



Op-Ed: Teachers Are Not Just Frustrated, They Are Scared  
By Bettina L. Love

Public school teachers are not just frustrated with the current state of education, they are scared. Scared of a mass shooting at their school. Scared of getting sick from Covid-19. Scared of low wages and rising inflation. Scared of how the stress of teaching is impacting their overall health. Scared of being fired for teaching Black history, which is American history, or teaching that queer people exist and that their lives matter. Many teachers I know now feel they risk a felony conviction for doing their jobs. The constant threat to the lives and livelihoods of teachers is undeniable as education increasingly becomes a punching bag for Republicans. One day politicians are sending thoughts and prayers after a school shooting, the next day those same politicians are telling America that education is filled with “woke” radical leftist propagandists who are using the classroom as their political soapbox to make White children feel bad about the sins of their forefathers. These calculated lies are strategically intended to attack teachers, a segment of the workforce they know are underpaid and overworked, and often, as mostly women, financially vulnerable.

Teachers in the U.S. make 20 percent less than other professionals with equivalent education and experience, and in many parts of the country, they make less than the family living wage. One in five teachers works a second job during the school year. Three out of four U.S. public school teachers are women, and four out of five are White. So, if the woke agenda is taking over our schools, that would mean that underpaid, overworked, burned-out White women teachers are doing the work of indoctrinating White public-school children to feel guilty about America’s racism. This favored falsehood of the Right is not only dangerous to all teachers, students, families, and communities, but also the institution of public education, which makes it an attack on democracy itself.

These types of attacks on education may seem new, but they are updated plays from the classic Republican playbook. When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, his major education goals were to abolish the Department of Education and introduce school vouchers so public dollars could be spent on private schools. Those goals have persisted in the four-plus decades since then. To achieve them, White parents have to believe that public education can’t be trusted with White children’s futures, and that the privileges of Whiteness are being threatened in America’s “woke” classrooms, until finally the distrust becomes so massive that public

education itself is done away with, replaced with a piecemeal system of vouchers, for-profit charter schools, and online schools that profit from gutting the system they replace.

Florida banning AP African American Studies is cause for alarm, but we also have to stay focused on the fact that of the more than 42 states with proposed legislation limiting any classroom discussion of race and gender, 17 have already passed that legislation. More than 1,500 book bans have taken place in 86 school districts in 26 states. According to the Center for American Progress, 41 percent of the books banned included “protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are people of color,” and 22 percent of the banned books addressed issues of race and racism. These numbers are devastating when we consider how few children’s books are written or illustrated by people of color (only 22 percent in 2016, rising to a still small 26.8 percent in 2020). If conservatives prevail, children of all races will go through their primary and secondary schooling reading only books that feature White protagonists and rarely, if at all, stories that explore counter narratives to White superiority.

Our teachers don’t want to be pawns in the culture wars waged by politicians. As a professor of education, I teach teachers every day who come to my classroom worried about their students. Beyond looking for the most effective ways to teach their curriculum, they want to help their students feel safe, seen, understood, cared for, and inspired. They are not paying tens of thousands of dollars for an education degree to have their agency over their classroom taken away. Every teacher is an individual making choices daily about what is best for their students. Most believe that children have a right to learn freely, about themselves and about people who are different from them. It is this freedom of teachers to teach fearlessly with passion and commitment that ensures we raise civically aware citizens. A robust public education system is the compact upon which a thriving democracy rebuilds itself every generation.

Teachers should not be scared to teach. Educating all children about the humanity of others should not be used to divide our country. Extreme political positions should not justify extracting public money from public schools. Teachers deserve better. So do the children they teach.