



Turning Back the Clock: Will Fights Over Curriculum Usher in New Era of Segregated Schools?

Michael Collins

October 20, 2022

A disturbing thought occurs to Akilah Alleyne as she watches parents and politicians across the country teaching America’s children. Is the U.S. entering a new era of segregated schools, she wonders?

“A lot of people don’t want to call it that,” said Alleyne, an education expert at the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning research and public advocacy group based in Washington.

But it’s not a preposterous conclusion.

Education policy experts warn that efforts to keep certain books out of the classroom or ban the teaching of sensitive topics such as race and gender risk turning back the clock to a time when segregated schools meant separate – and vastly unequal – forums for learning.

To be sure, millions of American students still go to schools where their classmates are predominantly the same race or ethnicity nearly seven decades after the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional. Though the work isn’t done, the landmark decision marked a major turning point in America’s attitudes about racial equality and helped pave the way for the civil rights movement.

But experts see the dawning of a new era of school segregation – one in which certain topics will be verboten in some districts and how and what students learn will be determined by what their schools are allowed to teach.

“That’s going to be more and more of an issue as some school boards or states are saying, no, we don’t want these particular books in our schools, and they’re banning them,” said Sarah Hill, a political science professor and education policy expert at California State University in Fullerton.

“Students will have very different educational experiences, different kinds of conversations in the classroom,” she said.

As a result, many American children may wind up at the end of high school without a complete picture of the country's history. Many will lack, under the guise of keeping them from feeling discomfort in school, exposure to aspects of the American story that undeniably define the country. They may be denied a chance to reconcile modern events and the past and be denied the opportunity to build empathy and compassion for people they are sure to face for the rest of their lives.

Fights over school curriculum – often initiated by concerned parents, eagerly embraced by elected leaders and fueled by social media – have morphed into discordant political issues that are shaping multiple races in this year’s mid-term elections. Republican candidates for local school boards to state legislatures to governorships see the clashes over curriculum as an opportunity to influence what children are taught and advance a broader conservative agenda.

The movement already has produced a flurry of new laws that make certain topics off-limits in the classroom.

An analysis earlier this year by the National Education Association found that 17 states, including Texas, Tennessee, Florida, Idaho and New Hampshire, had passed legislation since January 2021 that banned or limited the examination of systemic racism in the United States.

A spate of bills silencing speech about LGBTQ issues also has emerged this year. Two states – Florida and Alabama – have passed “Don’t Say Gay” laws that forbid schools from providing instruction or engaging in discussions on sexual orientation with young students. Fourteen states have introduced legislation to restrict the way sexual orientation or gender identity is discussed or taught in schools, according to the Human Rights Campaign, the nation’s largest LGBTQ advocacy group.

Efforts to remove books in schools, universities and public libraries also are on the rise.

The American Library Association reported a record number of attacks on libraries last year – 729 attempts to censor library resources and target 1,579 books, the highest number in the two decades the organization has been tracking such efforts. This year is likely to set a new record: There were 681 attempts to ban or restrict library resources and target 1,651 titles in the first eight months alone, the library association said.

“Efforts to censor entire categories of books reflecting certain voices and views show that the moral panic isn’t about kids: It’s about politics,” Lessa Kanani‘opua Pelayo-Lozada, the library association’s president, said in September. “Organizations with a political agenda are spreading lists of books they don’t like.”

Critical Race Theory and 'Don't Say Gay'

They’re also taking the fight to the voting booth in November.

A ballot measure in West Virginia, for example, would give state lawmakers the power to approve, amend or reject decisions by the state board of education – a move that opponents warn would inject even more politics into public schools.

In Arizona and South Carolina, Republican candidates for state school superintendent are vowing to stop the teaching of “critical race theory” – the four-decade-old academic framework that examines if and how systems and policies perpetuate racism. Conservatives across the country have made blocking the teaching of critical race theory their cause célèbre, even though there’s little evidence it’s actually being taught in public elementary and secondary schools. Opponents incorrectly use the term to describe any effort by schools to teach students about the dark chapters of American history and promote racial equity, diversity or inclusion.

