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Defending the Freedom to Teach and Learn

Education and Our Democracy
Depend on Open Discussion
in a Safe and Welcoming
Environment

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Defending Democracy: Fighting for Our Freedom to Teach and Learn

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

DO YOU HAVE a lesson you taught 10 years ago that today might be challenged by students, families, or community members? History teacher Tim Krueger does. As he describes on page 30, in 2020 he taught a junior high lesson on voting that he'd taught before each presidential election since 2008. Though the lesson was carefully nonpartisan, administrators at Krueger's school received eight complaints from parents claiming he was indoctrinating their kids.

Sound familiar? So many of you—from pre-K through higher education—tell me that you feel like you're teaching on eggshells these days. Like doing your job conscientiously will land you in trouble.

If it feels like the air around you is full of noise and rancor—you're right. And it's not by accident. It's part of a concerted, ruthless war by extremists seeking to destabilize and destroy public education at every level. To that end, they're waging an all-out campaign to crush academic freedom and honest teaching, and to sow distrust between educators and the students, families, and communities they serve.

What brought this on? A perfect storm: A once-in-a-century pandemic. The brutal murder of George Floyd, and the righteous outrage that followed. Disinformation, social media manipulation, political polarization, and the erosion of civil discourse. Suddenly, the world felt very unsafe. When parents became worried about their children's future, extremists saw an opportunity.

Our opponents don't want a "more perfect union." They want to turn the clock back and make sure that the people who have long been in power *keep* that power.

They're exploiting the nation's anxiety to move their agenda: Weaponizing *everything*, from pandemic-era safety measures like masks to a children's book about penguins. Defunding neighborhood public schools with voucher programs for wealthy families. Imposing book bans and curriculum censorship aimed at people of color and

LGBTQIA+ youth. Eroding academic freedom and cutting programs at public colleges and universities, making it even harder for students to pursue their dreams. Passing deliberately vague "divisive concepts" laws that endanger teachers' livelihoods and have a chilling effect in the classroom. (In May, we won a major court victory against such a law in New Hampshire.)

If educators can't hold mock United Nations debates without fear of getting sued or talk honestly about the Civil War without having a bounty placed on their heads by Moms for Liberty, then other sources (notably TikTok) will fill the vacuum—and our crucial role teaching students how to be critical thinkers, appreciate nuance, and civilly navigate conflict will fall by the wayside. If professors can't teach freely and advance knowledge in their fields, then students won't get the range of viewpoints and disciplines higher education should provide.

It's a war on knowledge and intellectual freedom, and democracy itself is at stake. Indeed, the founders—including George Washington, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton—at the Constitutional Convention were concerned about one thing above all: demagogues. Hamilton even predicted the rise of tyranny because of self-aggrandizing politicians who prey on people's fears.

The question is what to *do* about it. This issue of *American Educator* explores policy and practice that can protect our freedom to teach, our students' freedom to learn, and ultimately all our freedoms. The articles show how to

- grapple with real challenges, like when a student's use of the freedom of discussion provided in the classroom diverges from the purpose of a class and disrupts other students' freedom to learn;
- fight misinformation by inviting families and communities into schools, showcasing what's being learned, and

centering students' voices—especially when book banning or curriculum censoring is proposed; and

- forge bipartisan coalitions across academic disciplines, institutions, and school districts and throughout preK-20 to strengthen and defend academic freedom, whether on campus, in the community, or in the voting booth—and especially in school board elections.



Families are with us in this fight: New polling from Hart Research shows public school teachers and our unions are at their highest approval ratings ever recorded—teachers at 71 percent and teacher unions gaining 26 points since 2010. Polling also shows that parents don't want public schools to be pawns for politicians' ambitions or extremists' agendas. They're with us in fighting for real solutions to help kids thrive and have better, fuller, freer lives.

This is the work of a great nation—and our great union. A great nation does not fear people being educated. It does not fear pluralism. A great nation chooses freedom, democracy, equality, and opportunity—brought to life in public schools and colleges. And at the AFT, we will never tire in fighting for our rights and for a better life for all. □

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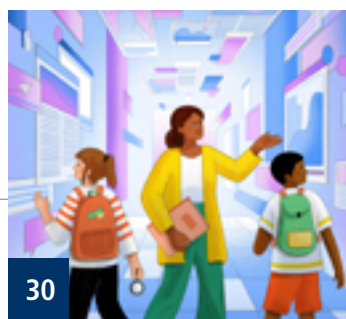
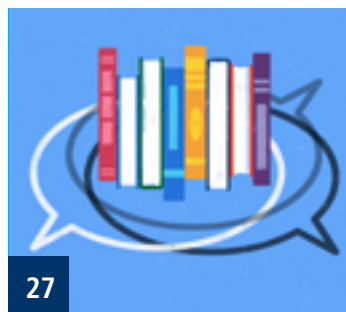
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The Imperiled Right to Learn

Teaching
in Troubled
Times

By Michael Bérubé

On February 15, 2024, the RAND Corporation published findings related to restrictions on teaching race and gender from its 2023 State of the American Teacher Survey. The results can be summarized succinctly: the state of the American teacher is *scared*. As the authors explain:

Public debates around whether and how teachers should discuss topics related to race and gender in the classroom have turned classrooms into political battlegrounds. Between April 2021 and January 2023, 18 states passed policies restricting teachers' instruction. Many of these state policies restrict teachers' instruction on topics related to race and gender; some also address how teachers can discuss current events or controversial topics.

In the 2023 State of the American Teacher survey, 65 percent of teachers nationally reported deciding to limit discussions about political and social issues in class. This is nearly double the share of teachers who are located in states

that have enacted restrictions.... Regardless of the presence or type of restriction, teachers said that they limited their instruction because they were afraid of upsetting parents and felt uncertain about whether their school or district leaders would support them if parents expressed concerns.¹

Clearly, the educational gag orders issued by the culture-war right are having precisely the effect their proponents intend: to chill speech and stifle intellectual inquiry nationwide.² The very existence of these laws, backed by a national movement of renewed and intensified whitelash (in response to the massive rallies after the murder of George Floyd)* and anti-LGBTQIA+ panic (in which, appallingly, some gay and lesbian intellectuals have joined the anti-trans aspect of the panic⁵), has empowered right-wing activists from coast to coast, inflaming parents and school boards.⁶

Teachers' fear is well-grounded. No doubt many educators, especially at the K-12 level, are aware of the case of Mary Wood, the English teacher from Chapin High School in Chapin, South

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*The term *whitelash* is explained by journalist Wesley Lowery, author of the 2023 book *American Whitelash*: "Historically..., in moments of Black racial advancement, we see America's white majority lash out with rhetoric, with policy, but also with violence. We see a strengthening of that white supremacy and violence now."³ In Benjamin Wallace-Wells's *New Yorker* profile of conservative activist Christopher Rufo, a key figure in the contemporary whitelash, civil rights scholar and law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw calls this latest phase of whitelash "a post-George Floyd backlash."⁴

Carolina, who became a target of conservative rage—and was reprimanded by administrators—for teaching Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me* in her AP English class.⁷ Wood’s case is notable because the South Carolina statute Wood violated forbids teachers from making students “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress” on account of their race.⁸ This is a particularly biting irony for a book in which Coates writes of his studies at Howard University, “It began to strike me that the

Nontenure-track faculty teach material that makes students and/or their parents upset at their peril.



point of my education was a kind of discomfort, was the process that ... would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness.”⁹ In this light, it is not too much to say that the point of right-wing assaults on our schools is to take the “educational” part out of our educational institutions.

From the Schools to the Campuses

The climate of fear in the schools has knock-on effects for higher education. As I write this essay in the spring of 2024, I am teaching *Between the World and Me* in a capstone course on creative nonfiction for my university English department’s creative writing concentration. I have enough job security to do so, and to suggest to my students that the case of Mary Wood is a spectacular example of whitelash. But my colleagues off the tenure track, who now make up about two-thirds of college faculty nationwide, have no such job protection.¹⁰ If they teach material that makes students and/or their parents upset, they do so at their peril—and the peril is growing greater with each passing year.

In 2022, I was approached by the Elias Law Group to write a report for a lawsuit brought by United Faculty of Florida (among other parties) challenging the constitutionality of HB 233, a so-

called viewpoint diversity law that had gone into effect in Florida the previous year.¹¹ HB 233 mandates an “Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity” survey, the intent of which is to monitor the degree to which students, faculty, and staff feel free to speak their minds.* (Completing the survey is not mandatory, since that would constitute compelled speech, so it is no surprise that response rates have been extremely low, with percentages often in the single digits.¹³) More perniciously, the law allows students to video-record their classes and use the recording “as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding.” As I remarked in my report, this language quite clearly envisions *and fosters* an adversarial relationship between student and professor. Professors who find themselves being recorded by their students under HB 233 could reasonably suspect adversarial or malicious intent. There is a national network that includes right-wing student groups such as Turning Point USA and Campus Reform (the latter of which actually pays students to write damning accounts of their professors¹⁴), which in turn report faculty members to outlets like the Daily Caller, Breitbart, and Fox

News;¹⁵ any professor familiar with these groups knows that their course materials and their lectures can be ripped out of context and disseminated in ways that are very likely to leave them subject to harassment and even death threats. Jonathan Marks, a conservative professor of politics at Ursinus College, has eloquently argued in an essay on Turning Point USA that his conservative colleagues should be as alarmed about this phenomenon as he is: “I know relatively few conservative academics who look up from railing against wokeism long enough to notice or say much about the feverish, disgraceful character of too much of what passes on the right. From both a conservative and an academic perspective, that’s a dereliction of duty.”¹⁶

This is dystopian, to be sure, but the provision of HB 233 I want to focus on is the so-called anti-shielding provision, which baffled me for weeks until I managed to reverse-engineer it—partly by way of reading through the transcripts of the many legislative hearings on the bill to learn how this toxic piece of sausage was made. The anti-shielding provision forbids Florida’s public colleges and universities to “limit students’ faculty members’ or staff members’ access to, or observation of, ideas and opinions that they may find uncomfortable, unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive.”¹⁷ It is effectively a hate speech protection plan, very much in line with what has become conventional wisdom among university administrators and offices of general counsel—that free speech absolutism trumps all other

*I have written about viewpoint diversity elsewhere, arguing that it is a red herring—and not synonymous with intellectual freedom: “‘Viewpoint diversity’ has become a watchword among critics who believe that universities are inhospitable to conservative views, but there is nothing *intrinsically* valuable about a diversity of viewpoints, particularly in an intellectual setting that exists precisely to distinguish viewpoints that deserve a hearing from viewpoints that do not.... Some fields benefit from viewpoint diversity, particularly with regard to social, cultural, and political affairs; but there is no value in a ‘viewpoint diversity’ that includes a Ptolemaic understanding of the universe or the belief that ‘hysteria’ is a medical condition involving the dysfunction of the uterus. Crucially, even in fields that do benefit from viewpoint diversity, the benefit derives not from the diversity in and of itself but from the intellectual value that diverse viewpoints bring to a more comprehensive and adequate understanding of the subject matter; no field of study includes an infinite diversity of viewpoints for the sake of diversity. All fields of study define themselves, and evolve, by vetting viewpoints in order to determine which perspectives constitute useful contributions to human understanding.”¹²

considerations, including legitimate educational objectives. In a published February 2024 letter, Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe pushed back on this conventional wisdom:

The current doctrinaire insistence that we cannot restrict speech unless it falls within previously recognized narrow exceptions such as the “incitement of violence,” “fighting words,” or “true threats” wrongly elevates free speech above all other freedoms—including the bedrock principle that every student should be free to access education without discrimination. Just as a commitment to free speech can surely coexist with a campus rule banning calls for killing Black students or shunning LGBTQ students even if those calls single out no student in particular, so a commitment to free speech can certainly coexist with a rule banning calls on campus for killing all Jews, whatever the specific context.... Transplanting to university campuses rigid legal categories developed for the evaluation of criminal laws conflicts with the discrimination-free environment that the Constitution requires public universities to afford all their students and that federal civil rights laws demand of private universities receiving federal funding.¹⁸

Tribe is right that free speech absolutism conflicts with other freedoms students should enjoy and is right that it has become a matter of doctrinaire insistence; in Florida, it is now enshrined in state law.

What makes the anti-shielding provision so remarkable in HB 233—and what puzzled me when I first read it—is that it has been enacted in the same state whose governor announced, upon signing the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (Stop W.O.K.E.) Act in December 2021, that “in Florida we are taking a stand against the state-sanctioned racism that is critical race theory.”¹⁹ There are the obvious facts: the opponents of critical race theory (CRT), led by Christopher Rufo, have no idea what that body of knowledge consists of and no interest in finding out (indeed, Rufo has been admirably honest about his willingness to lie about it[†]), and the whitelash against CRT spectacularly bears out CRT’s critique of structural racism. But leaving those aside, the Stop W.O.K.E. Act very emphatically seeks to shield Florida’s employees and students from ideas that are unwelcome in conservative circles. So what is a professor in Florida’s public universities to do if, under HB 233, she decides that her students should not be shielded from CRT?

Teaching and Learning in Diverse Classrooms

The language of “shielding” was taken from the influential “Chicago Statement” of 2015, which was issued by the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago in response to the discourse around trigger warnings. That statement declared that “it is not the proper role of the University to attempt to shield

[†]In a pair of tweets in March 2021, Rufo wrote, “We have successfully frozen their brand—‘critical race theory’—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory.’ We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.” The tweets have since become deservedly infamous as examples of a post-Trump, post-truth media landscape.²⁰

individuals from ideas and opinions they find unwelcome, disagreeable, or even deeply offensive.”²¹ HB 233 closely tracks the Chicago Statement in protecting “ideas and opinions that [students] may find uncomfortable, unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive.” But there is a decisive difference between the Chicago Statement and HB 233: the Chicago Statement has guardrails. In the paragraph following the shielding clause, it adds:

The freedom to debate and discuss the merits of competing ideas does not, of course, mean that individuals may say whatever they wish, wherever they wish. The University may restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt the ordinary activities of the University.²²



The point of right-wing assaults on our schools is to take the “educational” part out of our educational institutions.

Time, place, and manner restrictions are already central to First Amendment case law; what I want to call attention to here is the restriction of expression that is “directly incompatible with the functioning of the University.” HB 233 contains no such guardrails—no acknowledgment that universities are educational institutions that can legitimately restrict speech that undermines their educational mission.

