

Education in the Age of Censorship

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Don't join the book burners. Don't think you are going to conceal faults by concealing the fact that they ever existed. Don't be afraid to go into your library and read every book.

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

There are people in every time and every land who want to stop history in its tracks. They fear the future, mistrust the present, and invoke the security of a comfortable past, which in fact, never existed.

—Robert F. Kennedy

Throughout the United States, a current point of contention is what topics may be taught in public K-12 schools and higher education. While freedom of speech and the separation of church and state are guaranteed by the Constitution's First Amendment, increasingly, parents, politicians, and religious activists seem to be the ones making curriculum decisions instead of professional educators. They have targeted two broad categories of instruction as objectionable: critical race theory (CRT) and sexuality.

Put very simply, CRT is organized around the idea that race is socially constructed, and that racism is built into U.S. laws and institu-

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tions (USAFacts, n.d.). It “transcends a Black/white racial binary and recognizes that racism has impacted the experiences of various people of color, including Latinx, Native Americans, and Asian Americans... [and seeks] to examine specific experiences of oppression” (George, 2021, para. 3).

In “September 2020, former President Donald Trump’s Executive Order 13950, since rescinded, aimed to prohibit the teaching of CRT.... Trump said CRT was a tool for “brainwashing” and “psychological abuse”...[and] taught the youth to “hate our country” (Spencer, n.d., paras. (9 & 10). Similarly, Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders equated CRT with indoctrination, saying:

We cannot perpetuate a lie to our students and push this propaganda leftist agenda, teaching our kids to hate American and hate one another. It’s one of the reasons that we put into law banning things like indoctrination and CRT. (Snyder, 2023, para. 5)

Although many educators and CRT experts agree that CRT is not actually taught within K-12 schools (Harrison, Hurd, & Brinegar, 2021; Zalaznick, 2021) because it is not really course content (Bissell, 2023), such as math or science are, lawmakers in numerous states have passed legislation that prohibit the teaching of CRT. Eleven states¹ have banned teaching about racial issues (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), while 25 states² either currently have local school policies in place or have bills moving through state legislatures that explicitly forbid the teaching of CRT (Schwartz, 2022).

Higher education also faces restrictions in teaching both CRT and racial topics. For example, Dakota House Bill 1012 prohibits colleges and universities from teaching “divisive concepts” (Flaherty, 2022). In addition to limiting what can be taught in K-12 schools, Iowa and Oklahoma’s anti-CRT legislation affect higher education (Greene, 2022). Tennessee’s CRT ban, likewise, forbids teaching topics related to racism, sexism, and social class in higher education (Wise, 2022).

Knowing exactly what it is about CRT that lawmakers object to is difficult to determine because the language within the bills is broad and vague, most likely deliberately. However, rather than explicitly forbidding CRT, the bills “limit teaching about ‘divisive subjects’ such as racism and sexuality” (Prothero & Blad, 2021, p. 10) or that “one race, color, religion, sex, ethnicity, or national origin ‘is inherently superior to another’” (Coote, 2022, para. 3). According to Oklahoma House Bill 1775 (2021), classroom instruction should not cause “any individual discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex” (General Prohibition 7).

Even before the passage of CRT gag orders, though, “through omissions, downright errors, and specious interpretations, particularly regarding racial issues,” (Greenlee, 2019, para. 7) many textbook publishers had begun to distort information students received. For example, Texas textbooks enacted history revisionism, such as the claim that “the Atlantic slave trade brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations” (Isensee, 2015, para. 2) but with no mention in the lesson of “Africans forced to the U.S. as slaves” (para. 5). Publisher Studies Weekly “removed mention of Rosa Parks’ race” (Getahun, 2023, para. 3) in their first-grade social studies Florida textbooks. For their fourth-grade Florida textbooks, Publisher Studies Weekly also “removed language saying Black people were discriminated against” during the Reconstruction era, “instead opting for language like ‘certain groups’” (para. 5). The Florida Board of Education’s new standards for African American history will teach middle school students “that slavery gave Black people a ‘personal benefit’ because they ‘developed [job] skills’” (Quinn, 2023, para. 1). Florida’s high school students will receive an equally misleading lesson about a 1920 deadly White mob attack against Black residents of Ocoee, Florida, that included “acts of violence perpetrated against and *by African Americans*” (para. 3). Other textbook publishers refer to “White settler colonialism” with “[i]mperialistic expressions such as ‘Empire of Liberty,’ ‘Manifest Destiny,’ ‘The American Frontier’ [and] ‘wards of the state’” (Gahman, 2016, p. 320) that obscure the reality that Indigenous peoples were assimilated, forced into reservations and boarding schools, or murdered.

