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**Educators as Bogeyman: Exploring the Attacks on Public  
Education in the 2020s and Offering Recommendations for a  
More Peaceful K-12 Educational Climate**

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**Introduction**

Much has been written about the plight of teachers and how they have been devalued within the context of US society (e.g., Goldstein, 2015). Issues related to poor pay, cuts to pension plans, diminished bargaining power, school

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disinvestment, an obsession with high stakes standardized testing, an emphasis on merit pay, and questionable evaluation tactics have all been problems teachers have faced for decades (Bruno, 2018; Giroux, 2012). In recent years, teachers in the United States—particularly those working in public schools—have also been scapegoats in what might be regarded as a reactionary populist backlash against critical pedagogy and equitable diversity. To use language recently employed by Stephen Steinberg (2022), this backlash is part of a “counter-revolution” that has been gaining momentum and seeks to roll back rights, values, ideals, and practices that have characterized the post-Civil Rights era in the United States. Although Steinberg is referring primarily to the reconfiguration and re-entrenchment of systemic racism in the US since the 1960s, the idea of a counter-revolution is also discernible in recent efforts to limit or outright ban American schools from teaching critical aspects of US history and society.

According to many on the Right (e.g., Hegseth and Goodwin 2022), pedagogical objectives that move beyond standardized, “common core” curricula and use schooling as a way to encourage critical thinking, civic engagement, and social justice are a clear indication that education has been weaponized by the radical Left and transformed into a system of indoctrination. In response, under the guise that parents have the “right” to control what their children learn in school, states have been proposing and enacting a number of attacks on curricula reminiscent of the McCarthy era. Much of the furor has been focused on the teaching of racial issues, in particular, critical race theory (CRT), which is a framework that was developed for use at the graduate level of academia. CRT is an approach to teaching history that emphasizes race as a social construct and documents how racism is not just individual bias but embedded into legal systems, education, and various policies. Further, CRT highlights the legacies of racist practices like slavery on people of color today. Key architects of CRT, with its origins in the 1970s and 1980s, include scholars Kimberle Crenshaw, Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado.

Other attacks are focused on teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity as well as on “social and emotional learning,” or SEL. SEL aims to teach young people the five general skills: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, the ability to get along in groups, and ethical and responsible decision making (Strozewski, 2022). Additionally, there has been a surge of attempts to ban certain books in schools, most notably those focused on the same two subjects of race and sexual orientation/gender identity. As the nation continues to grapple with the global COVID-19 pandemic, school boards, educators and administrators who

followed science-based recommendations for safety protocols, notably mask mandates, have also faced attacks by legislators and, in many cases, by parents. Furthermore, as part of these attempts to put more control over school curricula in the hands of parents instead of the school system, there has also been an increase in efforts to overturn school board decisions and even remove school board members.

None of this, however, is new. Educators have previously been vilified as bogeyman in the US. Accordingly, this paper begins with a brief history of right-wing efforts to dismantle public education, framing them as moral panics. It then explores some of the structural conditions that promote the current concerns mentioned above, followed by an examination of who is largely responsible for the current demonization of educators. The paper concludes with a review of the effects that these attacks are having on educators and on public education, and provides recommendations for change.

### **Moral Panics and the Demonization of Teachers in US Historical Context**

A recent national survey shows that a majority of K-12 teachers, although left-of-center, hold moderate political views and are by no means the “radicals” they are often portrayed to be (Green and Paul 2021). In fact, the same survey finds that close to a third of teachers classify themselves as “conservative.” Therefore, far from any solid grounding in objective reality, fears about a “leftist take-over” of the school system—which are based on hearsay, half-truths, and exaggerations—are constitutive of what is sometimes referred to as a “moral panic” (Cohen 1972/2022; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). In his classic study *Folks Devils and Moral Panics*, Stanley Cohen (1972, p. 9) defines moral panics as “a condition, episode, person, or group of persons. . . that becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, [religious leaders], politicians, and other Right-thinking people.” As with most moral panics, the main agents driving the presumed threat are what Cohen referred to as “folk devils,” or people who are socially constructed as villainous agents actively encouraging the degradation of society. In short, folk devils are the equivalent of a “boogeyman.” Taking this framing into account, there is a long history in the United States of teachers being vilified as “folk devils” or “boogeyman” polluting the minds of students and carrying out some nefarious mission to undermine US society.