As history professor Malick W. Ghachem argued in January 2023, the sweeping nature of the Chicago Statement is problematic because it does not grapple with the “subtleties of teaching in diverse classrooms where the challenge is to turn disagreement into an occasion for learning.”²³ HB 233 goes much further, as Florida state Representative Omari Hardy explained during the state House legislative hearings on March 18, 2021. Noting that “school officials have not only the right but the responsibility to regulate expression when they reasonably conclude that it will materially and substantially disrupt the work and discipline of the school,” Representative Hardy argued that

this bill is so vague that nearly anything an administrator or professor would do to control the academic environment

could be recast as shielding or limiting someone's access to or observation of expressive activities or speech that might be offensive, unwelcome, and so on.

And so I wonder, can a professor teaching a class on terrorism stop a student from contributing to the class discussion by showing video clips of American soldiers being harmed abroad? Can a professor of gender studies stop a proponent of pedophilia from having that kind of discussion in the classroom? Can a faculty member or ... a faculty advisor of a Christian student organization stop a member from the Church of Satan from using a meeting of that Christian organization to advocate for the benefits of abortion? Can an administrator [prevent] ... a student from distributing nude photos of a classmate in a hallway if the student characterizes his effort as an art project or a protest? ... In each and every single case, the offending student could conceivably recast the professor or the faculty member's attempt to gain control

of the academic environment as an attempt to shield or limit other students from observing expressive material, however unwelcome. And that's concerning.²⁴

"Concerning" is putting it mildly, but Representative Hardy's concerns were ignored by every single one of his Republican colleagues. As I testified in court in early 2023, HB 233's anti-shielding provision licenses a complete free-for-all in the class-

- a. *Korematsu v. United States*, the case in which the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of Fred Korematsu (who was born in the United States) for refusing to relocate from his home in California during World War II;
- b. the 1983 overturning of Korematsu's conviction on the grounds that the government had suppressed and/or destroyed evidence gathered by its own intelligence agencies that Japanese Americans posed no security threat; and
- c. the official congressional statement in 1988 that "there was no military or security reason for the internment" and that "the internment of the individuals of Japanese ancestry was caused by racial prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership."²⁶

That statement was signed by President Ronald Reagan, which should have put the matter to rest even for conservatives. But the discussion ate up a great deal of class time that I had not anticipated, believing as I did that no reasonable person in the 21st century could argue that the internment was justified. I thought of Thomas Jefferson's famous 1820 letter to William Roscoe, an English abolitionist, about his new university in Charlottesville: "this institution will be based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind. for here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."²⁷ A noble sentiment indeed, though Jefferson did not specify precisely *how long* we have to combat it in the course of a 75-minute class.

My point is that disruptive students can be ... disruptive. And students empowered by a limitless anti-shielding law are basically being given a license for disruption, just as students and parents now feel entitled to demand that a teacher be punished or fired for creating a classroom in which some people feel uncomfortable. Surely any teacher, whether in the K-12 system or in higher education, is aware of the challenges disruptive students pose and knows that the most difficult aspect of teaching involves the improvisatory techniques one has to master.

But in all the discussion of classroom discussion over the past few decades, I have rarely seen anyone argue that disruptive, combative students are infringing on other students' right to learn—or that the "right to learn" might encompass the right to learn about the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates or Toni Morrison.* (After all, many students might want to claim that right! They might even believe that a free society should tolerate and foster criticism of its various failures to operate as a free society for all who dwell in it.) Even though my own students in that honors seminar repeatedly complained to me that John was taking up all the oxygen in the room, I did not think of making such an argument until last year, in the course of a long lunch with the dean of the Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State, Marie Hardin. Marie had a number of questions about the parameters of academic freedom, and after I had gone through my usual exposition²⁸ of the 1940 Statement of Principles of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), she asked, "And where are students in all of this?"

I replied that I unfortunately had developed an allergy to that kind of question, thanks to David Horowitz (whom the Southern

*Perhaps that will change now that Beacon Press has published *The Right to Learn: Resisting the Right-Wing Attack on Academic Freedom*, edited by Valerie C. Johnson, Jennifer Ruth, and Ellen Schrecker.



Free speech absolutism conflicts with other freedoms students should enjoy.

room and was approved on a largely party-line vote by people who apparently have no understanding of or interest in the subtleties of teaching in diverse classrooms. Quite apart from Ghachem's critique of the Chicago Statement, then, the use of the statement in HB 233 demonstrates that the document is quite easy to weaponize.

The Right to Learn in a Focused Classroom

In 2003, I published an essay about "John," a disruptive conservative student in an honors seminar who became increasingly belligerent and combative. In a discussion of Richard Powers's 1988 novel *Prisoner's Dilemma*—which, in part, is an alternate history involving the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II—he insisted that the internment was justified.²⁵ The class burst into an uproar. I managed to settle things down and then generate a useful conversation. We discussed three key points:

Poverty Law Center describes as “a driving force of the anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant and anti-black movements”²⁹); in the early aughts, he campaigned for an “Academic Bill of Rights,” which included the creation of an organization called Students for Academic Freedom—a deliberate attempt to confuse the meaning of academic freedom by insinuating that students need the academic freedom to resist indoctrination by leftist professors.³⁰ However, allergic reaction aside, I had to acknowledge that the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn are two sides of the same coin. Though it can’t be denied that the AAUP has far more to say about the former than the latter, the AAUP handbook *Policy Documents and Reports* (better known as the “Redbook”) does contain the 1967 “Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students.” On the conduct of classrooms, that statement is clear and unexceptional:

The professor in the classroom and in conference should encourage free discussion, inquiry, and expression. Student performance should be evaluated solely on an academic basis, not on opinions or conduct in matters unrelated to academic standards....

Students should be free to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but they are responsible for learning the content of any course of study for which they are enrolled.³¹

In follow-up emails, Marie informed me that she was also consulting with staff at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), one of whom defined students’ academic freedom as their freedom to access information. She offered that staffer a better definition, informed by our conversation, emphasizing the right to learn.

Marie’s exchange with FIRE seems to me to encapsulate what is wrong with an understanding of teaching and learning that is not informed by classroom dynamics and classroom experience. The right to access information is basically the right to use the internet or a public library; granted, this is not a right enjoyed by billions of people living in autocracies around the world, but it is (so far) uncontroversial in the United States. The crucial point is that accessing information is only one very basic aspect of education—the absolute minimum, one might say. The right to learn also entails the right to open, civil, *but inevitably bounded and focused* discussion in the classroom, in which students are properly “shielded” from irrelevant and erroneous information. The right to learn also entails the right to participate in discussions without the fear of discrimination or intimidation—though not without the fear of criticism or even opprobrium (the responses sometimes attributed to a censorious “cancel culture” even when the criticism or opprobrium is directed at shameful utterances, like the claim that the Japanese American internment camps were justified). And finally, the right to learn must include the right to learn about the ways in which the United States has failed to live up to its egalitarian promise. American educators should imagine that one part of their mission is to ensure that events like the 1921 Tulsa massacre—which sparked widespread national discussion a few years ago only because showrunner Damon Lin-

delof based his reboot of *Watchmen* on reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’s essay “The Case for Reparations”—are never ignored by leaders and forgotten by the public again.³²

Postscript: The right to participate in discussions without the fear of discrimination or intimidation after October 7, 2023

Hamas’s unimaginably horrific attack on Israeli civilians, followed by the Netanyahu government’s unimaginably horrific pulverization of Gaza, has made the ideal of open and civil discussion about Israel and Palestine nearly impossible—on campuses and

Students empowered by a limitless anti-shielding law are basically being given a license for disruption.



in schools as everywhere else, as even families and lifelong friends find themselves torn apart by their varying responses to the atrocities. The crisis has revealed many ugly things, from Netanyahu’s and the Israeli far right’s codependent relation with Hamas (an organization that conveniently allows them to perpetuate the belief that Israel does not have a credible partner for peace³³) to the sorry fact that many diversity, equity, and inclusion programs on American campuses are not well prepared to deal with situations in which Jewish students, faculty, and staff legitimately feel vulnerable³⁴—shunned and vilified even if they have been passionately opposed to the Netanyahu government from the outset and especially to its massive crimes against humanity in Gaza since Hamas’s attack.

It comes as no surprise to me, as a member of the academic left, that pro-Palestinian voices on and off campus are marginalized if not demonized; it also comes as no surprise to me, as a member of the academic left who is not always in good standing with some parts of the academic left, that there are some pro-Palestinian voices from which one can hear the belief that Israel bears all the

responsibility for the wanton massacre, rape, torture, and kidnapping of its people on October 7; the belief that Palestine must be free from the river to the sea (which can be a call for either a single binational state or, as it is sometimes taken, the elimination of the state of Israel); and the belief that it is morally wrong to foreground—or even acknowledge—Jewish suffering. Perhaps there have been some pro-Israeli voices on American campuses willing to echo the Israeli far right’s arguably genocidal calls for an ethnic cleansing in Gaza; if so, I have not heard them. I have heard exclusively that it is a very lonely, painful time to be a progressive Jew in American higher education. At the same time, there has been no institutional pressure on Hillel chapters on campus to account

the suppression of peaceful protest against the slaughter in Gaza. Not every protest was peaceful, but so far, most of the violence—on campuses such as Dartmouth College,³⁸ Emory University,³⁹ and Indiana University⁴⁰—has involved excessive use of force by police. Not every protestor has been blameless; some have engaged in reckless sloganeering and indiscriminate criticism of all things Jewish. And as has been widely noted, the protests do not seem to include any demands that Hamas free its hostages. (My own rule of thumb is to consider whether such slogans and critiques are likely to alienate liberal and progressive Jews, without whom there can be no just solution in the Middle East, and to consider the intentions and effects of protestors who do not care about this likelihood.) But reckless sloganeering and indiscriminate criticism *are* free speech—and do not warrant the aggressively militarized response launched by increasingly authoritarian university administrations, first at Columbia and then on campuses across the country. To be sure, there were exceptions at universities like Brown,⁴¹ Johns Hopkins,⁴² and Wesleyan.⁴³ But the hair-trigger response of the universities where police were summoned remains remarkable—and deplorable.

In this context, therefore, at a time when even the invocation of “context” has become controversial, I do not want to be understood as saying that the right to learn—more specifically, the right to participate in discussions without the fear of discrimination or intimidation—is imperiled only by right-wing culture warriors. I believe that right-wing culture warriors have mounted a largely successful, well-organized, and profoundly anti-intellectual campaign against things they think of as “woke” and “liberal indoctrination,” and that their ignorance of what actually takes place in educational institutions at all levels is, for their constituency, one of their political strengths. I also believe that the phenomenon of liberal-centrist “both-sides-ism,” which promotes false equivalences between threats to intellectual freedom from left and right, is real and pernicious, and that comparisons of “cancel culture” to the Red Scares that followed the two world wars of the 20th century are too laughable to merit serious debate.* And I also believe that the campus left is sometimes demonstrably an obstacle to open and constructive debate, and that it affords its opponents too many opportunities for saying so.† I therefore close this essay in the hope that the atrocities in the Middle East might lead us to acknowledge, without denying the far greater scope of the atrocities in Gaza, that the American campus is a place where Jewish and Muslim students, faculty, and staff may plausibly feel imperiled—and might lead us to rededicate ourselves to the extraordinarily difficult task of fostering all our students’ right to learn. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2024/berube.

*There will therefore be no discussion in this essay of Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott’s 2023 book, *The Canceling of the American Mind*, which relies explicitly on such comparisons.

†For me, the most painful example was the response of trans students and their allies at Reed College to a visit by Kimberly Peirce, the director of the 1999 film *Boys Don’t Cry*. Peirce, who is nonbinary, was met with threatening posters and was subject to prolonged heckling—despite the fact that her film was groundbreaking in its depiction of violence against nonbinary teens.⁴⁴



for Israel’s pulverization of Gaza, but Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) has been banned at Brandeis University, Columbia University, and George Washington University—and in Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis ordered that all public universities shut down their SJP chapters.³⁵ Columbia also banned Jewish Voice for Peace³⁶ and convened a task force on campus antisemitism that has raised concerns that antisemitism will be conflated with criticism of Israel.³⁷ There is no symmetry between supporters of Israel and supporters of Palestine on campus; the latter group is and has been far more vulnerable than the former, in American universities as in the Middle East itself.

As this essay went to press, that vulnerability was exploited on many campuses as administrators called the police to disperse and arrest protestors in encampments. A new chapter in human hypocrisy was written as many politicians and administrators who had been championing free speech on campus demanded

Free to Teach, Free to Learn

Examining the Lines Between Education, Discrimination, and Indoctrination



By Andrew Manuel Crespo

Sitting in the faculty room alongside my colleagues at Harvard Law School, I read the words projected on the screen above us and tried to place a dawning sense of dread.

The bolded words at the top of the screen should have been a source of comfort. “Harvard University Non-Discrimination Policy,” they read. As a legal scholar who has written academically and publicly about racial discrimination, as a lawyer who has defended scores of Black and Latino people harmed by the US penal system, and as the director of an organization called the Institute to End Mass Incarceration, I’ve spent much of the past decade working to combat unlawful and unjust discrimination in our society. My efforts have focused on the criminal system. But I have long held the conviction that discrimination needs to be identified and opposed in our educational systems as well.

That conviction was impressed upon me from an early age by my first and best teacher. For 40 years, my mother taught in public elementary schools. In the school where she spent the lion’s share of her career, she was the first Latina and the first person of color hired to be a teacher. For decades, she was the only one.

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I will always remember being seven years old and asking my mom why she hadn’t taught me Spanish, the only language her father, my grandfather, comfortably spoke (and which I later learned to speak reasonably well). “I saw too many teachers discriminate against Latino kids in their classrooms,” she answered. “I didn’t want you to have an accent.”

From those early lessons, and on through almost 20 years studying and later teaching at Harvard, I’ve always believed discrimination to be antithetical to what education is all about. Educators teach everyone. And students learn best from a diversity of experiences and perspectives—among their instructors and among their peers. This much I know to be true. And so I remember reading with approval the announcement from our university’s provost sometime in 2021 that Harvard would be assembling a working group to “develop new University-wide policies” to “address forms of prohibited discrimination” in the learning environment.¹

But sitting in the faculty room and reading the resulting policy on the screen two years later, the feeling I experienced was, at the very least, dread adjacent. Reading it closely, I was able to pinpoint my concern to two words at the end of the policy’s opening sentences.

Harvard University is committed to the principles of equal opportunity in education and employment. Discrimination on the basis of the following protected categories, or any other

legally protected basis, is unlawful and is prohibited by this Policy: age (40+), race, color, national origin, sex (including gender identity and gender expression, as well as pregnancy), genetic information, ancestry, religion, caste, creed, veteran status, disability, military service, sexual orientation, *political beliefs*.² (Emphasis added.)

Those last two words, *political beliefs*, struck me as categorically different from the others on the list. Age, race, ancestry, genetics, the country or caste in which you are born—those are all things you can't change about who you are. That's less true of things like religion and military status, which might be changeable for some people. But it's hard to see why a university would have any interest in encouraging such changes or in treating students differently based on these attributes.