Although Florida Governor Ron DeSantis claims to fight “against the left-wing ‘indoctrination’ of children” (Reed, 2023, para. 1), Dennis Prager, founder of PragerU, a right-wing institution whose learning materials are used in Florida schools, openly admits that his organization’s goal is indoctrination. An example of this is a PragerU animated video, in which “explorer Christopher Columbus defends enslaving people on the grounds that ‘being taken as a slave is better than being killed’” (para. 6), said in a pseudo-Italian accent in the video. Recently, Oklahoma has joined Florida in adopting PragerU curriculum as “pro-American” education, although critics call it “right-wing indoctrination,” (Wallis, 2023, para. 1).

These examples of sanitized wording simultaneously conceal historical atrocities and allow White people to internalize “American nationalism” along with the confidence that their exercise of power was “legitimate” (Gahman, 2016, p. 320). These subtle lessons can teach a “persistent racial hierarchy that favors those who count as ‘White’ over

all others” (Simson, 2019, p. 638). Bond and Inwood (2016) defined White supremacy as “the presumed superiority of White racial identities...in support of the cultural, political, and economic domination of non-White groups” (p. 719-720) and suggest that White supremacy is a key characteristic of White settler colonialism proponents because of its “emphasis on the enduring *structures* of genocide and forced labor” (p. 719).

Meanwhile, many groups are actively challenging assaults on academic integrity. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, “promised to fight ‘cultural warriors’ who attempt to limit lessons on racism and discrimination by labeling it as critical race theory” (Binkley, 2021). In the first federal lawsuit to challenge a state statute implemented to prevent the teaching of race and gender, the “American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Oklahoma, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and pro bono counsel” (Fallik, 2021, para 2) filed a lawsuit challenging Oklahoma’s classroom censorship bill, House Bill 1775. Moreover, a group of students and educators “filed a lawsuit against the state of Oklahoma, accusing it of violating their constitutional [First Amendment] rights with a law that restricts the teaching of race and gender” (Coote, 2021). Jamiyah Brown, an Alabama African American student, led over “200 students, most of them Black” in a walkout from their Tuscaloosa high school to protest “what they perceived as systemic racism” and the Whitewashing of education (Sonnenberg, 2023, p. 3). In higher education, a group of Florida university students and educators filed a lawsuit challenging Florida House Bill 7, claiming it “unconstitutionally violates the First Amendment by imposing restrictions on speech and information in college classrooms, and is void for vagueness under the Fourteenth Amendment” and additionally “argues the Stop Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees Act violates the Equal Protection Clause because it was enacted with the intent to discriminate against Black educators and students” (Legal, 2022, para. 1).

Despite—or perhaps because of—the legal backlash, states are moving quickly to repress or remove curriculum and materials they believe may violate the CRT bans. As of October 2022, “educational gag orders...increased 250 percent compared to 2021” (Young & Sachs, 2022, para. 3). For example, the McMinn County School Board in Tennessee removed the Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* from its eighth-grade curriculum (Kasakove, 2022, para. 1). The Edmond School District in Oklahoma removed the books *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Raisin in the Sun* from classrooms and school libraries. Such restrictions are especially significant in Oklahoma, “whose history includes the 1889 Land Run, ‘Indian’ boarding schools, the 1921 Tulsa [Race]

Massacre, and racially segregated schools” (Fallik, 2021, para. 10). In Florida, Governor DeSantis rejected “54 of the 132 math textbooks on its adoption list” because they contained “woke content” (Bever, 2022, paras. 1 & 5).

“Woke,” is a term that originated with African American 1930’s blues musical culture but has more recently been adopted by wider U.S. culture and imbued with negative or positive connotations, depending on one’s point of view (Zamudio-Suarez, 2023). Many politically and socially conservative people use the word as an insult against people who are politically liberal or concerned with social justice issues. The objectionable Florida math textbook topics were “common educational terms like social-emotional learning and equity” (Prothero & Blad, 2022, para. 3).