During the 1920s, for example, conservative pundits warned that teachers who taught “evolution” were stripping children of their Christian values, and, in doing so, promoting moral decay and social dysfunction. Evangelist T.T. Martin from Mississippi exemplifies this anti-evolution/anti-science sentiment. In his 1923 book *Hell and the High Schools*, Martin condemns educators who teach evolution as follows:

The Germans who poisoned the wells and springs in northern France and Belgium and fed little children poisoned candy were angels compared to the teachers, paid by our taxes, who feed our children’s minds with the deadly, soul-destroying poison of Evolution. . . Evolution and the teaching of Evolution in tax-supported schools is the greatest curse that ever fell upon the Earth (Martin 1923, p. 24).

Martin’s comments clearly reflect a moral panic of that time, particularly among Christian conservatives. Teachers who gave credence to evolution, according to Martin, were akin to agents of Satan (i.e., folk devils/bogeyman) who were corrupting the youth, emasculating boys, robbing students of their Christian virtue, and promoting a morally bankrupt society under the guise of teaching “science.” To counteract the threat posed by teachers propagating evolution, Martin, like other conservative leaders around the country, urged parents to take over local school boards, filter out all suspicious educators, and ensure their state legislatures were dominated by men of God. According to reporter Adam Latts (2021), largely as a result of this anti-evolution hysteria, from 1922-1929, 53 bills or resolutions to ban evolution from schools were proposed in 21 states.

By the 1930s, the moral panic shifted to communist educators—sometimes referred to as “reeducators”—infiltrating US schools. Particularly during and in the wake of the Great Depression, discussions about Marxism and the “failures of capitalism” became increasingly popular among many intellectuals, and this prompted some states to conduct investigations of potential communist influences in schools and colleges (Howlett and Cohan 2008). New York was at the forefront of these efforts. In 1934, for example, state legislator Irving Ives sponsored a bill that required public school teachers to sign a “loyalty oath” as a defense against communism and other “isms” that were oppositional to the American government, capitalism, and way of life (Ekrich, 1967, p. 357). Furthermore, in response to a presumably mounting (albeit unsubstantiated) communist threat in schools, a New York statute in 1939 called the Feinberg Law banned teachers from calling for the overthrow of the US government. Contrary to what supporters of this law claimed,

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the idea that there were large numbers of communist teachers or professors indoctrinating children and calling for a violent overthrow of the US government was largely a myth (Hunt, 2015). Nonetheless, this law further reinforced the need to surveille, identify, and remove teachers suspected of being communists or communist sympathizers. After a group of parents and teachers challenged this law, the case was taken to the US Supreme Court. In a 6-3 decision, the Court ruled that “the state had a constitutional right to protect the immature minds of children in public schools from subversive [communist] propaganda, subtle or otherwise, disseminated by those to whom they look for guidance, authority, and leadership” (Supreme Court Rules on Communist Teachers 2021).

The moral panic against communists gained even more momentum during the 1940s and 1950s. As discussed by Jonathan Hunt (2015), particularly during the decades following World War II and at the height of the Cold war, anti-communism became central to an “American identity.” Identifying and weeding out all potential communists from schools and other areas of US life thus became a national priority. A major promoter of these efforts was the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA), a committee of the US House of Representatives that sought to investigate communists, fascists, and other “subversive” people and activities in the US. In 1948, HCUA published a guide listing “100 things you should know about communism and education,” in which the committee issued the following warning to parents in the US:

This is to tell you what the masterminds of communism have planned for your child in the name of ‘education.’ They mean to take him from the nursery, put him in uniform with hammer and sickle flag in one hand and a gun in the other, and send him out to conquer the world. If they have their way, he will be guided from the Kindergarten straight to college so that he will have anything except a mind of his own. He will be trained but not educated. . . he will be the child-man of communism (Communism and Education 1948).

In short, children in American schools, according to HCUA, are at risk of being stripped of their agency and turned into communist automatons unless something is done to stop this threat. Other state level committees—e.g., the Rapp-Coudert Committee in New York, the Canwell Committee in Washington, and the Tenney Committee in California—also followed these directives and sought to identify communists in public schools through a variety of intrusive means that are antithetical to a presumably “free” society (Hunt 2015). The HUAC in particular

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urged the US public to be vigilant, work in their community “to get rid of communists and communist influences in their schools or anywhere else,” and not be dissuaded if, in their valiant efforts, they face accusations of “witch hunting,” or “textbook burnings,” as these are all “standard smear in the communist propaganda machine” (Communism and Education 1948). Yet this moral panic led precisely to “witch hunting” in American schools and universities. Despite the fact that, in actuality, a very small percentage of Americans teachers and professors were formally affiliated with the Communist Party (e.g., Hultzen 1950; Iverson 1959), educators were increasingly subject to investigations, loyalty oaths, pedagogical restraints, and threats of termination. Particularly during the 1950s, at the height of McCarthyism, hundreds of teachers and professors were fired for being communists or suspected communists. In reality, even among the educators who might have been affiliated with the Communist Party or sympathetic to communism, the majority did not use the classroom as a locus of indoctrination. As noted by Hunt (2015, p. 33), “Yet if successful in firing hundreds of teachers who were communists and suspected communists, investigating committees and even the FBI were hard pressed to provide examples of actual subversion or indoctrination in the classroom” (see also Shrecker 1986).