Students learn best from a diversity of experiences and perspectives—among their instructors and peers.



Political beliefs are different. Political beliefs are *ideas* we choose to embrace or reject. Moreover, they are ideas that can, and arguably should, evolve over the course of a lifetime. Perhaps most importantly of all, they are ideas that evolve *through the process of education*. As William T. Foster, the first president of Reed College, poetically put the point, “It is the primary duty of a teacher to make a student take an honest account of his stock of ideas, throw out the dead matter, place revised price marks on what is left, and try to fill his empty shelves with new goods.”³ Echoing Foster, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) wrote in its seminal 1915 “Declaration of Principles” on academic freedom and tenure that it is part of “the duty of an academic instructor to give any students old enough to be in college a genuine intellectual awakening.”⁴

Education, in other words, entails in large part the discovery and interrogation of *new* beliefs. This is true for instruction in the natural and social sciences. And it is true for the study of philosophy, law, ethics, religion, and public morals—all domains that, to varying degrees, are inescapably political in nature. For that reason, political beliefs and ideas, like so many other ideas, can be expected to change as educators build and navigate students through the reflective learning environments that bring such change—such education—about.

For that to happen, educators sometimes need to interact with, act upon, react to, and *assess* the ideas (including the political ideas) expressed by their students. Those interactions and reactions can be messy. Indeed, the more closely we examine them, the blurrier the boundaries between education, discrimination, and indoctrination become. Nor are those boundaries static. A given pedagogical technique or approach—a given mode of interacting with, reacting to, or assessing a student’s ideas and beliefs—might be appropriately lauded as exemplary education in one pedagogical context and appropriately condemned as discrimination, indoctrination, or both in another. Complicating matters even more, those determinative contexts differ across a curriculum, even for a single professor. In my own case, teaching a mandatory introductory course one semester, an upper-level elective survey course another, and an applied law school clinical course the next, my pedagogical approaches and contexts vary dramatically. And with them so too do the markers of what I would call good—even necessary—teaching.

The pedagogical context and mission of a given course, in other words, are essential components of the analysis when defining prohibited forms of ideological discrimination in the classroom. And as a result, the question of the instructor’s rights and responsibilities when *defining* that pedagogical context and mission are just as critical to consider.

This is the nuance that I feared was missing from the blunt words of Harvard’s policy, which declare discrimination on the basis of political beliefs “prohibited” whenever it manifests in a student receiving “less favorable treatment” because of those beliefs or ideas.⁵ To teach in the best and most responsible way we know how, is it possible my colleagues and I might sometimes employ pedagogical practices in tension with this policy’s terms and goals?

This essay is an effort to think this question through with a community of readers across the country who I imagine face similar challenges in their own careers, at a time when the intersection between education and political beliefs is perhaps more fraught than ever.

Competing Freedoms

Most discussions of the relationship between teaching and political beliefs take as their touchstone the principle of academic freedom. Foundational texts on the subject, including the AAUP’s seminal 1915 and 1940 statements, have always described academic freedom as entailing “the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning.”⁶ But as Bruce Macfarlane, a professor of higher education, writes, these two freedoms are typically “tagged onto the end of definitions of academic freedom as a largely rhetorical device.” Far more prominent are concerns over the rights of teachers and students

to express unpopular or heterodox views inside and outside of the classroom when those rights are “threatened by forces external to the university such as governments and social lobby groups.” Even when speech within the classroom is at issue, the core academic freedom controversies tend to focus on teachers’ right to *express their opinions*, and less on pedagogical *actions* they might take that treat one set of students differently than others. The upshot, Macfarlane concludes, “is a comparative dearth of literature about the freedom to teach” as manifested in the interrelationship between teachers and students in a shared pedagogical setting.⁷

Within that relationship, academic freedom is an idea that can carry us only so far. Because unlike threats to a professor’s extramural speech or to a student’s right to protest outside of class, the curricular interactions between teachers and students implicate a set of *competing* academic freedoms, each with important substantive content: the freedom to learn and the freedom to teach.

The Freedom to Learn

The student’s freedom to learn includes a right not to be discriminated against in the classroom. At a minimum, this entails freedom from discrimination based on immutable characteristics, which is generally unlawful under federal statutes, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination “on the ground of race, color, or national origin” in any “program or activity receiving federal financial assistance” (which virtually all schools and universities do).⁸ Put more generally, a student’s freedom to learn entails the right to be treated as an *individual*, free from projections or assumptions derived from group affiliations or other attributes. To quote the AAUP’s “Statement of Professional Ethics,” the freedom to learn means that teachers must “demonstrate respect for students as individuals and adhere to their proper roles as intellectual guides and counselors.”⁹

Related to these principles is an important, but complicated, corollary. As law professor David Rabban wrote more than 30 years ago, “Professors violate the norms of academic freedom when they ... indoctrinate students.”¹⁰ The reasoning here is straightforward. As Justice Felix Frankfurter (who served on the US Supreme Court from 1939 to 1962 and, before that, taught at Harvard Law School) wrote, we “regard teachers—in our entire educational system, from the primary grades to the university—as the priests of our democracy” because they “foster those habits of open-mindedness and critical inquiry which alone make for responsible citizens, who, in turn, make possible an enlightened and effective public opinion.”¹¹ Frankfurter was echoing the AAUP’s 1915 statement, which declares that a professor must, “above all, remember that his business is not to provide his students ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves.” A teacher must therefore always be on guard, the statement concludes, “against taking unfair advantage of the student’s immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher’s own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters in question.”¹²

As then-Columbia University President Lee Bollinger would write almost a century later, this professional obligation to avoid indoctrination is sometimes tested:

Within the academy, we always face the impulse to jettison the scholarly ethos and adopt a partisan mentality, which can

easily become infectious, especially in times of great controversy.... In the classroom, especially, where we perhaps meet our highest calling, the professor knows the need to resist the allure of certitude, the temptation to use the podium as an ideological platform, to indoctrinate a captive audience, to play favorites with the like-minded and to silence the others.

These temptations, Bollinger concludes, pose “special challenges for those of us who teach subjects of great political controversy.” But the “responsibility to resist belongs to every member of every faculty.”¹³ Indeed, as Stephen Finn (the director of West Point’s Center for Faculty Excellence) concludes, a failure to do so would “deny students their own academic freedom to form, discuss, and defend their own views.”¹⁴

Political beliefs are ideas we choose to embrace or reject. Most importantly, they evolve through the process of education.

The Freedom to Teach

Much as the freedom to learn entails freedom from indoctrination, the freedom to *teach* carries an obligation to do so fully and completely, with generosity on the part of academics to share their expertise, including what they know and think on a subject. As sociology professor Frank Hankins wrote in 1937, the professor “is not a mere waiter serving nourishment prepared by others; he is cook as well.” Hankins posited that it is “bad teaching” to offer students “a mere statement of historical events,” facts, or information. Rather, the professor’s obligation to “be objective” is matched by an obligation to “also be thought-provoking.”¹⁵ In the words of history professor Hans Kohn (from 1938),

The teacher is expected to present to his students the whole truth, as he understands it in the light of his research and thought. He should put his whole individuality into his teaching with no other guide but his individual conscience. Only in this way can he present to the student, and make the student share in, the dignity of spiritual and intellectual endeavor and the seriousness which it exacts. The teacher must be free to speak his mind, the student must experience his effort at truth.¹⁶

And here, too, the AAUP’s seminal statement is in accord. No one, it observes, “can be a successful teacher unless he enjoys the respect of his students” and has “their confidence in his intellectual integrity.” This confidence “will be impaired if there is suspicion on the part of the student that the teacher is not expressing himself fully or frankly” or dares “not speak with that candor and courage which youth always demands in those whom it is to esteem.” And so, the AAUP concludes, it is the teacher’s duty to “give the student the best of what he has and what he is.”¹⁷



That duty captures a core component of the teacher’s own academic freedom. As Macfarlane sums it up, a “university teacher who does not enjoy” the opportunity to fully perform their craft as described above “will be operating as a service delivery worker rather than an academic. They will not, in effect, have the freedom to teach.”¹⁸

A teacher must engage with and challenge students’ ideas and beliefs—and be challenged by them in return.

Paradoxes and Sandboxes

With these working definitions of our two freedoms in hand, we can see how they might at times come into tension. Macfarlane, building on philosopher Karl Popper’s idea of the “paradox of freedom,” summarizes the tension: “When the university teacher exercises their freedom to teach in accordance with their own opinions and beliefs, the freedom of their students, the ‘meek’ with less power and authority than the academic, may be compromised as a result.”¹⁹ The basic fear, as Hankins described it, is that professors will be “dogmatic and intolerant” toward students who do not share their “own type of social idealism” and will ultimately tilt the classroom into a theater of “persistent and overt propaganda.”²⁰ Framed as such, one can see in the paradox of freedom what Macfarlane identified as the foundation of accusations, advanced repeatedly over time and vociferously of late, that “professors holding ‘liberal’ views” will end up “discriminating against conservative students.”²¹

Policies that prohibit discrimination on the basis of political beliefs might seem like welcome guardrails against these concerns. But the paradox cannot tidily be resolved simply by prohibiting ideological discrimination. In order to live up to the duty to teach, to be the student’s intellectual guide, a teacher must engage with and challenge students’ ideas and beliefs—and be challenged by them in return. And that reciprocal challenge must by necessity be *bounded*.

This is a critical point. Education occurs within the conceptual parameters of a given classroom, which requires some shared starting premises. Borrowing from the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, we might call these shared premises the *lifeworld* of a classroom, the shared “stock of knowledge” against which the “processes of reaching understanding,” the processes of exploration and education, “get shaped.”²² Without these shared premises, classroom discussions and the mutual understanding they seek to bring about would not be possible—and could quickly become intolerable or incoherent. Every question and

exchange would be open to endless contestation, questioning, and unraveling, all in infinite regress.

Put more simply, you can think of a classroom as a sandbox. Within that sandbox, the student enjoys the “academic freedom to form, discuss, and defend their own views,” free from a propagandizing or indoctrinating instructor.²³ But the teacher has the right—and arguably the responsibility—to keep the pedagogical discourse inside the box, and thus to defend the integrity of the box’s conceptual boundaries when students try to move beyond those limits.

And now we can start to see the problem. For as law professor Eugene Volokh writes, a professor who guards these essential boundaries “will inevitably need to” impose some “viewpoint-based restrictions on his students.”²⁴ A biology professor, for example, may well need to insist that students who believe in intelligent design and reject the theory of evolution must nevertheless check those beliefs at the classroom door. So too a professor teaching a seminar titled “Evaluating Solutions to Climate Change” need not permit students who insist that climate change does not exist to turn every class exchange or assignment into a debate over that (politically disputed) premise. Likewise, an introductory microeconomics class need not be overtaken by debates over Marxism as an alternative to capitalism, no matter how committed a Marxist a given student may be. In each instance, students must adopt or at least perform within the class a worldview that they sincerely and perhaps deeply reject, as a condition for entry into and participation within the course.

Note what this means. Students forced to check their worldview, their deeply held political beliefs, at the classroom door may experience intense and distracting cognitive dissonance throughout the semester. It may not be easy to learn while pretending to believe something they do not. A student who considers that cognitive dissonance too much to bear, or who fears (reasonably) that they won’t be able to perform as well on assessments as students who are not so encumbered, may decide not to take the course. Either way, it seems hard to deny that these students will be receiving from the professor “less favorable treatment” compared to students who hold the opposite beliefs—the evolution believer, the climate change believer, the capitalist—and who can take the class without any such burdens or impediments.

And yet, this form of viewpoint discrimination, based on these particular political beliefs, in the context of these particular classroom settings, seems simply unavoidable. Without it, the boundaries and conceptual integrity of the class would teeter or collapse. The biology class would become a theology class where students debate the existence of God and the interrelation of science and religion instead of learning the mechanism of the Krebs cycle or the nature of mitochondrial DNA. The climate change class would become a seminar where students explore how media silos and other structural aspects of modern society cause epistemic ruptures and disinformation instead of studying the comparative advantages of carbon capture, electric vehicles, and renewable energy.

The classes, in short, would become fundamentally different from those the professor set out to teach. And that, in its own way, would violate the freedom of the *other* students to learn in the classes they signed up to take.

Beyond Biology

What is true for classes in the sciences holds true for other academic domains. Take law school, which I know well. Even within a single subject matter area, like American constitutional law, different classes within a course catalog occupy discrete conceptual and pedagogical zones. A class designed to teach students how to craft effective briefs to the Supreme Court (which my school offers) is not the same as a class designed to explore what contemporary constitutional law says or ought to say on given topics like abortion or affirmative action (a class my school requires). Nor is either class the same as one exploring whether the Supreme Court should have the power to interpret the Constitution in the first place, or whether the Constitution should even exist or be seen as authoritative (two hotly contested questions in today's leading law schools).²⁵ Given the related but distinct pedagogical missions of these different courses, classroom discussions or pedagogical approaches could be inside the box in one setting but outside of it in another. In the brief-writing class, for example, a student whose deeply held political belief is that the Constitution is an invalid document may appropriately be asked to check that belief at the door, and could be negatively assessed by the professor for turning in assignments that press the anticonstitutionalism argument—even though such “less favorable treatment” is based on the student’s “political beliefs.”

The same dynamic plays out in my own teaching. When I offer our school's required introductory survey course on American criminal law or our upper-level course on the constitutional law of policing, I present complex and politically contested material. Especially in my required classes, where students don't get to pick me as their professor, I am sensitive to the fact that the 80 people in the room hold a broad set of views. And so, consistent with the AAUP's guiding principles, I bring my own research and perspectives into my teaching while also delighting over Socratic exchanges with students who offer views on mass incarceration or police power different than my own. A decade into this work, I routinely see that delight shared by the students on the other end of these authentically educational exchanges—a point confirmed for me this spring when a group of students from the local chapter of our school's Federalist Society, a national conservative legal organization, told me over breakfast how much they valued and appreciated learning from and with a professor whose perspectives differ from their own.

And yet, when I teach a different class—an experiential elective course that aims to show students how to operate effectively and responsibly as lawyers in solidarity with anticarceral social movements—my pedagogical mission and context change. The point of this class is not to debate whether mass incarceration exists or whether it should end. The goal is to explore the relationship between lawyers and organizers in the effort to bring that end about, and to help students learn how to enter into those relationships and that shared work most effectively. A student who rejects the premise that mass incarceration is a serious problem or who lacks the desire to do something about it will likely struggle to succeed in the course, and ultimately may not be able to do so.