At present, Florida is in the process of adopting the Classic Learning Test, an alternative standardized college entrance exam. Currently, “about 250 colleges accept the Classic Learning Test, nearly all of them Christian colleges” (Bartlett, 2023, para. 3). While Classic Learning Test founder Jeremy Tate claims the test will “reclaim education rooted in truth, goodness, and beauty” (para. 1), he makes no secret that he wants to replace the “left leaning” (para. 14) SAT and College Board exams with an “anti-woke alternative” (para. 16).

Along with topics that are supposedly CRT-related, LGBTQ and other themes of sexuality are also increasingly prohibited from classroom discussions and books. Governor DeSantis led the boycott on discussions of sexual orientation or gender identity when he signed into law Florida House Bill 1557, which has come to be called the “Don’t Say Gay” law (NEA, n.d.). Like anti-CRT legislation, exact terminology and enforcement procedures of the law are vague and open to various interpretations (NEA, n.d.). Thirteen states³ have followed Florida in proposing their own anti-LGBTQ bills (Jones & Franklin, 2022).

Throughout the United States, books with LGBTQ and other themes of sexuality are also being removed from K-12 libraries and classrooms. In February 2022 alone, there were “69 anti-LGBTQ school policy bills proposed in numerous states. Some of those bills proposed banning LGBTQ books from school districts, while others ban discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity in class (O’Loughlin et al., 2022, p. 1). PEN America found that “41% of [the 2021 school year’s] banned books were targeted due to LGBTQ+ content” (Monteil, 2022, para. 2). Idaho House Bill 666 (2022) forbids “disseminating material harmful to minors” (Section 1, 18-1517). During public hearing regarding the bill, speakers listed “queer texts as examples of ... pornographic (O’Loughlin et al., 2022, p. 5). For example, despite containing no sex

scenes, Maia Kobabe's graphic memoir *Gender Queer*, "about growing up nonbinary and asexual, was [2022's] most banned book" (para. 5).

Even books about puberty or relationships, themes of rights and activism, and biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs with characters of color or religious minorities, such as Judy Blume's pre-teen classic *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*; Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*; and *Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl*, have been banned across the U.S. (Martin, 2022). Librarians in Miami-Dade County, Florida, have taken the preemptive step of removing the book *Daddy's Roommate* without it being banned because the book's message is that "gay is just another kind of love..., and love is the best kind of happiness" (Miciak, 2023, paras. 2 & 3) because in Florida, it is the law to say "gay."

At a 2021 school board meeting in Virginia, two members "openly called for 'sexual' books to be burned" (Riedel, 2022, para. 3). Similarly, Oklahoma Superintendent of Schools Ryan Walters has banned books he deemed as having "pornographic material and sexualized content from public school libraries, including 190 LGBTQ titles" (Villarreal, 2023, para. 5) even though no book ban law is in place. At the same time, he advocates teaching the Bible in history classes, despite its scenes of explicit sexual activity, incest, murder, and infanticide. Further, Superintendent Walters seeks to require that each public school classroom be required to "display a durable poster or framed copy of the Ten Commandments" (Felder, 2023, para. 2) to restore morality in classrooms because, he claims, "the current national left-wing indoctrination is attempting to destroy religion as a way to destroy our entire country (para. 7). Walters relies on The Oklahoma Advisory Council on Founding Principles for policy recommendations, although it is not officially associated with the Oklahoma State Department of Education. One of their recommendations is that he take "every action possible to allow corporate prayer and expressions of faith in God back in our public school system" (para. 9).

The attitudes and beliefs that result in bans did not begin with concerns over CRT. Prohibitions against topics and people are historically part of oppressive systems. Refusing to teach students about people who are different than them, about people who are like them but who did bad things, or about an "awareness of one's own and others' thoughts and feelings" (Elias et al., 1997, p. 8) suppresses those topics into null curriculum. The failure to learn such topics does not really liberate students from the distress those subjects might cause; instead, they experience the "negative freedom" of censorship and obstruction (Greene, 1988, p. 11).

These approaches seem to be in opposition to John Dewey's philosophies of social-emotional learning and building a community of learners, in which "a positive social-emotional setting...allows students to have a sense of belonging [and to] feel significant" (Williams, 2017, p. 95). An important aspect of social-emotional learning is equity for a broad range of learners; this means meeting the needs of and giving a sense of belonging to *all* students, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation (Bond, 2020).

