021).



FIGURE 2. DIGITAL APPLE CARD ACCESS VIA A QR CODE (WLOS STAFF, 2020)



This heightened digital manifestation of the card is significant, as it illustrates one way North Carolina teacher activists adapted to constraints introduced by COVID-19, specifically the need to minimize in-person contact. The Apple Card's digital format also matters because, as Freishtat and Sandlin (2009) noted, "Online digital media function as a form of public pedagogy" (p. 148). As a public pedagogical tool, the Apple Card served to inform and persuade, and these functions were enhanced by its hybridity. This characteristic enabled greater flexibility and portability, thus allowing voters to educate themselves through multiple formats and in various settings. The card's digital format also extended its pedagogical reach by allowing it to quickly multiply in online spaces.

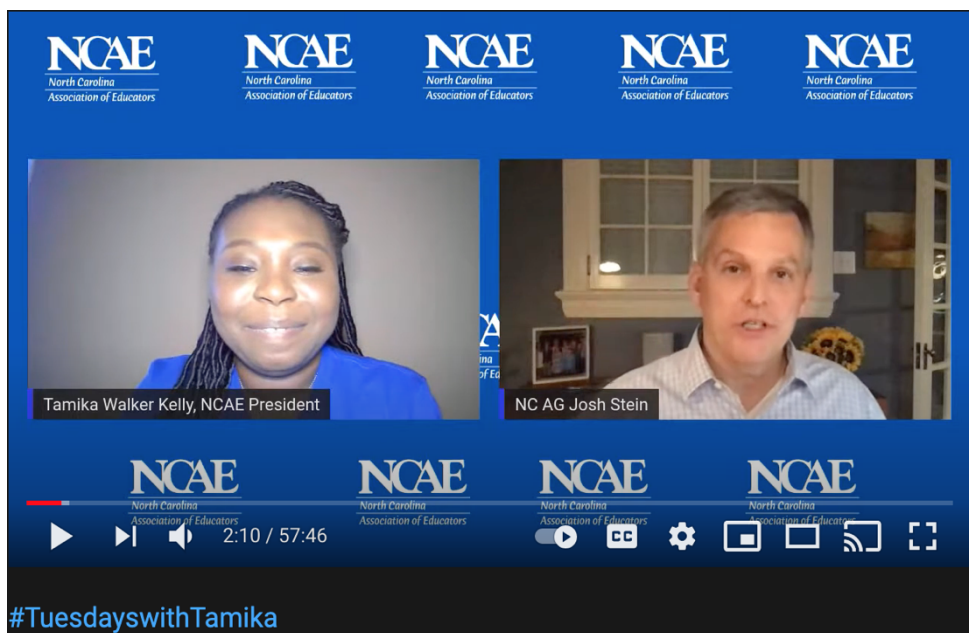
At a pragmatic level, the card simply informed voters via a list of endorsed candidates; at a deeper pedagogical level, the card encouraged both resistance and hope. The significance of the card, and the candidates it featured, was located in its rejection of the current educational reality in North Carolina, one characterized by a prolonged neoliberal assault on public education. It conveyed hope by offering voters a way to participate in the construction of a new political reality in which the state's public schools could be strengthened and its teachers supported. The Apple Card was therefore a noteworthy pedagogical tool with educational, civic, and affective implications.

## Voter Education through Video Interviews with Political Candidates

Another pedagogical tool teacher activists employed to educate voters was video interviews with political candidates. My research revealed a video interview series that was particularly visible online: #TuesdayswithTamika. #TuesdayswithTamika featured NCAE President Tamika Walker Kelly interviewing various NCAE-endorsed political candidates (see Figure 3). During these interviews, Walker Kelly asked candidates to share their backgrounds, views on public education, and other information of interest to voters. Interviews were broadcast live on Facebook and YouTube, and voters could also access video recordings through these platforms and Twitter.