At a conceptual level, these examples strike me as indistinguishable from the biology, climate change, and microeconomics examples. Yet the shift to these transparently more political subject areas surfaces a controversial and perhaps even provocative idea. We are accustomed to using pejoratives like indoctrination and propaganda to describe, in Hankins's words, “the teacher who presents what is unorthodox” and who acts as a “social evangelist who seeks to convert students to his own type of social idealism.” But if good teaching requires an instructor to hold firm to the shared starting premises of a given class, to guard the boundaries of the box, might it not be the case, as Hankins writes, that “all teaching has in it an element of propaganda”?²⁶

Context and Judgment

Taking together all of the above, the crux of the analysis when assessing the relationship between the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn seems to be twofold.

First, we must ask the essential antecedent question: What is this class *about*? What is the lifeworld, the sandbox, of the educational endeavor that the teacher and the students are undertaking together? As Finn puts it, we cannot assess whether a professor's pedagogical approach is appropriate or effective unless we know “the educational goals of the course.”²⁷

And second, we must ask an equally essential and related question: Who gets to decide what the course's pedagogical context and mission are? Here, I submit, there is no single answer. As Karen Singer-Freeman, Christine Robinson, and Linda Bastone (scholars of teaching and assessment) write, academic freedom typically affords educational institutions, acting through “the fac-

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ulty, as a group,” the right to restrict the decisions of individual faculty members, including “by requiring uniform syllabi or grading policies” in certain courses.²⁸ Likewise, it is the responsibility of the faculty as a whole to attend to the diversity of perspectives across the broader ecosystem of the curriculum.

But as these authors go on to observe, in the absence of any collective faculty guidance or constraint on a given class, it is a broadly accepted principle of academic freedom that professors have wide “discretion in using the pedagogical approach most appropriate to the academic course being taught” and thus “have the right to make decisions about how they will teach, what they will teach, and how they will assess student learning.”²⁹ Indeed, this “autonomy in the day-to-day business of determining how to teach and assess students,” what Macfarlane calls *academic judgment*, “is a precondition that lies at the heart of the freedom to teach.”³⁰

Translated into practice, this idea of academic judgment boils down to discretion. As Sir Walter Moberly, a philosophy profes-

Think of a classroom as a sandbox. The teacher has the right to keep the pedagogical discourse inside the box.

sor, put the point in 1949, teachers need “plenty of elbow-room” when it comes to deciding “what they are to teach, and how.”³¹ Of course, discretion has its discontents. If I let you choose what to do, I may not like the choices you make. That is the nature of discretionary judgment, a point sociology professor William Pendleton captured well when discussing the risks—and the need to tolerate them—that academic freedom entails. His cautionary and illuminating words, published 30 years ago, offer a helpful coda to our discussion:

Academic freedom does not ensure perfect or even the best possible education in every class. But it is the best means of ensuring that, over the course of a student’s career, he or she receives an education that is broad, flexible, nondoctrinaire, and subject to the self-correction inherent in exposing students to many teachers, all free to pursue the pedagogy and content of their classes as they judge best.

Accepting academic freedom requires accepting that some will not teach ... as others think they should....

This system has served higher education well. Efforts to depart from it for religious, political, or social regulatory purposes have been, for the most part, detrimental to excellence; with the passage of time, such efforts have come to be seen as ludicrous by subsequent generations of scholars....

Yet the temptation remains to make things “better” by imposing controls on the classroom.... Should not universities protect students from improper views, outdated theories, and distorted data? If faculty remain free to teach as they wish, will they not release evils of the worst sort on the impressionable

young? These questions are raised repeatedly, as they should be. But the too-frequent answers—add new administrative powers, allow intrusion into the classroom, provide for regulation of faculty by persons little qualified for the task—were supplied because they are easy and they appeal to those who little understand education.³²

Back to Harvard

Let me return to where I started. This essay stems in part from my worry over the language in Harvard’s new nondiscrimination policy. But more concretely than that, it stems from concern over how I have seen my institution react when charges of political discrimination in the classroom have arisen.

In particular, I have in mind the case of my colleague and collaborator, Marshall Ganz, whom our university newsletter recently profiled as “the Rabbi of Organizing.”³³

As our colleague, Theda Skocpol, explains in that profile, Ganz “has helped to train many of the organizers who have worked for some of the major political campaigns” and social movements of our time, teaching “people how to relate to others, how to build organizations,” and “how to harness moral passion for collective purpose.”³⁴ Ganz does this work through a set of classes offered as part of the Practicing Democracy Project that he directs at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where he has been on the faculty for decades. His core class on organizing, which regularly enrolls over 100 students from countries around the world, is intensely experiential. The “students work together to form values-based leadership teams, work with a community on behalf of a shared purpose, and strategize how this community can turn its resources into power it needs to achieve goals, aligned with their shared purpose.”³⁵ The ultimate goal is to teach the students how to “practice democracy”³⁶ by organizing others to fulfill “the democratic promise of equity,”³⁷ in which communities come together to help build societies where people have equal rights and opportunities to flourish.

It was against the backdrop of this course that Ganz was charged in the spring of 2023 with discriminating against three of his students. Here is how he describes what took place:

Last April, while classes were still in session, I was suddenly called to an urgent meeting with Dean Doug Elmendorf at the Harvard Kennedy School....

That semester, 127 students from 30 countries had enrolled in my spring “People, Power and Change” class.... One of the teams consisted of three Israeli professionals at midpoints in their careers....

These students stated that their purpose was to organize Israelis “building on a shared ethos of Israel as a liberal-Jewish democracy.” I asked them to consider whether the concept of a “Jewish democracy” is a contradiction in terms and whether this framing of their purpose would be helpful or harmful to the project’s goal of bringing people into an organizing movement. A Jewish state is one thing. A democratic state is another. But a state that limits full citizenship to a specific ethno-religious group, essentially a racial test, denies the excluded from that ethno-religious group the equality of voice that gives democracy its legitimacy....

The students would be wiser, I argued, to reframe their team’s statement of purpose. They rejected my suggestion,

keeping their statement as originally drafted. The students were not punished or disciplined in any way for that choice, nor suffered any academic consequences, and the class moved on....

After the course ended, the three students ... [filed] a formal claim with the Harvard General Counsel, [in which] their lawyers argued that by having a conversation with them about their work in the class, where I pushed back on their definition of the state of Israel, was to discriminate against them.... The dean acted as grand jury, prosecutor, investigator, and judge. The result was a finding (which I emphatically reject) that I had discriminated against these three Israeli students.³⁸

The school's formal finding was that Ganz "sought to silence the speech of Jewish Israeli students about a topic that he viewed as illegitimate" and in so doing engaged in teaching practices "inconsistent with the free speech principles set forth" in university policies.³⁹

As Tracey Meares and Benjamin Justice (professors of law and education, respectively) write, "culture wars over the overt content" of educational curricula and classroom instruction "have been an endemic feature" of American education for centuries.⁴⁰ This dynamic has become only more apparent and more troubling in recent years, as captured by a recent joint statement from the AAUP and PEN America condemning "a spate of legislative proposals being introduced across the country that target academic lessons, presentations, and discussions of racism and related issues in American history in schools, colleges and universities."⁴¹

That was all before October 7, 2023. Since then, as the conflict in Gaza has unfolded, debates over Israel and Palestine have roiled higher education, leading to the discipline and arrest of students, the discipline and arrest of faculty members, and the termination of multiple university presidents, including my own. There are few topics more fraught or divisive at this moment in American public life. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that academic freedom controversies related to this conflict would erupt.

And yet, the principles of academic freedom described throughout this essay should help us more clearly assess the charges leveled at Ganz. As Ganz has said, "the pedagogical mission" of his class "was to enable every student to learn to organize."⁴² To Ganz, organizing is the practice of democracy. "Democracy," he says, "is not something you have, but something you do."⁴³ The mission of this class, plain and simple, was to teach students *how* to do it. It was not to debate which versions or forms of democracy one ought to pursue. Rather, in this class, the definition of democracy was a starting premise laid out in the first line of the syllabus, which described organizing as a practice aimed at "fulfilling the democratic promise of equity."⁴⁴

Measured against that starting premise, the students' project, in Ganz's view, did not seek to practice democracy. It sought, he believed, to contest the meaning of democracy from which the course's pedagogical mission proceeded—to contest, as he would later write, "the equality of voice that gives democracy its legitimacy."⁴⁵ In other words, Ganz believed the students' project

was venturing outside the sandbox. And so, he encouraged them to reconsider, to contemplate the definition of democracy that the class was designed to help them practice.

To be clear, the questions and the project Ganz's students wished to explore may well have intrinsic merit. In a different class asking what democracy or equality mean, Ganz may well have viewed the questions about religious and national identity implicated by the students' project as within the box. But that was not the class Ganz set out to teach, nor was it the class the students signed up to take.

Ganz's students unquestionably had the freedom to learn what he *was* trying to teach. And he just as clearly had the freedom to teach it. We who are Ganz's colleagues and fellow educators have the right to question his pedagogical choices—for that too is academic freedom. But if the freedom to teach is to have any real meaning, Ganz must be afforded the elbow room to decide how best to question, coach, direct, and assess the students in his class. Applying these principles, it seems to me straightforward that Ganz's actions were consistent with his students' freedom to learn. And that in finding him guilty of discrimination, Harvard did not respect Ganz's freedom to teach.



**Without shared premises,
classroom discussions and
the understanding they seek
to bring about would not
be possible.**

That, I fear, was a dreadful mistake. If the essential, fragile principle of academic freedom and the institutions of higher learning it animates are to survive these challenging times, it is a mistake we as educators must better learn to identify, to understand, to grapple with, and ultimately to avoid. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2024/crespo.

Defending Academic Freedom

How Bipartisan Coalitions Can Strengthen Our Educational System



By Patricia Okker

No one reading *American Educator* would likely question the assertion that 2023 and 2024 have been difficult for education in the United States. K-12 teachers across the country are facing ongoing consequences from the pandemic, devastating teacher shortages, low student attendance, and divisive school boards. In higher education, colleagues are also facing significant challenges: enrollment pressures, declining public confidence in the value of a college degree, and campus turmoil related to national and global events.

As if these weren't enough, educators at all levels are also grappling with growing legislative efforts to restrict what teachers can say and do in the classroom. Often focused on issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), these legislative efforts initially targeted the supposed threat of critical race theory but have more recently expanded to include a broad range of issues, including classroom discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity. In some cases, entire disciplines—African American history, gender studies, sociology—have been restricted. PEN America, which has been tracking educational “gag orders” since 2021, estimates that 1.3 million public school teachers and 100,000 higher education faculty have been directly affected. PEN

America's estimate of the effect on students is far higher: “The students who have been directly affected—through canceled classes, censored teachers, and decimated school library collections—likely number in the millions.”¹ As Eduardo J. Padrón, former president of Miami Dade College and a 2016 recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, has explained, “Make no mistake: this is censorship at work.”²

I have had a front-row seat to the rapid escalation of these threats to US education. Florida, where I have lived for almost three years, is an instructive case study of how quickly this censorship movement has developed. In October 2020—less than four years ago—the Board of Governors (which oversees all 12 universities in the State University System) issued a bold white paper declaring its “steadfast commitment to prioritize and support diversity, racial and gender equity, and inclusion in the State University System.” The Board of Governors charged each university with ensuring that its “strategy plan, as well as its mission statement, should prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion and provide clear direction for the total integration of D.E.I. initiatives throughout the institution.”³ (Emphasis added.)

This was the political climate in which I applied to be president of New College of Florida, a small public liberal arts college that is part of the State University System. Known for its innovative and rigorous curriculum, New College is designated by the Florida legislature as the state's residential honors college. I joined the institution in July 2021, thrilled to be chosen as New College's sixth president. One of the many things that attracted me to the

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY PEP MONTERRAT

institution was the state's commitment to DEI, and I was especially excited that DEI in Florida did not appear to be a partisan issue. While there were differences of opinion about its impact and methods, DEI was embraced by state educational leaders, including the Board of Governors, whose members were closely aligned with the state's Republican administration. The fact that the Board of Governors was both conservative *and* committed to DEI made sense to me at the time. Florida's population, after all, was becoming increasingly diverse, with the state's Latino population increasing by almost 35 percent between 2010 and 2020, in contrast to the state's overall population growth of less than 15 percent.⁴

In 2024, educators in Florida—in higher education and K-12—face an entirely altered landscape. The state legislature and the Board of Governors have joined the growing chorus of state leaders attacking DEI, including initiatives that the Board of Governors had itself *required*. The new mantra, as Governor Ron DeSantis has so frequently proclaimed, is that Florida is where “woke goes to die.” Florida now leads the nation in book bans⁵—with many of the books targeted for discussions of race, sexual orientation, or gender identity—and the state has passed some of the nation's most restrictive anti-DEI legislation, including HB 1557 (a.k.a. the “Don't Say Gay” law) and SB 266 (eliminating or severely restricting DEI initiatives at state universities). In addition to affecting extracurricular programming available to students, these laws are already impacting what is taught in our classrooms.

Sadly, many other states are following Florida's lead. As PEN America's 2023 report makes clear, 22 states had passed 40 educational gag orders into law or policy as of November 1, 2023—with 6 more gag orders either passed or pending as of March 2024. The effect on higher education and K-12 classrooms has been profound, with many teachers reporting self-censorship out of fear of losing their jobs.⁶

And at New College of Florida, this anti-DEI movement has expanded to include central questions of academic freedom, governance, and institutional autonomy. Nineteen months after I became president, seven new trustees were appointed with a mandate to turn this public honors college into a “Hillsdale of the South.” (Hillsdale College is a conservative, private Christian college in Michigan.) Within days of these appointments, one of the new trustees, Christopher Rufo, proclaimed on X, “We are organizing a ‘hostile takeover.’”⁷

Although the future of New College is far from certain, the intents of the “takeover” are not hard to decipher. Some of the ideas initially proposed by the new trustees included eliminating tenure, canceling the contracts of all faculty and staff, and abolishing DEI and gender studies. Even before the new board had met, the press was reporting that a close ally of DeSantis had been selected as the new president. That rumor proved true at their first meeting on January 31, 2023, when the newly constituted Board of Trustees fired me and began to implement its plan to transform the institution.

The developments at New College continue to draw national attention. Several national organizations have issued statements about the irregularities in governance and the threats to academic freedom, including the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). A significant portion of the AAUP's 2023 report on “Political Interference and Academic Freedom in Florida's Public

Higher Education System” was devoted to events at New College. AAUP's position was formalized in February 2024, when it officially sanctioned New College, concluding that it “stands as one of the most egregious and extensive violations of AAUP principles and standards at a single institution in recent memory.”⁸

As much as New College represents an important test case, the issues here are much larger. I believe it is time for educators across the nation to reimagine how we protect academic freedom in the United States. Although this work will not be easy, I believe we can build a broad bipartisan coalition in support of academic freedom in the United States. Below, I outline five possible strategies of how to begin.