Antonio Gramsci made a powerful case that such outcomes are likely conscious aims rather than unintended consequences of well-meaning actions. Gramsci (1972) argued the function of hegemonic activity is "to organize the consent of the masses in support of the dominant class" (p. 12). "Cultural hegemony" embeds power dynamics within language and, as such, the "use of language in discourse and the subject matter of the discourse itself can be reinforcing constructs of cultural hegemony," thus enabling White people to retain their power (Martin-Thomsen et al., 2021, p. 285). Historically, Whiteness has depended on racial hierarchy with the "central principle [of] Whiteness as an identity...not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be 'not White'" (Harris, 1993, p. 1736). Whiteness as a power relation is built upon the belief of White supremacy while "assigning a racial identity that [is] equated with inferior status" to racial groups who are considered subordinate (p. 1761).

The political and social conditions that have resulted in censorship and book bans involve many structures. As Peter McLaren (1996) identified, a crisis of democracy can be brought about by acts of "bad faith" (p. 152), such as White supremacy, racism, and "capitalist patriarchy" (p. 169). Similarly, Paulo Freire described

power factors such as domination and oppression, which are but a short step from separation and fragmentation, i.e., once I see another as "other," it is but a short step to see and treat the other hierarchically as lower or higher in relation to oneself. (qtd. in Kuelzer & Houser, 2019, p. 47)

The "social construction of Whiteness...was the mechanism that forged a White 'national' identity in American history, as various ethnic groups defined themselves as different from people of color in order to benefit from the privileges accorded to the White population" (Chubbuck, 2004, p. 304). Similarly, Jean Anyon (1980) and Peggy McIntosh (1989) suggested that social stratification and White privilege may contribute to the societal separation and fragmentation that impact institutes of education.

Literature is potentially one way to reconcile separation and fragmentation because it gives readers the opportunity to “draw parallels between their own and others’ experiences” (Boaz, 2020, p. 242) and a way for them to learn about the world, others, and themselves. When “[people] read, [they] learn. [They] take [information] in, and [they] make it [their] own. [They] evaluate. [They] consider. [They] form opinions. [They] agree, or [they] disagree....Reading [equals] learning” (Neace, 2015, para. 4). Because banned books include those with “main and secondary protagonists of color [and] issues of race and racism” (Friedman & Johnson, 2022, para 3), the “absence of people of color in children’s books positions Whiteness as normative and dominant... [thus] perpetuating and promoting biases. Absence subtly supports the exclusion, devaluation, and marginalization of people of color” (Aronson et al., 2018, p. 166). Likewise, “heteronormative” (Aronson & Laughter, 2020, p. 264) literature can reinforce “the systemic oppression of heterosexism” (p. 269) over people who identify as LGBTQ.

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Gender binary is the “pervasive idea that there are two, rigidly founded and dichotomously existing genders” that are “biologically determined and stable over time” (Shelton & Dodd, 2021, 625). Although biologists and many others no longer view gender as bound by binary constructs, some people still adhere to binary gender classifications that are “deeply connected to other binaries, and...subsequently enforce the hierarchy of White, European, male dominance” (627).

Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) wrote of binary either-or thinking in strictly enforced, traditional male/female sexual and cultural roles. She stated that individuals who deviate from those roles, such as LGBTQ people, were feared by those in orthodox society. They were seen as “different...other...lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human” (p. 40). The historical *othering* of LGBTQ people leaves little room for representation in traditional, heterosexual social categories and hierarchies.

Consequences of Censorship and Book Bans

Censorship of what can be taught, read, or even discussed in classrooms does not occur in a vacuum. Those decisions and actions have significant consequences, affecting K-12 and higher education. As Richard Shaull argued in his foreword for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,

There is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 34)

A significant problem resulting from banning CRT and “offensive” books is the trivialization or illusion of deep learning, which can subtly maintain many inequitable conditions initiated throughout history. For what other purpose, though, do teachers assign literature than to help students think beyond their “immediate world[s]” (Robertson, 2022, para. 17)? Within diverse topics, “students often begin to inquire how they can help overcome the disparities revealed by the texts” (Burke & Greenfield, 2016, p. 47).