The social activism of the 1960s and 1970s also encouraged a moral panic about “radical” teachers and professors who, here again, were presumably committed to pushing a leftist political agenda that challenged prevailing institutions, perpetrated epistemological sabotage, and eroded the social and moral fabric of American society in the name of promoting equality and social justice. In his bestselling book *The Closing of the American Mind*, philosopher Allan Bloom (1987) argued that the social upheavals of the 1960s lead to an obsession with social activism that compromised higher education by undermining the search for “truth,” vulgarizing culture, and promoting a form of social and moral relativism that was oppositional to the Western canon. Bloom’s fears were further promoted by a host of writers throughout the 1990s. According to Roger Kimball (1990), as student radicals from the 1960s and 1970s earned doctorate degrees, entered the academy, became tenured professors, department chairs, and even deans and elite universities, they systematically reshaped college curriculums to fit a leftist view of the world that denigrates western values, undermines objective reality, and gives legitimacy to subversive perspectives associated with deconstructionism, postmodernism, critical theory, and liberation theology. The anti-essentialist, anti-hierarchical orientation of these perspectives, in turn, bolstered fields like black studies, gender studies, gay studies, post-colonial studies and other field of inquiry that, according to critics, are little more than programs of indoctrination that pass

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as “scholarship” (Kimball 1990). According to Dinesh D’Souza (1991), these radical fields of study are fundamentally illiberal, as they emphasize a victim mentality that demonizes Western culture, promotes resentment, erodes academic standards, and encourages preferential treatment.

In more recent years, the moral panic has continued in the form of a presumably militant “woke” agenda that is said to permeate the school system, as “radical” educators are given a green light to teach subjects that demonize white people, encourage racial minorities to see themselves as victims of “systemic racism,” confuse underage kids about their gender identity and sexual orientation, and convince students that the United States is a fundamentally immoral society that must be entirely uprooted.

### **Social Structural Promoters of Moral Panics Against Teachers/Critical Curricula**

As in the past, the current moral panic directed against teachers might be a reflection of prevailing structural conditions in contemporary US society. First, the increasing pervasiveness of the internet and social media has encouraged the rise of “filter bubbles” and digital echo chambers that can easily distort reality and reinforce confirmation biases. As stated by Walter Quattrociocchi (2017, p. 63), “the Web has created an echo chamber where misinformation thrives. . . the viral spread of hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and other false or baseless information online is one of the most disturbing social trends of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Misinformation about radical teachers trying to undermine America, encourage the persecution of white people, or “groom” students to become gay or transgender has been widely propagated in Right wing media outlets and especially on social media (e.g., Block 2022). As is well known, in their efforts to promote “personal advertising,” major digital/social media companies such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, and others use algorithms that bring up search results based on users’ likes, preferences, or search histories. What results are “echo chambers” or online spaces/communities where people encounter others who share similar ideologies, interests, or beliefs. According to Pariser (2011), these echo chambers and the filter bubbles that create them “dramatically amplify confirmation biases” as users inadvertently participate in an ongoing “communal reinforcement” of misinformation that, over time, becomes accepted as indisputable truth. The fervor with which angry parents are currently going after “woke” or “leftist” teachers is a testament to this bias.

Second, political divisions are also a structural promoter of moral panics. While the US has always experienced political divisions, these divisions have, especially since the rise of Donald Trump into the national political scene, become magnified. Perhaps more so than in the last four decades, Democrats and Republicans accuse one another of espousing ideas that are not simply different to their own, but rather anathema to what is moral, factual, and/or genuinely “American” (see Finley, Esposito, and Johnson 2020). As was the case during the so-called “red scare,” this sort of radical partisanship has created a fertile environment for demonizing others who deviate from one’s own worldview. The demonization of teachers who presumably “indoctrinate” children into beliefs and values that are vilified as evil, degenerate, and/or un-American is a prime example of this.