1. We must articulate a positive defense of academic freedom, grounded in the benefits to our students.

One of the most difficult aspects of defending academic freedom is that there is no shared understanding of what it is. As Brian Rosenberg (president emeritus of Macalester College) has recently written, academic freedom is often confused with freedom of speech and has been used to defend all kinds of activity: classroom discussion, social media posts, and controversial speakers, to name a few.⁹

The popular shorthand descriptions of academic freedom—“I can teach/research what I want”—moreover, do nothing to establish a clear foundation of what it is or why it is essential to our educational system. This focus, almost exclusively on faculty rights, has sadly weakened public confidence in our educational system.

As the AAUP's “1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure” makes clear, faculty rights are an essential component of academic freedom, which this document defines as including “full freedom in research and in the publication of the results” and “freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject.”¹⁰

But the 1940 statement does not stop there. It clearly articulates that the reason for academic freedom is the “search for truth.” And that search for truth requires teacher responsibilities in addition to rights. Teachers are charged with taking care “not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no



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relation to their subject.” And both in and out of the classroom, faculty “should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.” Notably, the 1940 statement also specifically addresses “the rights of the teacher in teaching” and “of the student to freedom in learning.”¹¹

We would do well to amplify this essential aspect of academic freedom: that academic freedom exists so that students and teachers alike may search for truth. Our goal is not, of course, to “indoctrinate” our students—to use a term all too popular these days—but to provide them a model of what a search for truth might look like: an emphasis on accuracy, on respect for different opinions, on curiosity.

One of the benefits of articulating a student-centered understanding of academic freedom is that it welcomes K-12 colleagues into the discussion. The AAUP document is, of course, a statement by an organization of university professors, and we must attend to the important differences between K-12 and higher education. But teachers and staff in K-12 and higher education are struggling with many of the same issues: how to create an academically rigorous environment when some want to limit what students can read and study, how to help students engage in respectful debate, and how to help students develop the confidence to ask and answer difficult questions. These are the reasons we need academic freedom.

2. We must develop new alliances among educators.

Our commonalities notwithstanding, education is notoriously siloed. Collaboration across K-12 schools and districts is often difficult, if not impossible. Likewise, in higher education, many of our strongest national organizations focus on specific kinds of institutions (research universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, etc.), and faculty members have long identified primarily with their disciplines. Faculty members teaching political science at a regional public college in the Midwest, for example, are far more likely to see themselves as allies of political science faculty members at an East Coast liberal arts college than they are to identify with their local high school social studies teachers or even the community college composition teacher who works five miles away.

And the problem isn’t confined to how faculty organize themselves. On many college campuses, student, faculty, and staff leaders operate independently of each other, often unaware of the strategic priorities of their counterparts on campus. Rather than build a broad, powerful alliance of faculty, staff, and students, these groups have focused primarily on their relationships with campus administration and vice versa.

These organizational structures have left education politically vulnerable. As a former college president and a long-time faculty member, I recognize and celebrate the unique governance role that the collective faculty have on college campuses. But I also recognize the value in developing coalitions that expand beyond faculty. Although faculty voices are powerful, combining the voices of faculty, students, and staff is even more so and has greater potential for leveraging actual political power when it is needed most.

Our organizational structures also inhibit statewide coalitions. Although the recent restrictions on higher education are a national phenomenon, all of the actual political work has been enacted at the state level. But we in education have almost no structures to bolster statewide partnerships among educators.

The lack of collaboration is especially concerning across K-12 and higher education. Virtually every college campus has a K-12 school district in the vicinity, yet with the exception of dual enrollment, we have limited opportunities for K-12 and higher education collaboration.

Our inability to create thriving coalitions among educators at all levels limits our ability to advocate for our students’ right to read and learn in a climate of intellectual independence. There are, no doubt, important differences between higher education and K-12, but we are increasingly facing more similarities than differences. To cite one promising area of collaboration, I wonder how a coalition of K-12 and higher education teachers might address the decline of public confidence in education. According to Gallup polls, public confidence in higher education dropped to just 36 percent in 2023, down from 57 percent in 2015 and 48 percent in 2018.¹² Numbers for public K-12 schools show similar declines.¹³ Perhaps a fresh look at the value of the US educational system, with input from educators from K-12 and beyond, might begin to reverse this troubling decline.

3. We must establish communication training as a requirement for leaders on campus, not just campus administration.

Having followed dozens of campus crises, and been involved with two that gained national attention (one at the University of Missouri,¹⁴ the other at New College), it seems to me that few institutions are well prepared to communicate with the campus or broader community during a crisis. And when crises develop, faculty and staff leaders are often discouraged from communicating key messages to the public. My comments here are not intended to question the valuable work that central communication experts provide. But as important as their work is, in most cases we also need to hear from faculty and staff leaders with direct knowledge of the issues involved, especially when those issues include academic freedom. With ongoing training and practice, educators can become key communicators as we seek



to raise awareness of and support for the foundational principles of US education.

4. We must recommit ourselves to meaningful community engagement.

One of the most interesting results regarding Americans' view of education is the difference in perspectives about our K–12 system between the public and parents of K–12 students. When US adults were asked how satisfied they were with K–12 education, only 36 percent indicated satisfaction. When parents were asked the same question about their oldest child's education, however, 76 percent were satisfied.¹⁵

Presumably, the more one knows about K–12 education (or perhaps more precisely, the more one knows *actual K–12 teachers*), the more positively one views K–12. People who know teachers know that they are not trying to indoctrinate students, as so many of our detractors try to suggest; rather, teachers are focused on making sure students have a well-rounded education so that they are prepared to navigate the world.

I am not advocating for a system in which higher education faculty communicate directly with parents. Our students are adults, and we have reasonable policies for treating them as such. But could we collectively do more to ensure that more members of our local communities know more about us and know what we are teaching and why?

Most higher education faculty members are not trained in such public engagement, and our usual practices for presenting our work in academic conferences are extremely inappropriate models for community engagement. But people across this nation *are* interested in what we teach. People from all political persuasions read books, spend time in nature, listen to music, try to improve their health, and puzzle over our political system. We have experts on all of these and more. Surely it is in our collective self-interest for higher education faculty to spend some portion of our time sharing our passion for our fields with the public. Doing so will require investments of time and resources, and we may well have to reconsider faculty workloads and even promotion and tenure standards. But we cannot let the obstacles keep us from this work. How else will we ever reverse the trends regarding the public's view of education? No one is better situated to advocate for academic freedom than the people who spend day after day directly with students.

5. The new education coalition must be bipartisan.

It is difficult to imagine finding common ground since so many recent education bills are deeply partisan. But there is increasingly solid evidence of the potential for bipartisan support for academic freedom. Book bans are notoriously unpopular with the public, regardless of political affiliation.¹⁶ And just last year, it was Republican leaders who voiced the most persuasive objections to eliminating gender studies at the University of Wyoming, on the basis that universities—not state governments—are best able to decide what should be taught on college campuses.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, recent polling suggests that 68 percent of Americans have similar beliefs.¹⁸

I even see hope for bipartisan support for academic freedom among our students themselves. As much as higher education is sometimes portrayed as an oasis of radical liberals (or perhaps

we are imagined as the desert), my own experience is that the political leanings of college students are far more nuanced. While it is true that nationally, college students are more likely than the general public to identify themselves as liberals, most college campuses, especially large public ones, have vibrant student organizations for students from a range of political views.¹⁹

Even at New College of Florida, which I believe has wrongly been portrayed as having an extremely left-leaning student body, I found the reality on campus to be quite different. One of my fondest memories of New College was my almost weekly Wednesday lunch in the cafeteria. I would randomly pick a table, ask to sit down, and talk about whatever the students wanted to talk about. In all those wonderful conversations, I cannot recall a single one about politics. Yes, there were some students who were activists on key social issues. Every campus has such students, and I am proud of their commitment to their causes. But those students, from my perspective, were not the norm at New College. In fact, the three things students most wanted to talk about during our informal lunches were how much they loved their classes and professors, how much they loved their clubs, and how much they loved their pets. I know this sounds like a fantasy, but I can assure you that anyone who knows New College students knows that, almost without exception, they love what they study. And they found their way to that school not for the fine dining or a culture of political activism but rather to be part of an intellectual community that celebrates the joy in intellectual pursuits.



**Academic freedom exists
so that teachers and students
alike may search for truth.**

Historically, US classrooms have long been places in which students can learn with and from people with whom they do not agree politically. Surely, this is one of the greatest achievements of the US educational system—and something that is critical to the health of our democracy.

My hope is that thoughtful action now by educators in all sectors can strengthen and protect academic freedom and, in so doing, make our educational system once again a source of pride for all Americans, regardless of political affiliation. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/summer2024/okker.

A Call to Disrupt the Deprofessionalization of Teaching

Standing Together for Truth



By H. Richard Milner IV

As a former high school English teacher, substitute teacher, community college instructor in developmental studies, and researcher who has spent hundreds of hours observing classrooms and interviewing teachers, students, caregivers, policymakers, and leaders, I am deeply concerned about the deprofessionalization of teaching and the attacks on practices that ensure all students feel safe, have an opportunity to learn about current and past truths about the United States, and are able to experience a robust curriculum that allows them exposure to a diversity of texts. I have never known educators to be more afraid to do what they know to be right for young people regarding the design, promotion, and enactment of learning opportunities that are truthful, just, and appreciative of diversity (particularly regarding history, race, sexual preference, and gender).

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At the same time, I know that educators are strong, caring leaders in their classrooms and communities. And I believe that as a society, we can still co-create spaces where communities come together to make society better: to support educators as they teach truth and to push back against policies designed to perpetuate and reify lies. In light of progress our society made in the past to reduce bias, I am confident that we can make progress again even in the midst of polarizing attempts to separate us from truth, justice, democracy, possibility, opportunity, and healing.

The deprofessionalization* of preK–12 teaching in recent decades has opened the door to current attacks on teaching and teachers, including unfounded accusations of teaching critical race theory and unfortunate attempts to narrow the curriculum† and ban books. Curriculum narrowing and book banning most directly impact students of color and LGBTQIA+ students because materials reflecting these students' experiences, identities, and worldviews are most likely to be pushed out of schools.² At the same time, these

*By *deprofessionalization*, I mean teaching that moves away from professional decision making due to unfounded problematic claims of teacher practices. Teaching has long been seen as a semi-profession, an occupation unworthy of professional status that just about anyone can do without professional credentials or long-term educational training.¹

†By *curriculum*, I simply mean what students have the opportunity to learn.

attacks on the teaching profession bring to the forefront a key issue: the role of families and communities in deciding what is, is not, should be, and should not be taught in schools.

Although most people have a perspective on what should or should not be taught in school, too few people really know or understand what *is* taught in preK–12 schools in the United States. Because of this, the public can be bamboozled and coerced into believing just about anything about curriculum practices. (To be clear, teachers tend to design learning opportunities to build students up, not tear them down.)

In response, it may be tempting to require that all course content and teaching techniques be approved in advance by school boards and/or administrators and shared online with the public, but I argue such reactions would stifle the very purpose of schooling. Indeed, I have found curriculum and instructional practices must vary as teachers work with young people whose needs and identities are diverse (and whose questions are unpredictable). Students vary in terms of their race, ethnicity, first language, socioeconomic status, ability status, gender, sexual preference, religion, politics, values, and beliefs. Given these rich, robust differences among young people, curriculum and instruction should respond to students being taught at any particular time.³

And yet, we all have a right to know what is being taught in our public schools and to contribute to discussions of what ought to be taught and how. Therefore, the role of families and communities in curriculum development and implementation is a complex issue to consider: While it is not effective to have rigid, pre-planned curricula that do not respond to students' differing needs, and while one person should not be able to restrict what another person's child learns, we all need to work together to solve disagreements over curricula so that all students experience a well-rounded, truthful, opportunity-centered education. *This can only occur in classrooms, schools, and communities that welcome exchange of ideas and advance truth—even uncomfortable truth—in pursuit of a democracy where people have divergent views but do so in a civil and civically responsible manner.* This will not be easy in 2024, but we must try. In fact, our young people deserve our best efforts to work with them to cultivate learning opportunities that maximize their brilliance, their diversity, their hopes, their dreams, and their varied, intersecting identities.

Young people need, deserve, and should expect our unwavering courage, confidence, truth-telling, and modeling of leadership during these times of polarizing politics, harmful practices, and magnified trauma from reinvigorated racism, anti-Blackness, and anti-LGBTQIA+ bias. Leadership now means we are, in the words of the scholar and civil rights activist James Baldwin, willing to “go for broke”⁴ in the fight for what we know to be necessary to make schools places where young people—all of them—feel safe, are psychologically and mentally healthy, and know they belong as they bring their full beings into learning environments. Educators may or may not have experienced racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, or other forms of discrimination themselves. But they can commit to their students, schools, and communities and embrace their responsibility to create spaces where young people think, question, critique, learn, develop, experience joy, and improve every single day.

As a consultant to school districts across the country, I am the first to admit that it is not easy to educate communities

about what actually is taught in schools. But helping families, parents, and communities build knowledge about curriculum and teaching practices can be done. This work starts with inviting community into schools. To be sure, I believe families and communities have a right to know what is going on in schools, and I believe educators have a right to share realities about what they teach (curriculum) and how (instruction). This dialogue between educators and communities can help build or rebuild trust as families and educators support young people in their learning and development.

In this essay, after sharing a bit about unfounded accusations related to teaching critical race theory and attempts to narrow curriculum and ban books, I offer examples of what I believe we can do as a nation committed to justice and equity in education to address these two challenges. I hope educators (across roles, disciplines, regions, races, genders, sexual preferences, grade levels, and political affiliations), family members, parents, communities, and policymakers are better able to capture the moment in which we live to find common ground for the sake of young people who deserve an education that maximizes their humanity. But first, I share a bit about who I am in the work of education.



We can make progress even in the midst of polarizing attempts to separate us from truth, justice, democracy, possibility, opportunity, and healing.

Positioning Myself in the Work of Education

It is essential that we educators position ourselves in building and disseminating knowledge.⁵ When I was a student growing up in the deep south of Griffin, Georgia, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, teaching was viewed as a well-respected profession. Teachers were lauded in my community. They were celebrated for their knowledge, their community involvement, and their relentless commitment to supporting young people inside and outside the classroom. When I was in elementary school, almost all my classmates and teachers were Black. My teachers were no-nonsense. They had extremely high expectations, developed rigorous curriculum practices, usually lived in the community where they taught, and were active in their community as they showed up and participated in afterschool activities—sponsored

by the school and otherwise. Further, these teachers purchased materials for students in their classrooms and were eager to support families when needs emerged. Perhaps most importantly, my parents, who were actively involved in my education and success, rarely questioned the curriculum in school. There were a few occasions where my parents had conflicts with my teachers about teachers' decisions that my parents found unfair, but they did not have questions about curriculum practices. My parents seemed to have faith, confidence, and trust in what my teachers taught—and why they were teaching it and how.

