



The White Supremacist Attack on Education

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The central elements of the education policy that Florida's Governor DeSantis is imposing on the state of Florida are teacher intimidation, which includes imprisonment for having unapproved books in the classroom, and the elimination of content that runs afoul of a white supremacist view of the world. His education policies would make it impossible to teach an accurate history of this country. Instead, this policy reinforces all the mistruths of white supremacy. Books are banned, elementary and secondary school courses are eliminated, teachers are fired for telling the truth about America's history, about world history, and the citizens of Florida and the nation are told that this will make America great again.

This is an old story going back to the days of slavery when schools for enslaved Africans were forbidden and illegal. Attacks on African-American education continued through neglect and policy. In the 1960s, we now-veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) confronted an American educational system constructed to support white supremacy and affirm the inferiority of the so-called "Negro."

Meaningful education was considered unnecessary, even dangerous, and Black children in the South especially were sent to work on plantations for months at a time. There were many books of the era about "Sambo" or other denigrating characters that showed the African American as fundamentally lazy, ignorant and uneducable. These racist images run deep in U.S. culture and persist. Movies and television portrayed African Americans only as ignorant servants. Christian ministers declared that Black people were cursed because they were descendants of Ham. Scientists from America's most prestigious colleges and universities, repeating the tropes of "scientific racism," asserted that African American brains were smaller than those of European Americans.

However, heroic teachers have always resisted these racist teachings, although the story of these brave and determined educators remains a little-known story. From the time of enslavement, education has been essential to Black folks. During Reconstruction, the first buildings erected were the church and the schoolhouse, often founded and built by formerly-enslaved persons. Today the Black community continues to challenge an American educational system that was established and built on policies designed to preserve white supremacy and erase the immense contributions to this country by African Americans.

But let's be clear: banning the teaching of the facts of history does more than harm Black children. White children are also being denied a history that would help them better understand their world. White children who learn about the many ways in which the great wealth of this country was built on the labor of enslaved people and the lands stolen from Native Americans will understand more clearly the world around them.

When they see the role played by Black veterans in World Wars I and II, they are better equipped to understand the inequities they see today. They learn that the racism Black soldiers fought against, both abroad and after they returned -- when they were refused loans by the GI bill or restricted to buying homes in low-resourced areas, or restricted to low paying jobs -- only increased the inequities of white generational wealth that continue to grow. Those students would also understand that there has always been affirmative action... it's just been affirmative action for white people, primarily white men.

In the 1960s, SNCC established Freedom Schools and helped Black communities secure the previously denied right to vote to bring about change, to improve education, to strive for quality education for all.

The effort by Ron DeSantis and culture warriors in the Republican Party to reverse the hard-fought gains of the last 50 years must not prevail. Fortunately, courageous teachers and students across this nation are on the front line today: protesting and organizing to take back their education.

We must support them as, together, we organize to attain and exercise political power at the state and local levels of government. We insist that teachers have the necessary resources to educate *all* students. Where there is educational suppression and negation, HBCUs and Africana and Black Studies programs at mainstream colleges should convene in-person, after school and Saturday Freedom School classes to teach the history and culture of African Americans, as well as that of all marginalized communities. We should openly and surreptitiously read and distribute De Santis' banned books, and we should use every legal option and instrument to defy laws that diminish quality education for our children. We must continue to engage in the fight for the hearts and minds of all Americans.

The assault on education we see unfolding in Florida today threatens to accelerate an already worrying shift away from commitment to democracy back toward the disenfranchisement that has characterized so much of this nation's history.

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