

Teaching the Truth is True Patriotism

Teaching social studies during these contentious times is difficult. Despite the challenges we face as teachers, we do it because we know it is crucial to “tell the truth.” Many states have passed or are considering passing legislation to ban the teaching of “Critical Race Theory” in K-12 schools and colleges. These bills, strategically calculated for political gain, should more accurately be labeled anti-honesty legislation and educational gag orders.

I teach in Louisiana, generally a politically conservative state, where politicians have tried to pass anti-honesty education bills and teachers and students have fought hard to prevent passage. So far, Louisiana is one of those rare Southern states not to have passed an anti-CRT bill. In 2021, the Louisiana House of Representatives debated passing House Bill 564, its own “anti-CRT” bill, designed to prevent teaching topics related to “racism and sexism” or any topic that might cause “discomfort.” This bill would make United States history classes sessions in mythologized propaganda. An opposition campaign against the bill was so successful that it did not make it out of the House Education Committee. In addition, after the man who proposed the bill said racist things while trying to defend it, statements like educators should “teach the good in slavery,” he was removed from being the chair of that committee by other Republicans.

In 2022, Louisiana politicians attempted to pass Louisiana House Bill 570, an anti-trans bill that would have legally mandated that teachers out students to their parents or guardians. This bill reflected a recent wave of anti-teacher and transphobic legislation, both commonly scapegoated groups. While these bills reflect a broader culture war, they have a real, material impact on our youth. They seek to make a teacher's job more challenging in an already overburdened profession while putting the lives of transgender students in peril. When students reveal information to us regarding their identity, they put their full faith, and at times, their lives, into the hands and hearts of a teacher. We accept that responsibility and protect and cherish that trust. Politicians write these bills to intentionally erode educator and student trust while alienating a marginalized student population.

My students organized a walkout to protest HB570 with over three-hundred students participating. The politicians and news outlets they contacted all showed up as well. Within weeks, other schools matched their energy and this bill also failed. So in Louisiana, students, teachers, and families came together to stop an anti-honest education bill and an anti-trans bill.¹

In my classroom, I never let any piece of legislation prevent me from teaching the truth of our nation, scars and all, because that is the only way a people can move forward. In one week in 2023 alone, my students explored the under-taught Reconstruction Era, from racist massacres to prominent Black politicians. Students read an excerpt from *An Indigenous People's History of the United States* (Beacon, 2014) by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz to prepare for a discussion of the genocidal campaigns carried out in the West to clear land for Anglo settlement and the movements across the South during the Gilded Age. My students yearned to learn about this type of history. No legislation, backlash, or censorship should rob students of learning about these objective, historical truths. Teachers can never back down if we are on the side of justice.

Efforts to limit what teachers teach and students learn has actually invigorated me. I published a book about a racist massacre in 1868 outside of New Orleans, *The 1868 St. Bernard Parish Massacre: Blood in the Cane Fields* (Arcadia, 2017), and I put “This Day in History” mini-lessons on TikTok to highlight the marginalized history not found in textbooks. No legislation can effectively silence teachers in the digital age.²

Advocacy for students should not be relegated to the classroom or within one state. I work with the National Network of State Teachers of the Year as a Voices for Honest Education (VHE) Fellow. Fellows meet with politicians, provide seminars on the importance of student-affirming education, write op-eds and blogs, and organize with teachers nationwide. In 2022, the VHE fellows published a 52-page report titled “The Student-Affirming Education Needed for Our Children and Our Nation's Future.” The report highlights stories, statistics, studies, and firsthand experiences demonstrating that students benefit the most from classrooms that value their identities, experiences, and perspectives and are best able to learn about themselves and the world with teachers who provide them with honest education and accurate history.³

Despite difficulties during this contentious time, teachers must recognize nationwide victories. Anti-honest education bills failed to pass in at least 23 states. Governors from both Kansas and Wisconsin vetoed harmful educational legislation, many states passed legislation affirming LGBTQ+ youth, 19 states adopted laws requiring some form of multicultural education, California became the first state to make an ethnic studies course a high school graduation requirement, Virginia's “snitch on teachers hotline” was suspended because there were no submissions, and in Louisiana, African American History can fulfill credit requirements for graduation. These achievements expand student knowledge about the experiences and vast contributions of people from all backgrounds.⁴

Teachers are pedagogical experts and our collective voices should be heavily weighted in any dialogue about curriculum and educational practices. We must organize to push back against draconian bills that seek to sow discord, fearmonger, rewrite history, and harm our students. The viability of our nation and our democracy depends on teachers, and the study of the past should serve as a guide. That is true patriotism.

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Notes

¹ Chris Dier, “My students hosted a walkout to protest transphobic legislation; I proudly joined them.” *Louisiana Illuminator*, April 2, 2022, <https://lailluminator.com/2022/04/02/my-students-hosted-a-walkout-to-protest-transphobic-legislation-i-proudly-joined-them/>.

² Chris Dier, “This Day in History.” <https://www.tiktok.com/@chrisdier/>.

³ Chris Dier, Gerardo Munoz, Takeru Nagayoshi, Tracey Nance, and Monica Washington, “The Student-Affirming Education Needed for Our Children and Our Nation’s Future,” *The National Network of State Teachers of the Year and the National Center for Youth Law*, <https://wkkf.issueab.org/resources/41248/41248.pdf>.

⁴ Scott Simon and Ben Paviour, “A 'tip line' championed by Virginia Gov. Youngkin last year has been quietly shut down.” *NPR*, November 5, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/05/1134514204/a-tip-line-championed-by-virginia-gov-youngkin-last-year-has-been-quietly-shut-d>.