My mother owned and operated a beauty salon and was a hair-stylist in the community. She dressed many of my teachers' hair over the years. I vividly recall how she and other patrons talked about, yielded to, and celebrated the teachers who frequented her salon. It was in fact the community's respect for and admiration of my teachers, combined with their professionalism, that propelled me into the profession of teaching. Once I became a high school English teacher, I too experienced a level of trust and admiration from families and community members.



I was also a community college instructor working in developmental reading; I taught students who graduated from high school but were unable to enroll in credit-bearing college courses due to the significant literacy challenges they faced. Since becoming a professor of education, I have spent hundreds of hours in teachers' classrooms observing their practices, from elementary to middle to high school.

Although I never saw myself as the arbiter of curriculum practices—one who was all-knowing about what should be taught—when I was teaching high school, family and community members seemed to believe in my school and all of the educators within it. I would have welcomed questions about what I was teaching from the families I worked with, but this was not something I experienced as a teacher. In fact, I could usually rely on parents to support me in challenges I was experiencing with students. Parents routinely worked with me to help build appropriate adaptations for their teens. However, currently, teachers seem to be experiencing the opposite of what I found as a child and in my experiences as a teacher of English language arts in a high school. Many families and communities seem to have a deep distrust for teachers and are even angered by what students are exposed to in schools.

Knowing what can be accomplished when teachers and families work together, I'm especially disheartened by the disrespect of teachers that seems to have grown dramatically in recent years. I support the idea that families and communities have a right to question what is taught—but I do not believe families and communities (or any entity) should ridicule, ostracize, or degrade what teachers teach—particularly without data to substantiate their actions. Looking at criticisms many teachers are facing today, I'm deeply concerned about how classroom conditions may be deteriorating and about the harms coming to the very students those critical family and community members are trying to protect—and to the students (mainly Black and LGBTQIA+ students) most critics seem to disregard.

Deprofessionalization of Teaching

What is leading to the deprofessionalization of teaching and why does it matter? A likely reason teachers have been attacked for what they teach in preK-12 schools is that we had begun to see progress toward creating safe, affirming, and welcoming spaces

for students who had long been placed on the margins of learning. For instance, after the murder of George Floyd, the United States seemed to engage in a moment of reflection about just how far we had *not* come as a nation regarding the lives and bodies of those most marginalized, such as Black folks. Although short lived, we collectively took a step back to question how police officer Derek Chauvin could literally murder George Floyd in 2020 while video cameras recorded it.

Born out of what appears to be fear of progress toward racial justice, many conservatives orchestrated a campaign suggesting that teaching honest history and current events to young people would somehow result in their turning unpatriotic or against police. Similarly, as some people became aware of books in school libraries that are supportive of gay and trans youth, they claimed that some teachers are pedophiles grooming children or that the books have harmful, sexually explicit content that is not age appropriate. In my experience, such lies are only able to proliferate because our nation has yet to confront and name the ways in which race and racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination still permeate in the United States.

Unfounded Accusations of Teaching Critical Race Theory

Teachers are being accused of teaching critical race theory in preK-12 schools. These claims have been, as far as I am able to determine, under-substantiated. Critical race theory is a theoretical framework that emerged from critical legal studies; it is employed by researchers and higher education professors and students to examine evidence and build conceptual arguments about the role, salience, and permanence of race and racism across different disciplines. As a seasoned teacher educator, I cannot name one teacher education program in the United States preparing teachers to teach critical race theory to preK-12 students. Moreover, having read many volumes of research about teaching and observed many schools and classrooms, I cannot point to one practicing preK-12 teacher teaching critical race theory. This should not be surprising. Frankly, it is absurd to think

that our mostly white teaching force⁶ is advancing an agenda of critical race theory in preK–12 schools. (However, if students in preK–12 schools were taught about critical race theory, I suspect there would be situations where they could benefit if their teacher were knowledgeable and skilled enough to convey its tenets in a developmentally appropriate manner.)

Why does the perpetuation of this unfounded accusation—that preK–12 teachers are teaching critical race theory—matter so much? I argue that this lie is being perpetuated to increase distrust for teachers and teaching. The resulting stress of teaching, dramatically increased by intensified scrutiny and surveillance, will likely push teachers into other fields. Similarly, students may decide not to enter teaching. With inadequate pay for the work compounding the stress, why would capable adults select teaching as a viable profession?

Counterproductive Challenges to Curriculum and Books

Another issue contributing to the deprofessionalization of teaching is the push from those outside education to narrow curriculum and ban books. Curriculum narrowing occurs, for instance, when teachers are not able to teach the truth about the enslavement of Africans (Americans) and the theft of land from Indigenous people. Narrowing curriculum to paint a one-sided picture of the United States is a dangerous practice that takes curriculum decision making away from teachers. Deprofessionalization occurs when teachers are not able to make decisions in the best interests of their students and when curriculum is narrowed away from truthful—albeit challenging—accounts of racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other forms of oppression that shape students' experiences. This is especially harmful to the students whose truth is no longer allowed in the classroom, but it is damaging to all.

Consider how negatively Black students are often portrayed in education, media, and society writ large. Inclusive curriculum practices have the potential to disrupt, nuance, or at best counter negative portraits and narratives of Black students not only historically but in the present day as well.⁷ Literature that in some communities has been censored or pushed out of the curriculum can offer broadening and nuanced views that are meaningful not only for Black students but also for other students (particularly if other students have internalized the notion that Black people are inferior or incapable). Moreover, books that showcase the brilliance of Black communities and individuals help students move away from the notion that whiteness is the gold standard—the norm others should follow and pursue⁸—and demonstrate that strengths and assets are common and manifest across different and diverse communities. Reading banned books such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) can provide insight for readers by revealing how individuals' actions are deeply shaped by social realities in which they live.

Likewise, book banning and related curriculum censorship of LGBTQIA+ experiences can be extremely harmful for young people who already feel ostracized, invalidated, confused, unworthy, and marginalized in a society that purports egalitarianism yet continually develops and implements policies and practices to the contrary. The cumulative impact of these slights can have devastating effects. For instance, a 2023 study found that “81% of transgender adults in the US have thought about suicide,

42% of transgender adults have attempted it, and 56% have engaged in non-suicidal self-injury over their lifetimes.”⁹ Rather than making up the truth or speculating about curriculum related to LGBTQIA+ themes, we should learn from literature, which documents hate crimes,¹⁰ hostile school climates,¹¹ and missed opportunities for inclusive curriculum.¹² In essence, curriculum and related books that show LGBTQIA+ students in positions of strength and thriving can be powerful moments for them to find commonality through difficult times and situations. These curriculum opportunities can be especially essential for young people in the LGBTQIA+ community who may feel unsupported in their homes or broader communities. Put simply, the banning and censorship of humanizing and transformational LGBTQIA+ books and curriculum materials can be a matter of life or death. Thus, teachers should be supported and lauded, not vilified, in their practices to help students find worth, affirmation, and agency in a society that pushes people out rather than brings them into communities of care, safety, acceptance, support, and hope.



We need to work together to solve disagreements so that all students experience a well-rounded, truthful, opportunity-centered education.

In short, I have found that students discover their identity, strength, possibility, hope, joy, and dreams in and through curriculum that is broad, deep, and well-rounded—curriculum in which they see themselves and learn about others. Thus, curriculum practices are not inconsequential. Curriculum practices matter deeply to what students learn (and how and why) and who they are and become.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In an era of intensified curricular misinformation and book banning contributing to the deprofessionalization of teaching, we need to consider ways to better collaborate with and regain the trust of our communities. To help teachers disrupt deprofessionalization of teaching and support next generations of young people who will surely need tools to navigate an increasingly divided society, I recommend that we (1) situate and substantiate curriculum decisions in data, especially by listening to and

learning from students; (2) cultivate opportunities for students to engage civilly with others; and (3) organize curriculum showcases for the public to learn about what is actually happening in schools.

Situate and Substantiate Decisions in Data

As people and organizations advance agendas that impact student learning and consequently student wellness, it is essential that educators ground and substantiate their curricular decisions in data. To be clear, data are not just representations of numbers. The most powerful data source we can learn from is students. Schools must learn from students' and teachers' voices, collected and analyzed in a systematic way, to help the public understand what is being taught and why.



Because adults make policy and practice decisions about what students experience, it is critical that we build mechanisms to listen and learn from what students tell us about what they need and why. What do students say about the books they read? How do students understand and represent history? As we learn from students, educators need to build repositories so that families have access to what students say about what they experience in schools.

Centering voices of young people would inform curricular decisions in a meaningful way. For instance, when a member of the community wants a book to be banned, shouldn't analysis of that demand begin with hearing from students who have studied the book? How would the debate shift if a book that presents LGBTQIA+ people in a positive light were challenged by some members of the community but then supported by students as centering kindness, joy, and resilience? Would the challengers maintain their positions if they understood how the book—and the related curriculum practices allowing students to openly discuss the book—helped students deal with real-world stressors, trauma, and anxiety? How many people who critique curriculum practices would argue against practices that young people say give them tools to work through challenging situations rather than attempt suicide?

Cultivate Opportunities for Students to Engage Civilly

As schools are building tools for young people to share their feedback about what they are learning and how they are experiencing education and sharing that feedback with families and communities, schools need to concurrently help students build tools to engage with each other during these deeply polarizing times. The point of equipping students to engage civilly is not to force them to believe or follow any predetermined worldview. Rather, the point of cultivating opportunities for students to engage with each other is so they learn how to disagree without defaulting to toxic discourse that may lead to troubling actions.

In 2008, I worked with high school students to develop Project TALK (Thinking, Acting, Learning, Kindness).¹³ The project emerged after the school's administration approached me about a fist fight that almost began in the cafeteria. Two high schoolers (friends who were both on the school's basketball team) were in

strong disagreement about the upcoming presidential election. Although neither student was old enough to vote, they almost fought because one (a Black student) supported Barack Obama and the other (a white student) supported John McCain.

Project TALK has a leadership team of students who decide on pressing topics that may be polarizing, difficult to discuss, or controversial in society and/or their school. Topics have ranged from immigration, poverty, and presidential elections to racism, gender, and homophobia. Completely student led, the project occurs several times a year with student facilitators leading the discussion without adults in the room. In preparation, I train students on how to pose questions and help student leaders build the capacity to help students express their views on topics in civilly appropriate ways. There are several curriculum anchors to get discussion moving among students; these include statements that allow students to agree, somewhat agree, or disagree; what-would-you-do videos, student-written vignettes, and scenarios that invite responses; and anonymous student surveys with results open for group discussion. I have found that Project TALK has helped students engage with each other, which is especially important now as far too many adults seem to be struggling to talk with each other with kindness and dignity.

Organize Curriculum Showcases for the Public

Because most Americans do not really know what is taught in schools, we must rebuild trust in educators to teach and create ongoing structures to help families and communities understand the range of what is happening in schools. I encourage schools to organize quarterly curriculum showcases where educators and students demonstrate what they are learning (books they are reading, projects they are completing, and so forth) and why. In addition to hosting showcases inside the school, educators should consider holding showcases at school board meetings and in open sessions in local libraries to reach as many interested community members as possible.

These showcases would offer families and communities a first-hand snapshot of student learning and an opportunity to raise their concerns. Instead of assuming that, for instance, learning about Jim Crow indoctrinates students in an unpatriotic view of America, community members could ask students and teachers about their class discussions. Do some students feel more patriotic as they see the progress that has been made in the past century? Do they feel more hopeful that today's injustices can be overcome? Curriculum showcases could also highlight what research tells us about human development and ways to support students inside and outside school. As families and communities gain a clearer sense of what is being taught in schools, they should be encouraged to use this information to pose questions, make suggestions, and become partners in deciding what students should learn in school. This clarity will likely increase trust in teachers and reduce challenges to what is taught. But even when these showcases lead to disagreements about curriculum content and instructional practices, they are an important way of involving the community in education and building communicative channels. Moreover, rebuilding trust with educators can reduce the deprofessionalization of teaching.

To deepen discussions of what is and should be taught—to shift the conversation from controversial topics and books to the

very purpose of education—educators and school leaders may want to engage community members in discussions of reflective questions such as the following:

- How do we build a school and classroom culture that recognizes and honors the humanity of all?
- What issues can unnecessarily divide us, and what unites us in schools, classrooms, local communities, and society?
- What assets do each of us bring into the school and classroom and how might we showcase, build on, and learn from those strengths?
- As we build our classroom (and school) communities, how do we honor and build on the many strengths in our decision making and practices?
- To what extent is achievement (i.e., high scores on standardized tests) synonymous with and divergent from learning?
- What do we value as successful, and who do we identify as knowledgeable in our school?
- Who constructs knowledge in the school, from what sources, and for what purposes?
- How do we honor and acknowledge learning among those who have been grossly underserved in schools and communities?
- How do we address and assess the kind of learning and knowledge acquisition that never shows up on achievement measures, including formative assessments and high-stakes standardized tests?

These are the types of questions educators routinely grapple with. Shouldn't public schools invite the public to help make these fundamental decisions?

* * *

In the table on page 26, I attempt to capture and summarize important dimensions of the recommendations I share. Ultimately, I hope these recommendations might improve our educational system, honor student diversity, and reprofessionalize the field of teaching.

Conclusions

Unlike other countries with national curriculums, such as Singapore and Finland, there is huge variation in the United States regarding what is taught, where, when, for how long, why, how, to whom, and by what means. As a result, families and community members seem to have little knowledge of what students are learning—and they are susceptible to misinformation. I conjecture that as the recommendations above are developed and implemented in a contextually rich and robust way, teachers may regain some of the respect they deserve, and we may disrupt some of the deprofessionalization of the field of teaching. And I hope that as communities engage in deep discussions of what is and should be taught, we develop some common ground about what all young people ought to experience through curriculum practices. For instance, I would argue all young people need to experience an education that features the assets and strengths of many different communities; that tells the complicated, difficult truth about how past and contemporary practices in the United States have led to too many deaths, hardships, and challenges; and that honors young people's humanity by valuing and affirming them.

Students discover their identity, strength, possibility, hope, joy, and dreams through curriculum that is broad, deep, and well-rounded.