Significantly, these interviews functioned as a pedagogical extension of the Apple Card. While the Apple

Card provided voters with an essential list of pro-public education names to support, #TuesdayswithTamika gave these names bodies and voices, and voters could watch, learn, and assess candidates' viewpoints in real-time or at their leisure. Further, by broadcasting live on social media, NCAE utilized the interactivity, or "multidirectional communication" (Thapliyal, 2018, p. 115) of these platforms, as viewers exchanged thoughts and resources through the comment and chat features on Facebook and YouTube. Importantly, this interactivity makes social media an essential public pedagogical space; as Reid (2010) noted, "social media have become important sites of public pedagogy, places where we go to learn, and places where we learn indirectly as we come to understand ourselves in relation to others" (p. 194). Thus, viewers not only learned from Walker Kelly and her interviewees, but they also educated each other. With #TuesdayswithTamika, NCAE



**FIGURE 3.** TAMIKA WALKER KELLY INTERVIEWS NC ATTORNEY GENERAL JOSH STEIN ON #TUESDAYSWITHTAMIKA (NCAEVIDEO, 2020)

utilized digital technology to inform voters while offering them opportunities to extend their learning through interaction, a noteworthy pedagogical affordance of social media, and one especially needful during a pandemic that discouraged personal interaction.

## Voter Education through Teacher Activist Blogging

The final public pedagogical practice under focus is teacher activist blogging. My research showed repeated activity around the work of two North Carolina teacher activist bloggers: Justin Parmenter and Stu Egan. Their blog posts are frequently shared and re-shared in online spaces including North Carolina Teachers United, and by numerous individuals and groups including NCAE. Both bloggers were active around the 2020 elections, as they published several blog posts aimed at voters; Egan published two pieces that garnered noticeable attention online, and one of Parmenter's blog posts also circulated widely online. Importantly, blog

posts such as these perform public pedagogy by functioning as educative platforms that allow teachers “to publicize their professional knowledge whilst problematizing policy. They also provide valuable grounds for awareness raising with deliberative attempts to change public opinion” (Dennis, 2015, p. 287). Egan and Parmenter employed several pedagogical strategies in these posts to educate and persuade voters.

First, they advanced critiques of neoliberal leadership in the North Carolina General Assembly by calling out specific individuals by name, attributing current educational conditions in the state to their actions, and demanding their removal. Egan (2020b), for example, wrote:

...after watching lawmakers like Tim Moore and Phil Berger hold this state hostage through unethical measures to pass budgets, hold special sessions, and pass legislation that continuously weaken our public schools it has become apparent to this teacher that these are not the people with whom you build bridges.

Parmenter (2020) was equally direct, calling Tim Moore (North Carolina House Speaker) and Phil Berger (President Pro Tempore of the North Carolina Senate) “chief architects of the current North Carolina public schools Dark Age.” Significantly, these critiques also provided alternative viewpoints to refute political talking points; Berger’s website, for example, characterized him as someone who had worked to improve public schools and support teachers (Education, n.d.). Egan’s and Parmenter’s critiques rebuffed this characterization by offering counter-narratives, an important function of teacher activist blogging (Krutka et al., 2018; Shiller, 2015).

Another pedagogical strategy utilized by Egan and Parmenter was that of triggering voters’ historical memory. Both bloggers communicated the need to replace current political leadership not because of a single action, but rather because of a long history of attacks on public schools and teachers. Parmenter (2020), for example, highlighted the history of damage inflicted during the “education policy Dark Age” that began when legislators hostile toward public schools assumed control of state government in 2010; he did so by providing a recap of multiple policies that had negatively impacted public education since then. Similarly, Egan (2020a) listed a series of reforms that had “turned a once progressive state system of public education into one of regression.” As public pedagogy, this triggering of voters’ historical memory underscored the need for voters to interrupt a

dangerous trend in NC’s educational history and challenge the neoliberal project.

A final pedagogical strategy was the bloggers’ elevation

**FIGURE 4.** VOLUNTEERS CONTACT VOTERS THROUGH VIRTUAL PHONE BANKING ON ZOOM (NCAE, 2020B)

of experiential knowledge. As full-time educators, their policy critiques are anchored in their experiences with these policies “in the trenches,” and their writing is thus deeply informed by their professional expertise. In her study of teacher bloggers, Shiller (2015) referred to this characteristic as “commons knowledge...a genre that allows everyday people to challenge so-called expert, official, and/or institutional knowledge...it allows for anyone to emerge as an expert, upending the conventional notions of whose knowledge counts” (p. 14). This anchoring in “commons knowledge” (Lievrouw, 2011; Shiller, 2015) served a pedagogical function in that it taught other educators that their experiences and voices matter. The ideal outcome of this pedagogy was the empowerment of these educators and the exercising of their voices, specifically through voting. In sum, Egan and Parmenter utilized several strategies to educate and persuade NC residents to reject current political leadership and vote pro-public education.

