

HOW FREE IS FLORIDA?

Bonfire of the Vanities Re-emerging in Florida

Repeating history with attacks on freedom, culture, and education

In 1495 in the City of Florence, the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance, Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola began to order the collection and burning of thousands of objects that church authorities considered might strongly tempt individuals to sin. His list of objectionable objects included books, manuscripts, paintings, tapestries, sculptures, antiques, musical instruments, and many other works of secular art including books on prophecy, astrology, and other sciences of the day.

The ceremonial burnings were called "bonfire of the vanities" and became an integral part of his puritanical campaign against secular culture and what he considered to be the artistic, luxury and social excesses of Renaissance Italy. His power and influence grew so much that in time he helped force out his own benefactors, the Medicis, in 1494. He became the effective ruler of Florence until his crusade and defiance was ended by Pope Alexander VI, who excommunicated him on May 13, 1497. A few days later Savonarola was tried by church and civil authorities. On the same square, the Piazza della Signoria where he had previously held his bonfires of the vanities, he was hanged on a cross and burned to death.

Shadows of this history are stirring again in Florida with Governor Ron DeSantis' crusade against "wokeness." This aggression of conservative outrage politics targets several American minority groups, selected immigrant groups, non-Christian religions, all liberals, progressive ideas and causes, and the diverse cultures they represent.

Similar to Savonarola's campaign of censorship some five hundred years ago, DeSantis and Florida's Republican legislature seek to impose ideologies of oppression and control over Florida's students, parents, and educators. They are prohibiting education on race relations and diversity in our public schools and universities including suppression of Black history and restricting curricula based on bigotry and bias. They are silencing young students seeking counsel from teachers regarding human sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases and related topics, including menstruation before 6th grade, and obfuscating and persecuting LGBTQ+ students and educators. They are requiring school libraries to censor books within five days if a single person objects to the content as being harmful to minors. They are stipulating that the Florida Department of Education approve all materials for sex education classes instead of local school boards. They are actively undermining essential academic freedoms in our institutions of higher learning, replacing career educators with partisan loyalists.

Targeting Education

Diversity of public education is under attack in Florida. Schools and universities, their boards of trustees, faculty and curricula are now subject to greater state scrutiny, partisan interference and outright takeover in some cases, based upon perceived 'wokeness.'

The term "woke" was coined to describe individuals who are conscious of social and political issues, particularly those related to systemic injustices and discrimination, and taking action to challenge and dismantle these structures. It embodies compassion and empathy, and the ongoing fight for equity and

inclusion of all. DeSantis' policies make clear that he has little compassion or empathy for several large groups within the constituency he has sworn to represent.

On a single day in May 2023, DeSantis signed 18 education bills into Florida law. DeSantis framed the signing as "Let Kids Be Kids" but the sentiment doesn't apply to all Florida students. Many of the laws he passed target LGBTQ+ students and educators, African American curricula, encourage more guns in our schools, censor books mentioning any perceived "woke" content, and prohibit programs encouraging diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In January, DeSantis unveiled an aggressive higher education proposal, and in late February the Florida House introduced a bill that outlines specific changes to how public postsecondary educational institutions operate. DeSantis has even gone so far as to launch a hostile takeover of a progressive university in Florida.

Taking a look at just a **few** of the new education laws:

Florida House Bill 1 (HB1) "School Choice" Signed into Law March 27, 2023

The new law expands available school choice options for all students in Florida by eliminating financial eligibility restrictions and the current enrollment cap. At first glance, expanding school choice options sounds great, but in reality it effectively loots our already-strained public education budget, eroding Florida's public school system.

The law redirects aid from the low-income students and those with disabilities that the scholarship and voucher programs were designed to assist. Ninety percent of Florida students are enrolled in public schools that are already suffering from teacher shortages and large class size. In Collier County, 925 students received Florida Empowerment Scholarship (FES) or McKay vouchers in the 2021-22 school year.

The law eliminated family income limit requirements, making all Florida students eligible for vouchers, even those who do not attend public school. All 46,492 Collier County Students are now eligible for voucher scholarships. While public schools face specific and increasing national and state curriculum requirements, private and homeschool programs are not subject to such scrutiny. Wealthy families would be eligible to receive funds and apply them to expensive private schools or homeschooling services, all at the expense of the state education budget.

Florida House Bill 1467 (HB 1467) Signed into Law March 25, 2022

HB 1467 requires school districts to be transparent in the selection of instructional materials, including library and reading materials. This legislation aims to preserve the rights of parents to make decisions about what materials their children are exposed to in school.

It has led to censorship and banning of entire classroom and school libraries in efforts to comply with the law. In March 2023, a teachers union filed suit against Florida's Department of Education, not challenging the law itself, but the expanded scope that it claims went too far in its issued training for school librarians. The suit claims that Florida officials under the DeSantis administration have flagrantly and unlawfully exceeded the quite narrow authority that HB 1467 provided the Department of Education.

Every parent should absolutely decide what is appropriate or not for their child. When a parent attempts to make that decision for all students in a school, as has been occurring at school boards around the country and right here in Collier County, that infringes the rights of all other parents.

DeSantis also rejected over 40% of mathematics books proposed for Florida schools stating they were "doing woke math." State officials charged with oversight of education curricula should set standards, but those standards should not subjugate the rights and freedoms of any targeted subsection of students or educators, or mandate the ideology of a single official over an entire state.

