

Signing the Zinn Education “Teach the Truth” Petition

Prior to my very first year as a social studies teacher in a Long Island, New York school district, I was exploring the Zinn Education Project website for material to teach to my 7th grade American history class. While on their website, I came across and signed the pledge to “Teach the Truth.” The pledge states, “We, the undersigned educators, refuse to lie to young people about U.S. history and current events.” Teachers who sign the pledge also promise to “continue our commitment to develop critical thinking that supports students to better understand problems in our society, and to develop collective solutions to those problems.” I also added the comment “I am committed to teaching the truth about our nation’s history. To educate young minds about the traumatic history many minorities have lived and experienced for centuries. My goal is to teach about the past in hopes for the next generation to build a more just society.” At this point, over 8,000 teachers have signed the pledge.¹

My experience after signing the pledge will give you a little window into what teachers around the nation who pledge to teach the truth are experiencing. In August 2021, I received a phone call from a union representative in my school who told me that my name had appeared in an online article. It was not causing trouble at the time, but he was concerned because I was the only person in the town whose name appeared in the article and if it got back to the school it could potentially cause some issues. I had no idea what he was talking about and didn’t know how my name appeared in the article. I was advised by the union to try to get my name removed from the petition so it would not create any problems for me as a new teacher.

After an Internet search, I found the article mentioning me on “The Daily Wire” website. I also contacted *The Daily Wire* and spoke to the author of the article. We had some words back and forth, and he ended up writing a second article specifically focusing on me.²

The very next day someone sent the second article to my entire district school board and district and building administrators and called for my termination. I then received a phone call from a district official requesting that I come in for a meeting and

bring my union representative. The district was actually very supportive of me. They did not believe everything stated in the article and I was advised to be cautious about where I place my name because these things can happen. There was some backlash because of comments on the article and I was criticized on social media for signing the petition and then trying to remove my name. On the community Facebook page there were parents demanding that their children never be assigned to my class and that I should be removed.

On March 8, 1965, the day after the Bloody Sunday march in Selma, Alabama, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told congregants gathered at First Baptist Church, “A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.” This statement by King has often been paraphrased, “The day we see the truth and cease to speak is the day we begin to die.” I strongly agree with Dr. King.³

As educators teaching in today’s political climate, we are subject to much criticism from politicians, the media, and our communities. In 2020, my first year as a middle school social studies teacher, my district received a parent phone call expressing concern for my class because on the first day of school I mentioned that throughout the year we will discuss sensitive topics such as the COVID pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and other current events. The parent called because she wanted to make me aware that in their household they believe all lives matter. Another teacher in my department experienced backlash from community parents because, when teaching about the 2020 presidential election, she allowed her students to participate in a survey that would reveal which political party they were more closely aligned to. Aside from the backlash from the parents on social media, we also had a parent call the school and state that the only political party her child needs to know about is the one that she supports.

I confess, as a novice in my career, the criticism we face as teachers have undoubtedly placed some fear and lack of confidence in my capacity to sustain teaching in such divisive times. This has resulted in some self-censorship in the classroom, particularly at the time when we were live-streaming into our students’ homes. This problem has also prompted some thought about how well we, as teachers, will be able to educate our students about important modern challenges facing our society and the history behind them. It causes me to think about their access to information, the opportunity to think critically, and their ability to participate in scholarly discussions about these topics. It is in our schools that students are provided with the opportunity to hear positions from those of diverse backgrounds, and where groups who historically have been marginalized are afforded the opportunity to voice their opinions.

In our classrooms, students learn and develop as they research, discuss, and analyze the systemic root causes of issues plaguing society. It is our duty as teachers and public intellectuals to teach the truth of our nation's history, present facts, provide multiple perspectives, and allow our students to construct their own conclusions.

Despite everything that happened, one of my favorite biblical passages remains John 8:32. “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” As a Christian, I believe I have a mandate to always teach and tell the truth.⁴

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Notes

¹ Zinn Education Project, “Pledge to Teach the Truth.” January 15, 2022, https://www.zinnproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth?_ga=2.266083661.351349941.1673714680-549979829.1668780087.

² Luke Rosiak. “Here Are The Thousands Of Teachers Who Say They’re Willing To Violate Law To Keep Pushing CRT.” *Daily Wire*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/here-are-the-thousands-of-teachers-who-say-theyre-willing-to-violate-law-to-keep-pushing-crt>; Luke Rosiak. “After Pledging They Would Violate Law To Teach CRT, Teachers Scramble To Hide Evidence.” *Daily Wire*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.dailywire.com/news/teachers-pledge-violate-law-crt-hide-evidence>.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Sermon, Selma, Alabama, March 8, 1965.” WIST, <https://wist.info/king-martin-luther/2285/>.

⁴ *Christian Science Monitor*, “What does it mean to know the truth?” October 24, 1997, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1997/1024/102497.home.relarticle.1.html#>.