Through blog posts, Apple Cards, and #TuesdayswithTamika, teacher activists engaged in public pedagogy to educate and persuade voters to support public education candidates. To truly effect change, though, voters had to be both educated *and* mobilized, and it is to this second category of radical pedagogical practice that I now turn.

## Voter Mobilization through Digital Media

In her discussion of activist uses of digital, or “new” media, Lievrouw (2011) identified the genre of “mediated mobilization,” or the use of “web-based social software tools like social network sites...to cultivate interpersonal networks online and to mobilize those networks to engage in live and



mediated collective action” (p. 25). My research revealed that teacher activists initiated two innovative and highly visible forms of mediated mobilization to move voters to the polls, the first being virtual phone banking.

During the run-up to the elections, NCAE used its social media channels to repeatedly promote virtual phone banking and recruit volunteers for this task. Once committed, these volunteers received online training, signed up for shifts, and then phone banked from their homes using their cell phones. In a break from the organization’s previous in-person phone banking efforts, and as a COVID-related innovation (T.W. Kelly, personal communication, August 3, 2021), NCAE also distributed a Zoom link that allowed volunteers to join other phone bankers in a virtual space to share their experiences and receive support (see Figure 4).

The second form of mediated mobilization was the #RedforEd Statewide Early Vote event (see Figure 5), held during the start of the early voting period in North Carolina. Intended to drive the pro-public education vote, this NCAE-sponsored event was heavily promoted through social media and offered participants both online and offline modes of participation. Participants could attend a number of socially-distanced, in-person rallies held throughout the state, or they could participate by joining a livestream of the rallies and sharing #RedforEd-tagged selfies on social media of them wearing “I voted” stickers.

bankers, livestream participants, and selfie sharers) to encourage offline action (e.g., move voters to the polls).

Second, these voter mobilization efforts illustrate once more how teacher activists adapted in the context of COVID-19. In the case of virtual phone banking, the use of Zoom not only provided a digital space for home-based teacher volunteers to quickly and safely receive real-time support, but it also created a shared space to combat the social isolation caused by the pandemic. Similarly, the #RedforEd Statewide Early Vote event promoted social connectivity by allowing participants to join the event via livestream, an option offered specifically in response to COVID-19 (T.W. Kelly, personal communication, August 3, 2021); thus, individuals uncomfortable with in-person contact could still connect with others and show solidarity in a safe, virtual capacity. Of relevance here is Oyler’s (2017) observation that “[o]nline spaces offer educators efficient ways to connect along lines of affinity and gain support” (p. 36). Given the importance of relationships in teacher activism (Catone, 2017), this function of digital media to facilitate social connection was likely critical in the context of COVID-19. For this reason and others discussed above, these forms of mediated mobilization provide noteworthy examples of digital teacher activism to mobilize voters.

## Mixed Results and Future Adaptation

As the election results came in, it became apparent that

teachers’ activist efforts had produced a mix of victories and defeats. Undoubtedly, there were some important successes to celebrate. Perhaps the most high profile of which was the re-election of Governor Roy Cooper, an ardent public education supporter. Other NCAE-endorsed candidates also won their races, including Attorney General Josh Stein, State Auditor Beth Wood, Secretary of State Elaine Marshall, and others. Local victories also occurred throughout the state in school board and county commissioner races. Efforts fell short, though, in the NC General Assembly, as both the House and Senate remained under the control of legislators hostile toward public education. Perhaps these mixed results underscore the limitations of digital activism and the continued importance of traditional, on-the-ground forms of political activism,

some of which saw decreased use because of COVID-19. This outcome also provokes questions of scale and reach: did public pedagogical tools circulate broadly enough to educate a wide swath of voters? Were enough teachers engaged in activism to mobilize voters across the entire state? Further research is needed to explore these questions.