Third, the last several years have been particularly difficult for millions of people in the United States. After years of neoliberal policies that emphasize free markets, undermine job security, stagnate wages, erode families, and thwart social mobility, millions of people in the United States have felt anxious, vulnerable, and forgotten (Esposito 2021). As discussed by Case and Denton (2020) these dynamics have eroded what had been the “pillars” that once gave life meaning in the United States: a good job, a stable home life, and a voice in the community. In the last two years, these challenges have been compounded by the effects of COVID-19, which further amplified a context of fear, mistrust, and anxiety. Under these sorts of conditions, people are more likely to look for scapegoats—whether it be immigrants, racial minorities, or “radical” teachers promoting leftist “woke” propaganda, normalizing degeneracy, and undermining US society.

Fourth, the past few years have also witnessed increasing activism and calls for social change. The murder of George Floyd and subsequent civic unrest in the US signaled to millions of people that the country was in dire need of a “racial reckoning”. This call for a ‘reckoning’ was also extended to include increasing support not only for racial justice, but for LGBTQ rights, women’s rights, environmental responsibility, and other issues. Movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter have promoted awareness about the fact that the country still faces patterns of female subordination, systemic racism, and homo/transphobia. As such, there have been increasing calls to uproot all vestiges of patriarchy, white privilege/supremacy, and heteronormativity. But much like what was seen during the activism and turmoil of the 1960’s, while many contemporary liberals/progressives regard all this as “progress,” others find these developments to be disconcerting, destabilizing, and clear signs that the country is being “taken

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over” by leftists who are determined to destroy America. All these conditions have contributed to current attacks against teachers and curriculums that: 1) critically discuss issues related to systemic racism, gender identity, and sexual orientation; 2) emphasize the need for civic engagement and social/personal responsibility; and 3) address alternatives to dominant narratives of US history and society, including those pertaining to foundational documents (e.g., the US Constitution) and political/economic systems.

### **Attacks on Teaching Anti-Racism**

As discussed, Right-wing media outlets and conservative politicians have made it seem as though K-12 educators are deliberately attempting to “indoctrinate” youth by teaching about systemic racism. Critics charge that CRT is divisive and that it teaches young people to feel guilty about the country’s past and to feel bad about their race. They claim it is nothing more than indoctrination. Calls for bans on CRT are typically misinformed about what it really is and are a part of broader conservative criticism of “wokeness.” According to education news outlet Chalkbeat, efforts to restrict education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to US history and similar topics have been attempted in 28 states, as of this writing. Nine states (Arizona, Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, New Hampshire, South Carolina and North Dakota) have enacted anti-CRT legislation, although Arizona’s law was overturned by that state’s supreme court (Graham, 2021).

In reality, CRT is not being taught in K-12 schools, but most educators do believe that it is essential that young people learn about the history of racial injustice in America, how racism has been institutionalized into laws and policies, and the effects of that institutionalization both historically and today. Yet even if educators are not explicitly teaching from a CRT framework, these kinds of laws have a chilling effect on the teaching of racial issues in general. Further, many of the anti-CRT laws are very broad, and thus have been interpreted to prohibit an array of issues. These include teaching the story of Johnny Appleseed and objections to a book about Ruby Bridges, as the latter does not offer the perspective of redemption for racists who screamed at her for trying to attend school. It appears fairly clear that the chilling effect on teaching about race and anti-racism is no accident but rather the intended, if not stated, effect of the laws (Graham, 2021).

A bill in Wisconsin would forbid not just teaching CRT, but also ban the teaching of concepts including “Social Emotional Learning,” “Diversity, Equity

and Inclusion,” culturally responsive teaching, anti-racism, conscious and unconscious bias, culturally responsive practices, diversity training, equity, microaggressions, multiculturalism, patriarchy, restorative justice, social justice, systemic racism, white privilege, and white supremacy, among others. It includes another near 90 terms, such as anti-racism, centering or de-centering, critical pedagogy, equity, implicit bias, normativity, patriarchy, racial prejudice, systems of power and oppression, and woke. More than just ideological, these bans often come with financial implications. In Wisconsin, the proposed bill would authorize a 10% loss of funding to any school district or charter school found to be in violation. The teaching of CRT and the like reached the federal level, as former President Donald Trump pushed for “patriotic education” and asserted that left-wing teachers were indoctrinating students. He issued an executive order prohibiting certain types of diversity training for federal employees. Trump endorsed, and several Republican representatives in Congress, called for cutting federal funding to any school that used lessons based on the 1619 Project, a *New York Times* series that emphasizes the legacy of slavery (Greene, 2021). Importantly, as was true historically, the teaching of anti-racism has been inaccurately equated with communist infiltration of education.