Fights over curriculum are spilling over into other races as well. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican running for a second term, is defending the “Don’t Say Gay” law he signed back in March that forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade. His Democratic opponent, former Gov. Charlie Crist, is vowing to take politics out of schools.

Critics accuse conservatives of exploiting complex issues such as race and gender identity solely for political gain.

“It’s absolutely a part of these campaign strategies from MAGA, far-right Republicans who are looking to find new talking points to win votes for their elections,” Alleyne said.

Beyond the current political gains, they fear, lurks a long-term goal: To influence a generation of young Americans that, according to polls by the Pew Research Center and others, are approaching adulthood with a liberal set of attitudes and an open mind on social issues.

“I think it is a way to try to cut that off and influence young people in terms of what their values are, what they think about, then how they’ll vote down the road,” Hill said. “It’s all part of that, in a way, to try to win political control in the long term.”

Others dismiss the notion that fights over curriculum are tied to a long-term political agenda.

“I have not seen evidence that people who are concerned about critical race theory and things like that are thinking many moves ahead, that we need to make sure that the current crop of children aren’t exposed to progressive ideas so that 10 or 20 years down the road they wouldn’t vote in a progressive way,” said Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington.

More than anything, McCluskey said, curriculum challenges usually start because parents don’t like what schools are teaching their children.

“It seems to me that it is a grassroots response to a lot of things that have been changing and specific things that have happened in schools,” he said.

Much of the discord over critical race theory, McCluskey said, started after the death of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man who died in Minneapolis police custody on May 25, 2020, after a white officer used his knee to pin Floyd to the ground.

Floyd's death prompted many school districts to examine systemic racism and pledge to do something about it. "That, you know, perks up a lot of people's antennae, and they say, 'Wait a minute. What is this all about? What is systemic racism? What is it you are saying you're going to do about it,'" McCluskey said.

Christopher Finan, executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship, traces the spike in book challenges to last year's governor's race in Virginia, when the fact that Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" was taught in some schools became a campaign issue. The eventual winner, Republican Glenn Youngkin, wove that anger into his campaign and even featured another Morrison novel, "Beloved," in an ad bashing his Democratic opponent, former Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

When Youngkin was elected, "a lot of other politicians saw that this was a successful tactic and jumped on it," Finan said.

Though book bans are hardly novel ideas – America has confronted book challenges in some form for over a century – what's frightening about the current push to remove certain books from schools is that some districts are pulling titles before they're even formally challenged, Finan said.

Some of the books are eventually returned to the shelves, Finan said, "but in the overwhelming number of cases, you know they're not going to touch those books until the heat dies down. And, right now, who knows when that's going to be."

'I don't see this issue going away'

While challenging books and school curriculum has been a winning strategy for politicians, it's students who end up losing, education advocates warn.

Parents have the right to raise questions about what their child is learning and opt them out of classes they might find objectionable, Alleyne said. But it's another matter when parents or politicians try to dictate what other students can read or prohibit them from studying sensitive topics, she said.

All students should be allowed to learn about who they are and how they fit into the world, whether it's a Black teen-ager curious about racial injustice or a young queer kid wanting to know more about gay identity and history, Alleyne said.

"That right gets taken away when you dictate whose books get to be on the shelf," she said.

Learning about themselves and others is an important part of a child's development and serves a societal role by helping them to understand the values and experiences of people from different backgrounds, Hill said.

When books are banned and discussions about race, gender or other topics are prohibited, “there’s a real loss to students in terms of their learning and understanding of other people in the world,” she said.

Given the GOP’s recent successes into channeling school curriculum fights into votes, opponents “need to be diligent, keep our eyes open and take a look at what’s really going on,” Alleyne said.

“I don’t see this issue going away anytime soon,” she said.