When I was in graduate school, my grandmother (who was not formally educated and lived to the age of 92) would ask me about the work I was doing. Excited to share, I often talked about challenges I faced with my work, particularly concerning racial justice. I talked about nonsensical policies that seemed to perpetuate and maintain the status quo. I told her about funding challenges that seemed to further marginalize communities of color. I shared how frustrating it was that high school students were working part-time jobs to support their families and were still expected to “produce”



the same outputs as those who did not have to work. I talked about how inequitable, unfair, unjust, and alarming situations were (and are) in society and education. One day after I finished my critiques of education, schooling, and society, my grandmother looked at me, paused, frowned a bit, and said, “Well, keep pressing, baby!”

I suspect these words may feel under-nuanced or perhaps even unthinkable during these times of uncertainty: as teachers are being falsely blamed for teaching critical race theory; as curriculum is being narrowed and Black history is being censored; as books that affirm Black and LGBTQIA+ students are being banned; and as the field of teaching is increasingly becoming deprofessionalized. However, we have made significant progress toward justice and equity over the years, and I implore us all to remember that our young people need us to work with them, perhaps unlike ever before. So, let's *keep pressing!* □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/spring2024/milner.

Ways to Address the Deprofessionalization of Teaching

School and Educator Practice	Description	Guiding Questions	Potential Outcome
Situate and Substantiate Curriculum Decisions in Data, Especially Student Voice	<p>Develop mechanisms to collect data within your school and draw from established data about promising practices.</p> <p>Share and showcase these data in curriculum decision making.</p> <p>Intentionally listen to what students say about what they are learning. Encourage and expect teachers and other educators to pose meaningful questions from students as they are developing, revising, and implementing curriculum practices.</p>	<p>What do we know from research about effective curriculum practices with young people from diverse backgrounds?</p> <p>What data can we collect from our own students, faculty, and staff about effective, developmentally appropriate curriculum decisions and practices?</p> <p>What do students learn about themselves and others in and through curriculum practices?</p> <p>How do student learning opportunities enhance their beliefs about and relationships with others?</p> <p>What curriculum practices do students find most meaningful and relevant to them?</p> <p>What curriculum practices likely need to change to address students' needs and interests?</p>	<p>Families build a deeper understanding about why decisions are being made as curriculum practices are guided by systematic data sources.</p> <p>Students feel more connected to what they are learning. Educators can adapt, respond to, and build from what students share about their experiences with curriculum.</p> <p>Families and communities can hear directly from students within their school about the nature of their experiences.</p>
Cultivate Opportunities for Students to Engage Civilly with Others	<p>Build opportunities for students to talk about, not shy away from, developmentally appropriate difficult topics. Help students build tools to talk about issues and share perspectives that may be divergent from their classmates.</p> <p>Stress to students and model for students how to engage with others in appropriate ways.</p>	<p>What opportunities do you have to help students engage with others who may have different views on topics?</p> <p>How do students learn to disagree with others without hating each other or wanting to cause harm?</p>	<p>Students build transferable tools to engage with others inside and outside schools.</p> <p>Students demonstrate how to agree to disagree and commit to collective aims of civility, kindness, and working together for the common good.</p>
Organize Curriculum Showcases for the Public	<p>Explicitly build opportunities for educators and students to showcase what they are learning in school. This showcasing should be ongoing to provide insights about what <i>actually occurs</i> through curriculum practices in a school.</p>	<p>What learning is happening in schools? How is the learning being planned and organized? Who is participating in the learning opportunities, and how have the learning opportunities shifted over time?</p> <p>Why are students learning and engaging in particular curriculum practices?</p> <p>What will students learn next?</p> <p>How might families and communities participate in complementing and contributing to decisions about student learning?</p>	<p>Families and communities have a chance to hear from educators and young people firsthand about what they are learning rather than speculating or being misled by those who are not really knowledgeable.</p> <p>Families and communities can provide feedback and suggestions on ways to improve curriculum practices.</p> <p>Teachers and teaching may rebuild respect, admiration, and deserved professionalization.</p>

Change, Challenge, and Creating Safe Learning Spaces

A Conversation with School Board Members



Across the country, families and communities have become increasingly interested in what is being taught in their local public schools, and there has been a dramatic uptick in efforts to restrict or remove content that some find objectionable. Against this context, the role of the local school board to ensure a well-rounded, inclusive education while providing community accountability is more important—and more difficult—than ever. To learn more about the challenges public schools face and the role of families and communities in education, we spoke with two New Hampshire public school educators and school board members. Peter Argeropoulos teaches seventh-grade science at Fairgrounds Middle School in Nashua and was elected to a second term on the Manchester Board of School Committee in November 2023. Sharon Giglio was a school librarian in Massachusetts before retiring in 2016. In November 2023, she was elected to a second term on the Nashua Board of Education.

—EDITORS

EDITORS: Tell us a little about your careers and why you decided to run for the school board.

PETER ARGEROPOULOS: Growing up, I always wanted to be a teacher. I have many teachers in my family, and when I was in high school, several teachers motivated me and really connected with me. By becoming a teacher, I wanted to give back to the community, not only helping students progress in their learning but also being part of their support system.

And that’s what I’ve been happy to do over my first five years of teaching. I’m a seventh-grade science teacher in Nashua, and I teach a little bit of everything in the subject. We start the year off with earth science and then go into some chemistry. Over half of our content is life science, then we cover ecosystems and end the year with climate change.

Over the years, as I’ve worked with educators and families to support students’ needs, I’ve seen the effects that outside forces can have on education. I felt there were things that needed to change so that we can continue to support public education. I thought about my community in Manchester, which hasn’t historically been well supported. Believing I could make a difference in a capacity beyond teaching, I decided to run for the school board. I wanted to help provide my community with a public education system that prides itself on making sure all students receive what they need to be successful and that opens doors to whatever they want to do in their future.

SHARON GIGLIO: I became a school librarian in my mid-40s, but I had two totally different careers prior to that. My first career was as a psychiatric social worker, and my second was in the business world for a company that made athletic footwear. In Nashua, I volunteered in my children’s school library and really enjoyed it, so I went back to school for my master’s degree in library and information studies. I became a middle school librarian in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and it was the happiest of all my careers. I retired in June 2016 but worked as a long-term library substitute in Nashua over the next three years.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GWENDA KACZOR

By the time I became a library sub in Nashua, so much had changed since my children were in school—not only the demographics of our community and schools, but a lot of society had changed. It felt like a whole different world. An increasing number of students in our district spoke a primary language other than English, and they needed a lot of support. The first elementary school where I was a sub in 2016 was very much an inner-city school, and I was totally awed by the dedicated teachers. Some had been there for 20–25 years and would literally bring in coats for the children. It tugged at my heartstrings just how much need there was, especially for funding, and how much need wasn't being met by either the state or the city.

By the time I retired, I was paying close attention to Nashua's board of education meetings. I believe there was only one former educator on the board—but two members were basically anti-public education, so watching them was very upsetting. They didn't seem to want public education to improve or endure, and the way they voted was counter to everything I believed. I'd never seen myself running for public office, but I started to feel I could make a difference on the board. I decided to run in 2019, hoping to unseat at least one of the two. Neither of them won in that election, but I did.



EDITORS: Have you seen challenges in your communities to students' freedom to learn or teachers' ability to create a welcoming classroom environment?

PETER: There haven't been major issues or challenges brought forward at my school or at the school board level. As a school board, we have been briefed on issues of racism occurring in our schools and on questions about our LGBTQIA+ community, but nothing has seriously escalated. We believe it's important that schools provide safe spaces for all students and that students feel they can be who they are at school and be accepted for who they are. Ultimately, those are the best conditions for learning.

SHARON: I haven't seen any recent challenges in our district other than the daily challenges of providing a safe classroom environment and making sure students' needs are met and that they're being kind and thoughtful. We have a very hardworking board member who diligently ensures that our policies protect children's right to learn and their right to feel safe in their environment.

But my first two years on the board were very challenging and at times felt dangerous. I was sworn in in January 2020, and COVID-19 hit in March. In board meetings, some parents were angry and accused us of suffocating their children by having them wear masks. Late in the summer, the meetings turned ugly. We had neo-Nazis

“Schools, families, and children should be ... partners in education, especially when questions come up.”

–Sharon Giglio

and the Proud Boys picketing outside, some of them using racial slurs and very negative language. They wanted children back in school no matter what, but they felt that wearing masks violated their civil rights. Some would come to our meetings, refuse to identify themselves as members of those groups, and say terrible things during the public comment session. Parents would sit in the audience and swear at us. We actually had to remove a few people from the meetings. Tension erupted between the groups and some of our parents, and the state police and FBI had to get involved. Nashua police had to escort board members to our cars because of concerns for our safety. Our administration did a lot to support us during that time, and I'm forever grateful to them and to the police for making sure we stayed safe and were able to continue doing our jobs, including voting the way we felt was necessary for the education and safety of the children.

PETER: I attended some of those contentious board meetings in Nashua. I remember seeing the large presence of groups protesting with their signs and the concerned and angry families. I was first elected to the Manchester board the year following the pandemic restrictions and stay-at-home policies, so I caught the tail end of some of that anger as a board member. It was a strange and unprecedented time.

But the thing that amazed me most about those days was the community's willingness to work together and do what was in the best interests of our kids and our families. Everybody wanted to keep everybody safe. There were differing opinions as the pandemic went on about the best way to manage health risks with learning and other issues. But I'm proud of the way that teachers, students, and families responded to COVID-19 and are still working to come back from it, fill in the gaps it created, and move into our new normal post-pandemic.

EDITORS: How do you see the role of family involvement in what's taught in the classroom? What are your perspectives on families questioning curriculum and on how to facilitate those conversations?

SHARON: I think it's wonderful for families to be involved in what happens in the classroom, and they should be involved. But as Peter said, schools, families, and children should be working together as partners in education, especially when questions come up.

We have had questions about library books that are available to students—and when I was campaigning for reelection to the board, many people asked me directly how I felt about book banning. I was very forthright: I'm totally opposed. Like teachers, school librarians develop relationships with students and get to know them. We read so many books and book reviews, and we do a good job of knowing what book to put in a student's hands to help them through a particular problem or situation.

Families certainly have the right to choose what their children can and cannot read, and when I was a librarian, I always worked with them to make sure their wishes were respected. But these books need to be available for everybody, and especially for the children who really need to feel seen and feel hopeful by reading them.

Being able to identify with something in a book is part of what makes children feel welcome and safe in school. And it's one of the blessed things about the school library: you can offer all kinds of materials to children, and they find what makes sense to them. We have books on psychology and social-emotional learning, books about drug abuse, books about the Holocaust, and books about many other things that affect our children. There are books in the library that I find sad or difficult to read. But students need access to them so they don't feel isolated.

While I oppose book bans, there needs to be a process for community input. Our libraries have had a reconsideration policy in place for several decades that has held up well. If people think a certain book shouldn't be in the school library, they first need to read the entire book to select the specific content that they think is objectionable. I had three of those challenges during my career, and no one ever completed the whole process to have a book removed.

PETER: I also think it's fantastic that community members, and especially families, are interested in education and the public school system. The purpose of education is to help create a society of knowledgeable citizens who think critically and contribute to a strong workforce and successful communities. Of course, there are going to be differing opinions on how to do this, but we can navigate those by establishing a basis of understanding, clear communication, and, as Sharon mentioned, collaboration—all in service of our common purpose. Families should know what kids are learning in schools and how it will benefit them. And we need to be willing to have conversations about how to choose a curriculum that is in the best interests of our students and our families, and therefore our community at large.

People are wondering about indoctrination happening in schools. As a teacher, it's important to me to always present facts and evidence—we really focus in my science class on claims, evidence, and reasoning—and then let students discuss the facts. I never want to influence a student to believe one thing or another; my goal is to get them to think about things more critically and defend whatever they're claiming with evidence and reasoning. That's why, when students question controversial science topics like natural selection, evolution, or climate change, I always start off with a conversation. I let them know that it's important to understand the scientific evidence. But I'm not here to tell them that their beliefs are wrong or don't fit into what we're teaching. Families can have conversations at home about what's important to them.

We can disagree; that's normal. And as a school board member, I think one of our goals is helping a community come together and understand that just because we disagree doesn't mean that we can't come to a conclusion that's in everyone's best interests. But

we need to be willing to have positive discourse with each other.

A big focus of mine on the school board is allowing teachers to have the freedom to hold conversations where students feel safe so they can respectfully discuss their understandings and beliefs and ask "Why?" without fear of a negative reaction from their peers or teachers. It's critical to education and to society to have that freedom to speak as we work together to extend students' learning. Sometimes the conversations will be uncomfortable, and we'll challenge each other, and that's OK. If we're listening to each other's perspectives and making sure everyone is heard, these challenges help us grow as we push each other to become a little bit better.

SHARON: Along with being open to communication, I think it's important that we promote ways for families to be as involved as they can. I don't think many people are aware that both our school board meetings and our individual committee meetings are televised. I'm currently on the curriculum and evaluation committee. Every third week, we talk about what's happening with the curriculum and go into detail about different curricular items. We've even started recording teachers in their classrooms delivering new curriculum. So that's a great way for families who are interested (and who have the time and cable access) to find out exactly what's being taught and what students are learning.

I know not every family has the same access or availability to get involved. But they can still take advantage of opportunities to know what's going on in their children's schools. Schools have various ways of reaching out—cultural events, monthly meetings, and parent-teacher associations are just a few—and families can also arrange to visit their child's school. For those who have the time, I think there's nothing like regularly volunteering in your child's school, because then you really get to see what's going on. I started out as a parent volunteer; it took on a life of its own, and here I am.



“We can disagree; that’s normal.... But we need to be willing to have positive discourse with each other.”

–Peter Argeropoulos

PETER: Many schools, like ours, also offer open house events during the year. These are great opportunities for families to meet the teachers who are working with their students and to learn what material is being covered. We also have lots of meetings with families and keep in contact through email and phone calls about what's going on at school. We use all the assets at our disposal to collaborate and communicate throughout the year and make sure we're meeting students' and families' needs.

To me, that's what's so critical about public schools. We serve everybody. No matter who you are, where you come from, what you look like, or what you believe in, we're here for you. We're here to help you and your family and provide what you need so that you can learn, become more understanding, and be set up for success. □

Teaching in Polarized Times

New Professional Development for Finding the Truth and Engaging in Civil Discussions



By Tim Krueger

Eight complaints. In the fall of 2020, administrators at my school—North Syracuse Junior High—received eight complaints about a lesson I taught in the run-up to the presidential election. Maybe I shouldn’t have been surprised, but I was. I had taught this lesson in 2008, 2012, and 2016 without any controversy. But by 2020, something had shifted in my purple New York county. Not only were there eight complaints, but not a single parent contacted me. Not one asked about the purpose of my lesson, how the students interacted, or what they could learn through participating. No curiosity. No dialogue. No chance to explain. Still, I am fortunate: I have very supportive administrators who didn’t want me to change a thing.