### **Attacks on Teaching SEL**

Florida is perhaps the epicenter of the right-wing agenda to dismantle public education as we know it. It bans CRT and SEL among other things. Last year, a bill proposed in Indiana, referred to as “A Parents' Bill of Rights” focused on SEL. Attorney General Todd Rokita explained, “SEL programs represent a fundamental shift in the role of teachers from educators to therapists and expand the reach of government into domains of the family.” A bill in Oklahoma would impose a similar ban on SEL. The Oklahoma bill states that “no public school district, public charter school, or public virtual charter school shall use federal, state, or private funds to promote, purchase, or utilize the concepts of social emotional learning for training, instruction, or education of students.” Additionally, no “public school district, public charter school, or public virtual charter school teacher, administrator, counselor, employee, or volunteer shall use any curricula with content related to social emotional learning in the training, instruction, or education of students,” with the bill specifying that it applies to all learning resources. Dozens of other efforts have been proposed around the country (Strozewski, 2022).

Critics assert that the prohibitions on SEL will do a terrible disservice to young people, who need to learn not just academic curricula but also how to

effectively communicate, behave, and participate in civil society (Strozewski, 2022). Yet, taking it further, in some communities, parents have begun to contend that mental health counselors and suicide prevention initiatives in schools are also “indoctrinating” students (Kingkade & Hixenbaugh, 2021). Such a claim, if taken seriously by school boards or legislators, would inevitably lead to further deficits in mental health assistance which is deeply troubling, in particular at a time when more youth are struggling than ever due to the global pandemic and other factors.

### **Attacks on Teaching About Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

Several states have considered or enacted legislation related to teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity. Florida’s law titled Parental Rights in Education has been roundly criticized and referred to as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill.” More than a dozen similar bills have been proposed around the country. In Arizona, HB 2011 is currently being considered. It is similar to a law that was previously overturned that had been called “no promo homo,” as it would require students to seek permission before joining groups like Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) or others that involve sexuality and gender. The previous law even prohibited any sexual education in public schools that “promoted a homosexual lifestyle.” Iowa is considering Senate Bill 2024, which bans any instruction related to gender identity in K-6 classrooms unless parents give their consent. In Ohio, HB 616 mirrors Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” legislation, banning instructional materials and curricula on sexual orientation, gender identity, and CRT (Stanton, 2022).

### **Attacks on Teaching Alternate Political Systems**

Under the guise of supporting victims of communism, starting in 2023-2024, Florida teachers have to devote at least 45 minutes of instruction annually to teaching about the harms of communism. Governor Ron DeSantis signed House Bill 395 in May 2022, designating November 7 as “Victims of Communism Day.” It requires teaching about communist leaders including Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Fidel Castro as well as the “poverty, starvation, migration, systemic lethal violence, and suppression of speech” that occurred during those regimes (Ocasio, 2022). While surely there are many legitimate criticisms of communist regimes, this is yet another example of legislators pushing a political agenda, with DeSantis declaring “communism is evil.” And while most social studies courses already do cover communism and the concerns about this system/ideology, here the state is again trying to control school curricula. Further, it is hard to miss the contradictions

in these laws—educators are to avoid teaching the ills of racism in the US but are mandated to teach about them elsewhere. Right-wing politicians, pundits and activists often equate anti-racism education with communism, with CRT often being called “Marxist.” This concern about communism in school is not new, however. In 1953 Florida adopted a strictly anti-communist curriculum that, like today, inspired parents to report supposed violations. Three mothers complained about the textbook *American Problems Today*, which they claimed, “painted a favorable picture of the American Civil Liberties Union, and “advocated FEPC [the Fair Employment Practice Committee] and other forms of integration.” A state senator claimed that the textbook taught principles “opposite” to those in the Constitution, and the northeastern Florida teacher who introduced the book to his class was eventually fired.” According to Dr. Robert Dahlgren, a SUNY Fredonia professor who has written about the Red Scare’s effect on Florida teachers, the point is to stifle discussion about America’s past and to promote American exceptionalism. He stated, “I think that’s the deeper level that these laws are trying to address, as they did back in the ’50s. They shut down any kind of expression of critical examination of our history” (Weill, 2021). Once again, it seems the key word of “communism” is enough to excite paranoia and legislative action.