Retired Tulsa Public Schools English teacher Amanda Trower claimed that Oklahoma House Bill 1775 restricts teachers’ ability to teach their students critical thinking skills (Robertson, 2022). For example, *Hamlet*, Act 2 Scene 2, includes a quote that, in today’s political climate, is ironic: “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (para. 10). Classroom discussion over Hamlet’s claim that “nothing is inherently bad” or what “moral codes, if any” all people share would likely violate House Bill 1775 (para. 12). Regrettably, but not surprisingly, students in some Florida school districts will be allowed to read only excerpts from William Shakespeare’s plays, not the full texts, because “[s]everal Shakespeare plays use suggestive puns and innuendo, and it is implied that the protagonists have had premarital sex in *Romeo and Juliet*” (Associated Press, 2023, para.3).

Despite the stated intent of Oklahoma House Bill 1775 (2021), that classroom instruction should not cause any individual discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex, overt racism (Brooks 2023)^b is becoming more prevalent in Oklahoma schools, perhaps because removing books with main characters of color reinforces the “internalized message of White supremacy” (Chubbuck, 2004, p. 302). If, however, teachers were to “attempt to teach the children to be kinder to their peers [this] could

be construed as social-emotional learning: far too 'woke' to be taught in any Oklahoma public school (Brooke, 2023, para. 4).

Other states are implementing new rules against teaching "divisive concepts." The term "divisive concepts" refers to the idea...that the institutions of the United States were created to maintain racial and gender inequalities and to preserve the supremacy of White people and men" (Brint, 2023, para 1). For example, in 2023, the Florida Board of Education refused to pilot an "Advanced Placement high school course on African American studies, saying it violated state law and 'lacks educational value'" (Fortinsky, 2023, para. 2). Florida has also banned Advanced Placement psychology courses rather than let students learn "how sex and gender influence socialization and other aspects of development because of a law signed by Governor DeSantis in 2022 which forbids "classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity" in part because the course refuses "to stigmatize LGBTQ people as...perverts" (Marcotte, 2023, paras. 2 & 4). New York Senate Bill 1452 goes even further in restricting ethnic studies by banning instruction about four core groups: "Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latina and Latino Americans" (Gutkin, 2023, para. 2).

Curriculum bans and restrictions have also had adverse consequences in higher education. More than 30⁴ bills across the country, with some states having multiple bills, target diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) at public colleges (Bryant & Appleby, 2023). The main purpose of DEI is to create a sense of belonging and acceptance regardless of peoples' ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or physical ability.

Some worry that anti-DEI policies "send a message to students and faculty of color [and] from marginalized communities that there is a lack of interest of the part of the government in supporting them when they're on campus" (Lu, 2023b, para. 6). In addition to the concern that eliminating DEI offices at public universities could make it "more difficult for institutions to defend themselves against future claims of discrimination" (Lu, 2023a, para, 4), states that have banned DEI will lose private, state, and federal funds and grants they once received for diversity work (Marijolic, 2023).

Defenders of DEI programs point out that "DEI offices provide vital support to underrepresented students, including students of color, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities" and warn that states eliminating "DEI activities will lose students, employees, and [federal] grants, even as many colleges are struggling to recruit and retain students" (Lu, 2023c, para. 6). Faced with the loss of DEI programs and with legislation, such as the "Don't Say Gay" bill

in Florida and other states, many LGBTQ college students are choosing to attend college in states without homophobic policies (Alonso, 2023; Wood, 2023). Colorado College, a small, highly selective private college, is taking advantage of the expected exodus from restrictive states. Officials at Colorado College announced they will “minimize barriers for transfer students from five states⁵ that have passed anti-DEI legislation,” will give transfer students “full credit for transferable coursework,” and help students meet their “full financial need[s]” (Chatterjee, 2023, paras. 2, 3, & 4).

In June 2023, the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action for college admissions, claiming “racial preferences for one group necessarily harm members of other groups” (Walsh, 2023, para. 3). The intent of affirmative action for colleges, however, was to “contextualize the opportunities that [students belonging to minority groups] had during their K-12 experience[s] and the disadvantages in access to high-quality teachers and high-quality advisors that they may have had during high school” (Wood, 2023, para.9), not to give students of color preference over White or Asian students. Schools that engaged in affirmative action were “more often selective colleges,” which recognized “students’ exposure to high-quality schools and the kind of preparation necessary to gain admission [to those colleges] is unequally distributed” (para. 8).