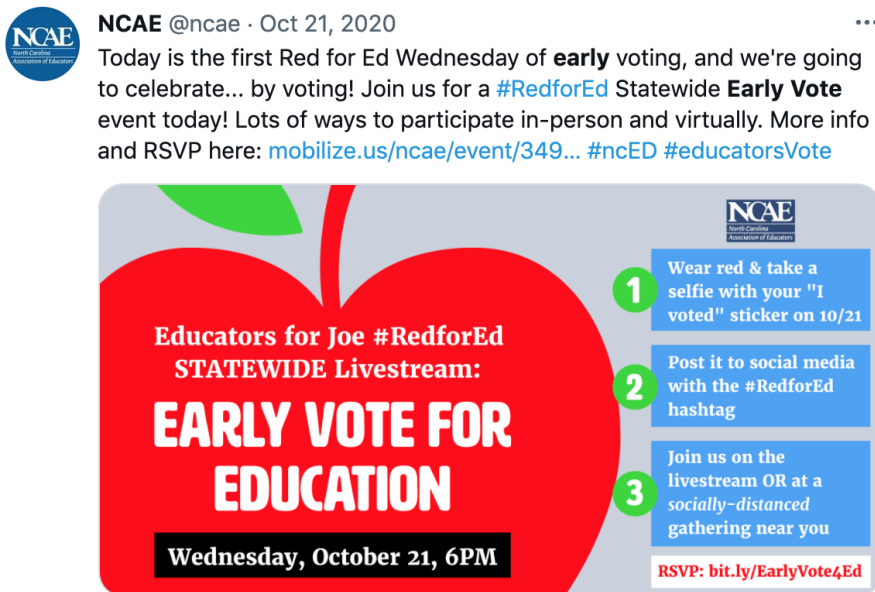


FIGURE 5. A TWEET PROMOTING THE #REDFORED STATEWIDE EARLY VOTE EVENT (NCAE, 2020A)

These two examples of teacher-activist initiated, mediated mobilization are significant for two reasons. First, they provide instructive examples of how teacher activists strategically employ digital media to mobilize offline activity (Berkovich and Avigur-Eshel, 2019; Krutka et al., 2018). This online-to-offline movement was evident in both forms of activism described above, as these efforts efficiently formed online networks of teacher volunteers (phone

Regardless of these mixed results, the digital activist practices explored here demonstrate how teachers utilize digital media to impact electoral outcomes. They also show that teacher activists persisted and adapted in the face of a pandemic. On top of their classroom responsibilities, which became vastly more challenging because of COVID-19, many teachers still took up activism to educate and mobilize voters to support public education. And the digital innovations that emerged during these efforts are now part of an ever-expanding teacher activist repertoire; the use of QR codes to share political information, Zoom video conferencing to facilitate phone banking, livestreams to enable virtual participation in rallies, and other creative uses of digital media may now become standard activist practices for teachers. During future elections and other political developments that call for activism, educators can employ these practices and draw upon their deepened technological knowledge to create even more innovative, activist methods. Future obstacles will undoubtedly emerge, and I suspect teacher activists will also continue to adapt. Importantly, such activism is increasingly essential given the persistence of the neoliberal project within North Carolina and beyond. Legislators in my state and elsewhere continue to implement regressive policies that funnel wealth to those at the top of the economic ladder and starve public schools of essential resources. Not only do teacher activists contest these policies through the radical pedagogical practices described in this article, but they also model forms of political engagement for educators who have not yet embraced the activist role. As the neoliberal threat persists, it is imperative that non-activist educators reject institutional and cultural norms that promote political detachment, expand their professional identity, and join with others currently engaged in activism to collectively support students, public schools, and the diverse communities these schools serve.

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**Chris Gilbert** is a former high school English teacher and college instructor who lives in the mountains of North Carolina. He is also an avid writer. His work has appeared in *The Washington Post's* education blog, "The Answer Sheet," NCTE's (National Council of Teachers of English) *English Journal*, Kappa Delta Pi's *Record* and *The Educational Forum*, *Critical Studies in Education*, and *Educational Action Research*.



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