## **Book Bans**

In April 2022, Florida’s Department of Education (FDE) banned 54 mathematics textbooks from use in K-12 schools, asserting that they include prohibited topics like CRT and social emotional learning. In all, the ban included more than 40 percent of the textbooks that had been submitted for review. The review was conducted to see if the textbooks were in line with a 2021 law that prohibits inclusion of “the theory that racism is not merely the product of prejudice, but that racism is embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons. The law also prohibits references to the 1619 Project, the *New York Times* work that highlighted the role of slavery in the nation’s founding. The FDE also wanted to know whether the material contained ‘culturally responsive teaching as it relates to [critical race theory]’ and ‘social justice as it relates to [critical race theory].’ Finally, they asked: Does it solicit “social-emotional learning?” (Balligit, 2022). Initially the specific reasons for why these books violated that law were not made public. However, upon requests from the public and Florida’s largest teacher’s union, some details were revealed. Almost 6,000 pages of documents were shared and showed that the books were overwhelmingly consistent with state law, and the issues cited by reviewers seemed to be more about personal opinion than actual violations. One reviewer said a book

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was biased because it presented climate change as a fact, rather than an opinion. This, of course, flies in the face of science. Using an overly broad definition of CRT, one reviewer flagged a textbook because it included the statement “The United States has eradicated neither poverty no [sic] racism.” That reviewer claimed the book had an “Emphasis that racism is embedded in American society,” which allegedly violates the 2021 law. Twenty-four of the books that were banned had even received high marks from the state’s textbook reviewers (Ballingit, 2022). More than CRT or issues related to racism, the reviewers flagged books that supposedly teach social and emotional learning. The majority of the books that were rejected were at the K-5 levels, where 71 percent of the submitted texts were disapproved (Hayes, 2022).

Florida is not alone in this zeal to ban books. A report from PEN America found that 86 districts in 26 states had banned more than 1,100 books from classrooms and libraries, most of which were about Black and LGBTQ+ individuals (Hayes, 2022).

### **Classroom Surveillance**

In addition to banning curricula and books, right-wing leaders are attempting to infiltrate the work of educators by proposing legislation that would allow school districts to install cameras in classrooms and record teachers and students. Florida is again leading the way. HB 1055, sponsored by Rep. Bob Rommel, R-Naples, and Rep. Mike Beltran, R-Lithia, states that its goal is to record “incidents” of bullying or inappropriate behavior by teachers or students. In districts where cameras are implemented, teachers would be required to wear microphones while class is in session and parents would have access to a recording if an incident occurred (Lowe, 2022). Conservative legislators in Iowa have proposed a similar bill, H.F. 2177, even expanding it to allow parents to see livestream recordings, which is not included in the Florida bill. The Iowa bill also requires that cameras be in every public school classroom, whereas the Florida bill allows districts to vote on whether they want to do so. Educators, administrators and staff who do not have their cameras active and in working order, or who otherwise obstruct the camera’s view would face fines up to five percent of their weekly salary. Rep. Norlin Mommsen, R, claims that bill is to “increase the involvement of parents in their children’s education” (Edelman, 2022).

Many are concerned that educators have been fleeing the profession and that fewer people want to become teachers. This is due to a host of factors, including low pay, safety concerns, and pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators and teacher's union leaders are concerned that this type of surveillance would further dissuade people from wanting to teach or keep teaching (Lowe, 2022). Further, educators see this as an attempt to censor classrooms and intimidate teachers. Iowa State Education Association President Mike Beranek called the bill "completely outrageous and dangerous," and National Education Association President Becky Pringle cautioned against using public school funding for such measures, especially at a time when schools are struggling to maintain necessary supplies and retain qualified educators and staff (Edelman, 2022).

### **School Board Meddling**

Another tactic in the playbook of Right-wing leaders and their supporters today is to interfere with local school boards. According to Ballotpedia, a website that tracks U.S. elections, conservative activists have tried at least 85 times to recall 225 school board members in 2021 alone, a record for a single year. Only 23 states allow voters to recall school board members, so that makes these numbers even more troubling. Right-wing activists attempted to recall school board members in 11 districts in Wisconsin in 2021, although only one reached the ballot. This was an attempt to recall four of seven school board members. Some 60 percent of parents voted to retain the school board members, but the brazen attempt to meddle with elected officials for a political agenda is scary (Graham, 2021).