Two major university systems, the University of California and the University of Michigan, eliminated affirmative action years before the 2023 Supreme Court ruling, so their experiences suggest what effects other colleges and universities might also experience.

UCLA and University of California Berkley saw an immediate impact after the California affirmative action ban in 1996...[in which] admissions of minority students dropped by nearly 50%....[the University of California] reportedly has invested nearly half a billion collars in diversity outreach programs to attract minority students since 2004. (Wolfe, 2023, para. 5 & 8)

More recently, the University of “Michigan’s ban on affirmative action...went into effect [in 2006]. [In 2005], the University of Michigan reported 7% of their enrollment were Black students. By 2021, that percentage fell to 4%” (para. 13). If these reduced enrollment numbers are typical, not only will universities feel the impact of fewer students, but many young people, especially Black and Latinx students, will lose opportunities to attend highly selective schools.

While the Supreme Court ruled affirmative action as unconstitutional, they did not rule similarly on legacy admissions. Legacy admissions “gives children of alumni and donors an edge in gaining en-

try to many of the nation's most selective colleges" (de Visé & Lonas, 2023, para. 1). Legacy admissions is an example of structural racism in higher education that was originally "intended to exclude immigrant Jewish students from" prestigious universities (Charles, 2023, para. 7). While "more than 100 colleges and universities" have ended "legacy preferences since 2015," (de Visé & Lonas, 2023, para. 4), legacy admissions still serve to expand privilege instead of opportunity: "seventy percent" of those who benefit from legacy admissions are White (Charles, 2023, para. 7).

Another effect of censorship and the banning of certain topics is the elimination of academic programs. For example, Florida's House Bill 999, bans courses in "Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality, or any derivative major or minor of these belief systems" (Roberts-Grmela, 2023, para. 1). Understandably, faculty worry what this means for their programs, jobs, and students because the bill gives "boards of trustees unprecedented power over faculty hiring, tenure review, and rewriting university mission statements, [and the right to] ban general-education courses that teach 'identity politics,'" or that do not align with conservative points of view (para. 2). Politicians in Iowa, Louisiana, North Dakota, and Texas are also seeking either to ban tenure for new faculty hires (Bauer-Wolf, 2023) or to eliminate tenure entirely (Brown, 2023). In a recent study of faculty members in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas, two-thirds of respondents indicated that, because of the increasingly aggressive involvement of conservative lawmakers, they would not "recommend academic work in their state to colleagues. About a third said they were actively considering employment in another state," while "20 percent have interviewed elsewhere since 2021" (Zahneis & Williams June, 2023, para. 2).

Such controversies have resulted in a growing dissatisfaction with or skepticism of the value of higher education. A 2023 Gallup poll of over 1,000 people found that "just over one third" of those surveyed expressed confidence in colleges and universities, while 62 percent of respondents had "very little" confidence in colleges and universities (Schermelle, 2023, paras. 2 & 5). Even some college graduates lack confidence in higher education (para. 11). These perceptions are not helped when Oklahoma State Superintendent Walters publicly questioned whether "the state should be sending its students to Oklahoma colleges and universities" (Eger, 2023, para. 1). The growth in attitudes of distrust may indicate further decreases in college enrollment, funding, and relevance in the future.

Classroom censorship policies are designed to control and limit

the free speech and ideas of teachers and students. When personal, religious, or political beliefs are used to make decisions about what students are allowed to learn, education is negatively impacted. Censorship in schools can also lead to narrow cultural and worldviews. Students who do not learn from literary examples that African Americans were enslaved and abused will not understand the implications of marches for Black rights, or the struggles people of color still go through to be treated as equals within society. Censorship of LGBTQ topics attempts to silence, invalidate, and erase the existence of LGBTQ students. Finally, while teaching about religions and activities such as referencing religious beliefs in assignments, unofficial prayer, or student Bible studies in public schools are protected under the Constitution, religious instruction in public schools is unconstitutional, although religious education is beginning to influence curriculum in many school districts. Education thrives in diverse, equitable, inclusive, and culturally sustaining school environments. Censorship and its effects are hurtful and deny students the content knowledge they need to critically analyze our society or learn how to act as empathetic leaders, advocates, and allies in our democracy.

Notes

¹ Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming

² Alaska, Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming

³ Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas

⁴ Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia

⁵ Florida, North Carolina, North Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas

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