What was this complaint-worthy lesson? It was a project using iSideWith.com. On a Google form, my eighth- and ninth-graders anonymously stated which presidential candidate they would

vote for. Then they took an iSideWith survey that asked how they felt about prominent issues, which generated an iSideWith report about which candidate they most closely associated with and thus should vote for. Back in the Google form, they anonymously reported which candidate iSideWith suggested. The last step was a group discussion noting trends, exploring issues, and considering how many students’ initial responses were different from iSideWith’s suggestions. Despite this all being anonymous and me never revealing my political affiliation or voting intentions, eight parents claimed I was indoctrinating their kids.

In the midst of this, I received a survey from the AFT about teaching civics, and I poured out my frustration and concern. I wanted to help fix the problem of increasing polarization, not by expecting people to agree but by teaching them to disagree in a civil, respectful way. When an AFT staff member invited me to join a team to create civics professional development from scratch, I was thrilled. Over the next three years, I worked with five other extraordinary secondary educators to develop, pilot, and refine Deepening Civics Skills Through Classroom Dialogue. The experience reinvigorated me—and because of this professional development work, my district is allowing me to create a civics elective for this fall.

Tim Krueger, an educator with 20 years’ experience, currently teaches eighth-grade US history and ninth-grade world history at North Syracuse Junior High School in Syracuse, New York, and is a member of the North Syracuse Education Association. A West Point graduate and army veteran, Krueger’s love of civics and deep knowledge of US government is evident throughout his career.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SOPHIE ESCAVY LIM

Behind the Scenes

Early on, my teammates and I struggled with what this professional development should include. We knew we wanted it to be a set of ideas, skills, and strategies that teachers could adapt for a wide variety of courses, but we had far too many ideas and priorities, and all of them seemed important. Corralled in a hotel convention center, we put sticky notes on the wall with everything we wanted to include. Once we started grouping them, suddenly it turned into the road map for the course.

The course starts with why civics matters and moves quickly into creating safe and brave spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their opinions. From there we have a segment called “What Is Truth?” about vetting news sources and spotting misinformation in social media. In our pilots, that media literacy content really grabbed teachers—it’s a problem many educators are grappling with. Next up is an exploration of whether it is or can be acceptable for teachers to share their political views. When we started building this part of the course, I was a firm *no*. But through several fascinating discussions, I’ve come to see that it can sometimes be appropriate—especially with older students who understand that no one is trying to sway them. The remainder of the course is a series of discussion strategies that progress from heavily supporting students to expecting students to lead.

I regularly use the media literacy and discussion strategies in my eighth-grade US history and ninth-grade world history courses. For example, in eighth grade, when we get to yellow journalism and the Spanish-American war, I take time to ask, “What does this look like?” I do the media literacy piece almost exactly like we present it in the professional development course, engaging students in vetting news sources. Sourcing documents for AP World History with my ninth-grade students is another parallel, as we are looking for bias in primary sources.

I’ve used all the discussion strategies, but I really love Philosophical Chairs and Harkness. These are the two ends of the spectrum in terms of supporting students.

One of my favorite Philosophical Chairs lessons with my eighth-graders starts with two articles, one on W. E. B. Du Bois and one on Booker T. Washington, that explain their views on civil rights. I divide the class in two, arranging the chairs in two rows facing each other. One side represents Du Bois, the other Washington. Philosophical Chairs works great for this because it’s not a debate; it’s a controlled discussion with each side taking turns. An essential feature is that there is no right answer. I give students sentence starters that require them to summarize what the other side just said, and to maximize participation I make students wait three turns before they can speak again. I step in as needed to keep the discussion on track, and at the end I wrap up what we learned.

Harkness is on the other side of the spectrum, with students leading the discussion. I haven’t tried it with my eighth-graders, but it’s amazing with my ninth-graders. I give them a reading and a couple of basic discussion questions. Then we



If you intend to change your students’ minds, that’s indoctrination. If you intend to educate them on finding the truth themselves, that’s education.

make a big circle. I don’t sit in the circle; I sit at my desk and record how and where the conversation is going. In preparation, I make a list of things that I hope students talk about; if they don’t, I cover them afterward. It’s very hard the first time you use this method because you’ll want to fill the silences, but you have to let them happen. The silences make students uncomfortable, but then someone will make a comment that sparks another. Each year, the first time I use this method, it’s a debacle. By the third time, it’s dynamic.

One Harkness discussion we had this year was based on a reading about the rise of monotheism and Greek rationalism in second-wave civilizations. My prompts were very basic: “Talk first about the birth of monotheistic religions. When you’re done with that, talk about Greek rationalism. Then, compare and contrast them. Do they fit in the same category?” The stu-

dents' discussion was awesome. First, they talked Judaism and Zoroastrianism and eventually touched on Christianity. When they transitioned to Greek rationalism, they realized that it was totally secular—it was the basis of science and the scientific method. That's something I could have told them, but it's far more powerful for them to come to this realization together.

Now that my ninth-graders are accustomed to Harkness, they can circle up and discuss anything. They even talked about the Second Amendment after a Jon Stewart clip related to a school shooting caused a buzz in the school. Of course, we had to build up to this type of civil discussion. I encourage quiet students to participate and help outspoken students learn to listen. During these discussions, I often draw a circle and write students' names in it to represent where they are sitting. As the discussion unfolds, I draw lines to track who has spoken (and how often) and who has yet to contribute. Especially the first couple of times we try Harkness, I have students who are too afraid to speak up. By the end of the year, nearly everyone participates.

Education, Not Indoctrination

Teachers are struggling with divisive and polarizing issues nationwide, and I fear it will only get worse as the election nears. If this new professional development supports teachers in helping students learn to discern fact from fiction and to engage in civil discussions, I'll feel like I have contributed to the good of my profession.

Today more than ever, I'm committed to helping children communicate openly and respectfully in a safe, brave space. And even more than in years past, I am emphasizing fact-checking—especially for things they see on social media. Some

I'm committed to helping children communicate openly and respectfully in a safe, brave space.

parents claim that learning to fact-check is indoctrination, but it remains essential to my courses. Learning to find the truth is necessary for becoming knowledgeable citizens. If you intend to change your students' minds, that's indoctrination. If you intend instead to educate them on how they can find the truth themselves, and also find what is important to them as a future voter, that's education. My intention is to teach students how to think, how to find the truth, and how to communicate civilly. Our civics design team hopes this professional development helps our colleagues across the country do the same. □



Deepening Civics Skills Through Classroom Dialogue

Deepening Civics Skills Through Classroom Dialogue is a two-day course for educators in grades 7–12. Participants learn research-based strategies that foster civic skills through civil classroom dialogue and can be implemented immediately with their students. The discussion protocols have been intentionally designed to take students from dependent to independent learners and help them develop skills for active, responsible participation in our democracy. The course addresses why teaching civics skills is so important for maintaining a healthy democracy, how to create a safe and brave space for civil classroom dialogue, and how to teach media literacy (news media and social media) and identify bias, misinformation, and disinformation.

In addition to the course for secondary educators, Civics in the Elementary Classroom is a two-day course that helps K–6 educators create a classroom culture and climate that is safe and brave for student dialogue. It explores role-plays, simulations, and action civic projects rooted in civic reasoning and discourse.

To learn more about these courses, contact Joanna Braman in the AFT's Educational Issues Department at jbraman@aft.org.

—EDITORS

Creating Safe Spaces for Civil Classroom Discussion

Engaging with difficult topics in the classroom equips students with skills they will use throughout their education and their lives. As they learn to express, defend, and explore differing ideas with their peers, they enhance their critical thinking and reasoning skills and develop tolerance for and understanding of others' perspectives.

Share My Lesson has many resources to help educators create safe, welcoming classroom spaces where students have productive conversations that broaden their perspectives and encourage empathy.

At an early age, students can begin to develop healthy conversational skills as they become more aware of others in relation to themselves and learn how to exchange ideas and questions with each other. "Global Citizenship: Activities for Under 5s" is a five-lesson unit for children ages 3 to 5 that emphasizes the importance of friendship, similarities and differences between people, and collaborating to solve problems. In "Communication: Peacemaker Skills," students in grades 3–5 learn to distinguish between types of communication and to appreciate diversity and uniqueness.

For upper elementary grades through high school, SML partner Journeys in Film created "How to Facilitate Inclusive, Thoughtful Discussions" to help educators create an open, respectful, and distraction-free space for meaningful classroom discussion. Tips include practicing "whole body listening" and taking a collective breath or break to reset if conversations become heated. And the "Civil Discourse in the Classroom" unit by SML partner Learning for Justice helps students in grades 6–8 hone their public speaking and argumentative reasoning skills on a variety of topics.

SML also has several webinars (each offered for one hour of professional development credit) devoted to helping educators create discussion-friendly classrooms. In "Deliberating Community Issues: A Framework for Student Engagement," learn how the deliberative process builds empathy and appreciation for diverse perspectives while helping students consider how to solve community problems. "Harkness: Honing Civics Skills in All Classrooms" guides educators

on implementing the Harkness method of student-led discussions and providing an environment where all students experience ownership and agency in discussing challenging topics with their peers.

In "Using Inquiry to Fortify Civic Education," discover how methods of inquiry—which encourage asking questions, researching, and exploring ideas—can drive students' learning and civic engagement. Although tailored for social studies educators of grades 6–8, the strategies can be applied with older students and across the curriculum to help students approach challenging topics with reflection and deliberation, compromise and seek consensus, and manage conflict. "Dig Deep: Exploring Current Events Through Interactive Online Tools and Lessons" gives tips for teaching challenging topics while fostering empathy and shares technology tools that can aid in classroom discussion. And because myths, conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation can hinder civil discourse, the webinar "Debunking Disinformation: Empowering Educators with Tools and Strategies" provides a toolkit to help educators constructively address disinformation in the classroom and at home.

Finally, as AI continues to evolve, it can help educators support civil classroom discussions—so long as we have the digital literacy to use it effectively. SML is growing its "AI and Education" community (sharemylesson.com/ai) with resources and webinars that are putting educators in the center of the conversation.

If you have questions or want more resources on civil discourse, or if you want to share any additional ideas or requests, please reach out to us at content@sharemylesson.com.

Recommended Resources

Global Citizenship: Activities for Under 5s
go.aft.org/fca

Communication: Peacemaker Skills
go.aft.org/zr0

How to Facilitate Inclusive, Thoughtful Discussions
go.aft.org/nxf

Civil Discourse in the Classroom
go.aft.org/joa

Deliberating Community Issues: A Framework for Student Engagement
go.aft.org/wj7



Harkness: Honing Civics Skills in All Classrooms
go.aft.org/cen

Using Inquiry to Fortify Civic Education
go.aft.org/k2o

Dig Deep: Exploring Current Events Through Interactive Online Tools and Lessons
go.aft.org/jv3

Debunking Disinformation: Empowering Educators with Tools and Strategies
go.aft.org/fpl



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- 1** **Montana Federation of Public Employees** President Amanda Curtis did a 2,100-mile listening tour giving out more than 700 books, including several written by or about Indigenous people, at 13 schools across Montana.
- 2** The **Washington Teachers' Union**, African American Policy Forum, New Republic, District of Columbia Public Schools, and DC Public Library hosted a panel with high school students, teachers, and librarians to discuss the alarming uptick in banned books and gave out over 1,000 books. This was the culmination of a Banned Book Tour sponsored by the AFT in which more than 15,000 books were distributed in five states.
- 3** In the shadow of the Florida state capitol, the **Florida Education Association** hosted the Great Florida Read In, giving away 25,000 books—including diverse and banned titles—to push back on Governor Ron DeSantis's policies that limit books and curricula in Florida's classrooms.





4

4 The **Pajaro Valley Federation of Teachers** in Watsonville, California, hosted a 40,000-book giveaway at a family literacy and community event that also provided dental and vision clinics, a science bus, live student entertainment, free snacks, and much more.



5

5 In Missouri, paraprofessional and **AFT St. Louis** Vice President Carron Johnson designed a 10-week literacy workshop for pre-K students and their families to support pre-literacy, parenting, and socialization skills. Along with books for their home libraries, families received individualized support based on videos of them reading and interacting with their children.



6

6 The **Cleveland Teachers Union** partnered with the mayor of Cleveland and the Cleveland Public Library for the yearlong Cleveland Reads Citywide Reading Challenge to collectively read one million books and/or for one million minutes in 2023. Reading Opens the World donated nearly 50,000 books to the effort.



7

7 The **United Teachers of Wichita** developed a one-on-one virtual program to help readers who need a little boost to meet grade-level requirements. Each week, children receive a free book and 30 minutes of personalized support.



8

8 Starting in 2023, the **New York State Public Employees Federation** has hosted an annual PEF Community Wellness & Book Fair anchored by giving away more than 20,000 books to students, families, healthcare providers, nonprofit partners, educators, and public employees in Albany.



9

9 The **Nashua Teachers' Union** partnered with the Nashua Public Library, Nashua Chamber of Commerce, and others to host a back-to-school fair with free books, school supplies, backpacks, and much more to welcome students, families, educators, librarians, and school staff.

10 Members of the **Ohio State University Nurses Organization** brought hundreds of books to students at West Broad Elementary School—and donated extra books for the school's library—to show that they care for their patients and for their community.

11 The **Hartford Federation of Paraeducators** hosted a family literacy festival in partnership with the city of Hartford, Hartford Public Library, and Dalio Foundation to distribute more than 50,000 books at the Connecticut Convention Center. Along with free books, there were fire trucks, bounce houses, and superhero and princess characters come to life from children's books to spread the joy of reading.



10



11



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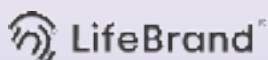
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WHAT: Be part of our fast-growing, nationwide activists' group of educators working to get out the vote.

WHY: To build on the progress we've made with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Together, we are: Winning historic investments in public education at every level, with a fivefold increase for community schools. Investing in the resources and staff our students need to thrive post-pandemic. Fighting for better pay and more respect for educators and school staff. Expanding school meals. Preventing gun violence. Making school buildings safer and healthier. Tackling the crushing burden of student debt. Protecting academic freedom.

WHO: YOU. Your family. Your colleagues. Your friends. Like-minded, engaged people in your community and across the country.

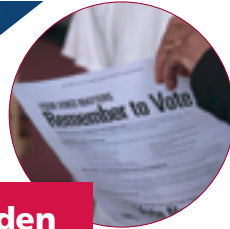
WHEN: All the way to Election Day—Tuesday, Nov. 5.

WHERE: In your neighborhood, in your community or right from your own cellphone.

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