Florida House Bill 1557 (HB 1557) Parental Rights in Education Act Signed into Law March 28, 2022

This law claims to protect parental rights, allowing parents to decide what and when their children learn about sexuality and gender. The language of the bill is too vague and is very clearly intended to further oppress LGBTQ+ students, educators, and any mention or discussion of LGBTQ+ family members or issues.

Schools have always encouraged parental involvement in classrooms, curriculum nights, PTAs, parent teacher conferences, and school board meetings. These new laws, by and large, do not give parents any new authority they didn't already have and serve as culture war campaign fodder while simultaneously giving parents, students, and teachers license to discriminate.

SB148/HB 7 Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act (2022) Signed into Law April 22, 2022

This law aims to regulate how schools and businesses address race and gender. It prohibits workplace training or school instruction that teaches that individuals are "inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously;" that people are privileged or oppressed based on race, gender, or national origin; or that a person "bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress" over actions committed in the past by members of the same race, gender, or national origin. The law says such training or lessons amount to discrimination.

This law attempts to cover up the darker parts of our nation's history, preventing students from learning about the harm caused by discrimination. Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

As of March 2023, a federal appeals court ruled that a temporary block on a portion of a law, pushed by Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, restricting what can be taught in Florida's public colleges and universities will remain in place. The three-judge panel of the 11th US Circuit Court of Appeals denied a request from the DeSantis administration and officials with the state university system to stay an injunction from US District Judge Mark Walker, who called the law "positively dystopian" in a 138-page order, while the case plays out.

Hostile Takeover of a Public College Begun January, 2023

In early January 2023, FL governor Ron DeSantis began dismantling the public New College in Sarasota, FL and reshaping it to mirror the structure and function of Hillsdale College, a private conservative Christian school in Michigan. In the New College overhaul, DeSantis appointed new trustees (five live outside the state and are considered right wing political activists), former administrators were fired or forced to resign, and a handpicked president, with no higher education experience but strong political ties to DeSantis, filled the presidential position. The new administration quickly denied tenure to five qualified faculty, eliminated DEI programs, and designed a new core curriculum with no faculty input. This blueprint made clear the plan for public FL universities and colleges and the goal was achieved in the recently completed Florida legislative session (May 2023) with the passage of HB 999 and SB 266.

HB 999 and SB 266 include six major features: 1) elimination of DEI programs at Florida colleges and universities while prohibiting accrediting agencies from compelling universities to violate state law (requiring DEI initiatives for accreditation), 2) final approval requirements for General Education courses/curriculum by the Board of Governors, 3) implementation of a five year post-tenure review for faculty, 4) authorization of hiring decisions by university administration with no provision for faculty input, 5) elimination of academic programs deemed to be controversial and not "fact based," and 6) modification/establishment of three university "civics" institutes including the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida with curriculum, goals, and purpose as imposed by the Florida legislature. During discussion of the house bill, Democratic legislators offered 14 different amendments in

a last ditch effort to modify the bills, yet all were rejected by the supermajority.

According to Jeff McCullers, a Fort Myers, FL educational activist who spent 35 years as a teacher and administrator, “It is dismaying that so much effort has been put into making our state colleges and universities less accessible, less diverse, less fair, less equitable, and less academically sound than they have been in our lifetime.”

House Joint Resolution 31 and Senate Joint Resolution 94 (HJR 31/SJR 94)

These companion resolutions propose an amendment to the Florida State Constitution to change our non-partisan school boards to partisan, politically-focused instead of education-focused. The text of the change literally strikes out the word non-partisan to replace it with partisan: “In each school district there shall be a school board composed of five or more members chosen by vote of the electors in a partisan ~~nonpartisan~~ election for appropriately staggered terms of four years, as provided by law.”

Partisan elections would threaten the replacement of historically non-partisan school boards of experienced professional educators with partisan loyalists for explicitly political goals. Changing the focus from education to political loyalties would make it difficult to regain control of politicized school boards and replace them with competent, qualified professional educators focused on the success of all students in their district. It would also make ensuring equity of funding and education across regions and income levels a partisan political exercise.

There should be no political sides to education. **Help keep our schools free of politics by voting NO to this proposed constitutional amendment on the 2024 ballot.**

These laws are already having a chilling effect on hiring established and emerging educators and scholars, and negatively impact faculty and student recruitment and retention. Anecdotal information suggests that this exodus is already happening at New College and other institutions and schools across Florida.

As the national, state, and local election campaigns for 2024 begin to be organized and launched, the big question is, will the Republican war on compassion and empathy for all Americans succeed? Or will a vocal voting coalition of youth, women, independents, moderate Republicans, and Democrats unify to demand the restoration of basic human rights and freedoms, diversity, civility, rationality, morality, and truth?

There are very real and present critical challenges facing our state, the nation, and humanity as a whole that are being ignored in favor of far-right Republicans' bigoted culture war against fellow Americans. Can an Enlightenment Period return and reunite us all with a commitment to restore our country's founding tenets of liberty and freedom for ALL? Will Florida's parents and educators take a stand against the ideological and partisan takeover of education in our state? Will Floridians allow our State Constitution to be amended to force partisan elections on our historically non-partisan school boards? The answers will be determined by the candidates that you elect in 2024.