### **Opposing Sensible Pandemic Protocols**

The same groups that are leading the attacks on curricula and educators have also peddled disinformation and lies about COVID-19, which in turn has resulted in opposition to common sense and science-based safety recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Association of Pediatrics, and many other experts. Florida again was a leader in these efforts, with Governor Ron DeSantis supporting the state's Department of Education in fall 2021 to withhold funds from two districts (Alachua and Broward County) that imposed mask mandates. State Education Commissioner, Richard Corcoran, invoked the parents' rights argument in a statement announcing the decision, claiming "They know what is best for their children" (Mervosh, 2021). In February 2022, however, DeSantis said he supported a different but equally punitive approach: allowing

parents to sue school districts over COVID protocols. He urged the legislature to allow “any parent whose kid was illegally forced masked this year in Florida, in any of those districts, they should have the right to sue if their kids have any negative effects of it” (Ceballos, 2022). Governors in Texas, Arizona, Oklahoma, Iowa, South Carolina, Tennessee and Utah also imposed bans on school district mask mandates, and Arkansas attempted to do so but the effort was overturned in court (Durkee, 2022).

### **Who is Responsible?**

While right-wing media has made it seem as though these assaults on education and educators are the work of an organic grassroots movement of parents, but the reality is quite different. It is clear that these efforts are calculated and orchestrated by radical groups, many of which are well-funded and influential. They use social media to spread disinformation and garner support for their so-called parents’ rights initiatives. According to Tim Chambers, whose work is focused on monitoring and countering disinformation on the internet, “The anti-CRT effort is textbook disinformation, manufactured and funded by right-wing think tanks and boosted by programmatically targeted ads to inflame users. It is from well-funded orgs working with suspect local groups on the ground, and with the ever-present background push from Fox News on broadcast and cable behind it all” (Graham, 2021). Many of the anti-CRT efforts were influenced by “model” legislation promoted by conservative organizations, including the Heritage Foundation, Citizens for Renewing America, and the American Legislative Exchange Council.

Another group that has spearheaded the efforts to unseat school board members is No Left Turn in Education. Founded by Elana Yaron Fishbein, a woman who objected to her children’s Philadelphia school including lessons about racism after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the organization now has chapters in many states where it offers resources for parents to “expose the radical indoctrination in K-12 education.” Parents Defending Education, based in Virginia, has a similar aim, even encouraging parents and activists to “document examples of woke indoctrination” and then adding them to its “IndoctriNation Map.” Samples include schools that encourage equity and anti-racism. Similarly, also in Virginia, the organization Fight for Schools opposed CRT and pushed for a school board recall in Loudon County in 2019. Co-founder Ian Prior claimed to be simply a concerned father but in fact had previously served as spokesman for Attorney General Jeff Sessions and is a long-time Republican strategist. Another leading

voice in opposing anti-racism education is Citizens for Renewing America, which was founded by President Trump's former budget director Russell Vought. It provides a toolkit for activists to oppose CRT, even including the note "whether CRT is currently in your school system is mostly irrelevant to the purpose of this document." Other supporters of these groups include long-time wealthy conservatives, including the Koch family and the Devos family (Murphy, 2021). In Florida, the push to review and then ban textbooks has come in large part from the Florida Citizen's Alliance, which critics say is a "fringe, right-wing group" that has expressed anti-LGBTQ views. Among its supporters listed on its website is Florida Oath Keepers. Some of the members of that group have faced sedition charges due to the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol. Another group that has supported the book bans and the Don't Say Gay Bill is the conservative Moms for Liberty. One member, Chris Allen, volunteered for the review of math books (Murphy, 2021).

Another tactic these groups use is to reward parents to "catch" educators violating new laws about teaching anti-racism. For example, Moms for Liberty, which operates in 35 states, offered a \$500 reward in New Hampshire for the first person to report a teacher violating its laws about teaching anti-racism (Murphy, 2021).

### **Effects of the Attacks on Education and Educators**

As previously mentioned, these efforts have an impact well beyond the actual targets. Students overwhelmingly want to learn about the topics that are being banned or minimized. Likewise, educators believe these issues to be a critical part of civic education. Research is clear that failing to provide safe spaces for LGBTQ youth in schools has a tremendously detrimental effect. *USA TODAY* spoke with 10 students who identify as LGBTQ in states where legislation like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill has been proposed. These youth feel angry, disgusted, and scared that they will face even more discrimination. The Trevor Project found that youth in schools that are more affirming for LGBTQ individuals have almost 40 percent less odds of attempting suicide than those in schools that are less welcoming (Stanton, 2022).

