

Op-Ed COMMENTARY: Back to School, Back to Fighting Far-Right Attacks on Education

By Ben Jealous, president of People For the American Way

(NNPA) - Just when you thought far-right attacks on public education couldn't get any more absurd, we hear about something new.

For the first time in almost 15 years, Sarasota schools this fall are turning down hundreds of free dictionaries from the local Rotary Club. Why? Because the district is afraid of violating a radical new law that's part of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis's crack-down on inclusive curricula. The district can't buy or accept any new books until it hires someone to make sure they comply with the state's draconian censorship regulations. So, the dictionaries sit on the shelf.

The idea that dictionaries might be hazardous to kids would be laughable if it weren't so dangerous. This new school year is starting as more states are passing laws to make it easier to ban books. States are also passing laws to stop teachers from talking about topics like racism; according to Education Week, 42 states have now enacted limits on what teachers can say about racism or sexism in the classroom.

These same political forces want to make schools teach a whitewashed version of our history and our current reality in the name of "patriotic" education. They're trying to take over school boards to impose their political ideology on teachers and students. That's bad for our kids. And it's bad for our country.

The freedom to learn is at risk.

This fall, it's more important than ever to stand for the rights of teachers to teach, and students to learn, about the full spectrum of the American experience. That means lessons that include and celebrate diverse communities. It means history that doesn't erase the experiences of Black people, brown people, LGBTQ people, women, immigrants, people with disabilities, and other communities that have been historically marginalized. The director of the nonprofit EveryLibrary warns that the current wave of book bans amounts to "the silencing of stories and the suppressing of information" that will make "the next generation less able to function in society."

Children learn better when they can see themselves in others and see their communities as part of the great American story. At the same time, sci-



Florida's Sarasota County School District is not purchasing or accepting donations of new books until at least January as it hires new staff and awaits new guidance to best comply with a statewide education law.

ence tells us that learning how to understand and empathize with people across differences is essential to children's healthy development. Looking honestly at our past helps students develop critical thinking skills that are desperately needed when every smartphone is a gateway to disinformation.

Democracy, too, depends on informed citizens to function. It's no coincidence that the crowd that stormed the Capitol in 2021, was acting on lies and misinformation.

Authoritarianism feasts on ignorance. Election deniers and censors of history are in the same camp and should get nowhere near our schools.

We cannot begin to heal our divisions until we acknowledge and teach our whole history — good and bad. And we know that standing up for the freedom to learn will be a challenging task. This school year follows one in which reports of book bans and censorship reached record levels according to the

American Library Association. Far-right groups and politicians are offering rewards and setting up tip lines to "report" teachers who cover "divisive" topics. School board members are receiving death threats.

But we don't shy away from these challenges when we act from a place of love. Loving our children means being advocates for them when political extremists want to limit what they can learn. It means showing up to school board meetings and organizing to make ourselves heard. It means running for the school board.

It means rejecting one of the censors' most harmful assumptions: that students are too fragile to hear the history our people have lived.

Millions of families are getting ready to send their kids back to school. Let's also get ready to defend the freedom to learn. Before the dictionary ends up on your district's banned-books list.

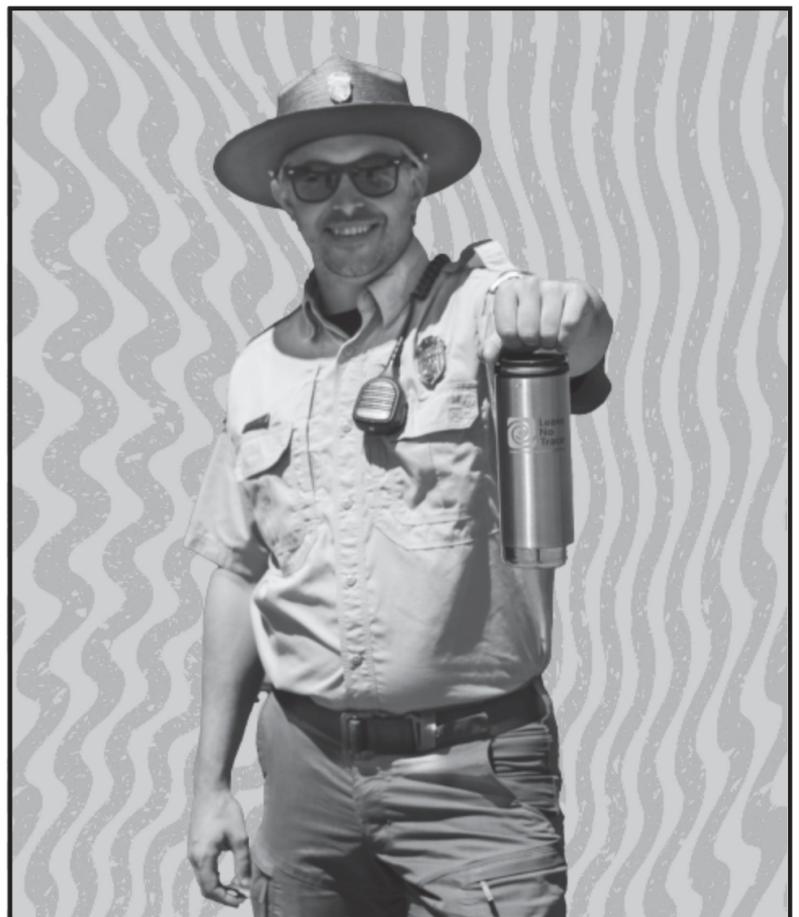


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