Educators are fearful of teaching anything that might get them into trouble, hence are avoiding important topics that youth need to understand. When educators fear they will face sanctions for teaching what they know to be historically, sociologically, and psychologically accurate, the chances of a continued

whitewashed approach to race are elevated, if not inevitable. Further, in recent years there has been a sharp increase in actual threats against educators and school boards. School board members in Virginia received death threats. Teachers in California and Texas reported being physically assaulted because they wore masks. A group of men in Arizona attempted to abduct an elementary school principal because they opposed the school's COVID-19 policies. There was even a social media challenge that encouraged students to slap their teachers and share the videotapes of the assaults. Protestors in San Diego took over a school board meeting, forcing their way in and declaring themselves the new school board (Murphy, 2021). A mother in Texas ripped the mask off a teacher's face while a father in California verbally harassed a principal then physically attacked a teacher who tried to intervene. A survey conducted by the American Psychological Association's involving almost 15,000 school personnel from June 2020 to June 2021 found that many had experienced harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fifty-nine percent of teachers, 58 percent of administrators, 48 percent of support staff, and 38 percent of school psychologists and social workers reported some type of victimization at work. The most likely to experience physical aggression were support staff, which included school resource officers, aides and bus drivers. In all likelihood these numbers are an underestimate, since the time period included when most schools were operating remotely due to the pandemic. Although students were most frequently the perpetrators, the survey found that parents were responsible for a sizeable portion of verbal aggression, with 42 percent of responding administrators and 29 percent of teachers saying they had been verbally harassed by a parent. In written responses, educators expressed how parents had rejected requests for students to wear masks and berated them for calling home to check on a student who was not completing assignments, among many other examples (Kamenetz, 2022).

These attacks not only show children that violence is the way to solve problems, but they also inculcate a lack of trust in and respect for educators and staff. Further, the continued assault on public schools threatens the very core of the country's democracy. Critical pedagogy is one of the hallmarks of peace education, which aims to teach youth how to create a more peaceful and just world. Limits on what teachers can do in the classroom work against the promotion of peace. As Horace Mann stated, "public education is the cornerstone of our community and our democracy." Lose this and we become not a nation but a series of towns filled with people who make decisions based solely on self-interest. To preserve it, "we need to de-escalate, to remember who we are: neighbors and fellow citizens. And we need to remember what we are arguing about: a piece of cloth designed to keep

us individually and collectively safe. It cannot become the flag we wave in surrender” (Fernandez, 2021).

### **Possible Solutions**

One piece of the solution is to crack down on the misinformation and lies that are being peddled by Right-wing pundits, activists and parents. In particular, as was mentioned, social media has provided a platform for inaccurate information about CRT and other issues that have inspired the “parent’s rights” assaults on education. In October 2021, the National Education Association sent a letter to social media executives asking them to help end the stream of propaganda on their platforms (Murphy, 2021). These online realms are like a wild west, with seemingly anything goes. While censorship is not the answer, legitimate curtailing of outright lies is far from censorship.

Another option is to work with law enforcement to address violence against educators. In October 2021 Attorney General Merrick Garland announced that the Department of Justice planned to meet with federal, state, tribal and local law enforcement agencies to discuss how to quell the violence against educators and school board officials (Murphy, 2021). The Biden administration has also undertaken investigations of the states the imposed school mask mandate bans, a welcome move of leadership (Durkee, 2022).

Further, legal challenges to these laws are imperative. Many human and civil rights groups have already filed lawsuits challenging the bans on CRT, SEL, bills like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” and more, and it is quite possible these initiatives will overturn those laws. Indeed, many political strategists have commented that these laws were never intended to stand up to constitutional muster but rather were about pandering to an ultra-conservative base. Additional attempts to ensure that such laws are overturned are essential, not just for educational purposes but for democracy as a whole. Andrew Spar, head of Florida’s Education Association, explained that a critical challenge is for voters to push for legislative changes. That could include, in part, voting out legislators who have supported attacks on educators as well as supporting those who promote public education and teaching critical pedagogy. Spar said, “If giving students a good education is the goal, the rule could be amended to say in part: ‘Instruction on the required topics must be factual and objective, and may not suppress or distort significant historical

events, such as the Holocaust, slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow” (Weill, 2021).

Although there has also been legislation attempting to limit what colleges can teach (See Coward, 2021), it is still troublesome and therefore, educating young voters, possible educators, politicians and others, can help challenge these attacks on public education. This can involve classroom instruction as well as other campus-based programs. Importantly, educators in many disciplinary areas need to ensure that their students are aware of what is happening. As educators who teach Sociology and Criminology, the authors have found that students are not generally aware of these issues but, upon being informed, are moved to take action.

Finally, those on the political left or in the middle need to stress the hypocrisy behind these attacks. While the notion that “woke” educators are “indoctrinating” young people has resonated with many, an honest review of the many bills that have been proposed and signed into law do that very thing—dictate who can be taught what information and in what way. Countering this moral panic with actual facts about what is being taught is imperative—as was true in previous eras noted in this paper—to retain the US’s system of public education, for the good of all.

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