

February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024

### **Global Citizens Paper**

Dear Florida Legislators,

I am writing to you concerning the most recent acts taken as a reflection on the Florida Stop W.O.K.E Act. I want to dive into the controversial and contradictory issue regarding House Bill 7, which focuses on the indoctrination in Florida's education system and how this new bill is contradictory to many of the legislation's newer ideas. In this letter, I will explore the inconsistencies arising from the reduction of leftist ideology in the school system and how this can be harmful to students and teachers by suppressing inclusive education, lack of addressing critical issues, and impact on the LGBTQ+ community, as well as certain races such as Mexican and Black Americans. Consequently, these new policies may be at odds with the perspectives rooted in right-wing ideologies within certain programs administered at schools. Throughout this paper, we will recognize the purpose of schooling and how the legislation undermines or values certain teachings over the rest.

This paper will also address the Stop W.O.K.E Act and its part in doing more harm to communities than its intended good. To quote Senator Bobby Powell's press release in early January of 2023, the Stop Woke Act "prohibits instruction on race relations or diversity that imply a person's status as either privileged or oppressed is determined by his or her race, color, national origin, or sex." However, in this context, can we ignore the harsh reality within the criminal justice system, where black Americans often face higher rates of arrest and crueler

sentencing compared to their white counterparts for a similar offense? This example shows that oppression can be rooted in race. Governor DeSantis emphasizes the Critical Race Theory that suggests that these concepts could instill hatred toward the country because of their opinionated tendencies instead of factual input. (Governor DeSantis Emphasizes Importance of Keeping Critical Race Theory Out of Schools at State Board of Education Meeting, 2021). This illustrates DeSantis's stance on the purpose of schooling where he is promoting certain “political beliefs” about fostering patriotism through education. However, to counterargue DeSantis, these “opinions” can be backed up by facts, such as the example that is seen in the criminal justice system. Giroux, a professor who studies critical pedagogy, advocated for fostering critical thinking among students to challenge these oppressive ideologies in the “hidden curriculum” of schools. Giroux acknowledges that educators should address the need for diverse learning and extend away from the societal norm, as well as educate students through Critical Theory teachings that offer them the opportunity to analyze social structures that aim toward positive changes (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). As a student who has studied systemic racism in America, my initial reaction is that there's a considerable amount of work and improvement needed in this country. However, this recognition of issues doesn't breed hatred for the nation like DeSantis thinks. Rather, it allows me to appreciate the positive aspects that our country emphasizes.

Denying students the opportunity to engage in programs that facilitate learning about diverse perspectives in a critical-thinking environment contradicts the goal of fostering an unbiased education system, making it harder to form independent opinions. As a result, legislation that imposes restrictions on specific subjects may potentially lead to the exclusion of diverse perspectives and the exclusion of crucial historical and social contexts from the

curriculum. House Bill 7 (2022) whitewashes historical truth. This bill denies students the quality of education they deserve.

These ideas can also be harmful to teachers as well, who are worried about getting fired for teaching these doctrines. An example of this is when a teacher was fired for reading “My Shadow is Purple” (Sonnenberg, 2023), which is a book that highlights the tension between anti-discrimination policies, that aim to promote diversity and inclusion. This situation undermines the concept of the purpose of schooling which is argued to foster an inclusive and diverse learning environment (Spring, 2021) This ultimately demotes a sense of community, especially for African American students. It also shows that students who have a supportive teacher who acknowledges personal and racial challenges positively correlate with their mental health and show an increase in academic and social pursuits (White, 2006). Because teachers will be stripped of their ability to connect about these issues, they will struggle to find the balance between keeping their jobs and connecting with their students.

Along with the Stop W.O.K.E Act, a similar bill was passed, Don’t Say Gay, with comparable ideologies that prevent schools from teaching critical theory discussions regarding sexuality, identity, and relationships. This restricts schools from teaching about gender, which is thought to be a subject that is educated through a parent. However, Bill 1557- Parental Rights in Education (2022) is harmful to the LGBTQ+ community because, in an environment where the students should feel safe, they end up not having a place to be able to talk about their community especially if they are in fear of this subject at home. Why does the education system seem to be so apprehensive about certain viewpoints? This bill negatively impacts children, after a survey was conducted of 113 LGBTQ+ parents it stated that 1 in 4 reported they experienced anti-LGBTQ+ harassment. (The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law, 2023). My thoughts on

this subject are that DeSantis is using these objectives as a way to further his political campaign. To quote DeSantis (2022) he says "In Florida, we will not let the far-left woke agenda take over our schools and workplaces." This statement is framed negatively in the context of the LGBTQ+ community. The use of terms like "far-left woke agenda" implies a dismissive attitude toward progressive or inclusive perspectives, particularly those related to LGBTQ+ rights and issues. This framing suggests opposition to efforts that aim to promote awareness, inclusivity, and understanding of diverse identities within educational and workplace settings. Not to mention that his goal to reduce far-left ideas in schools and to have fewer political practices is easily contradicted by his right-wing programs.

The biggest and boldest show of these programs is the approval of a nonprofit website called PragerU where teachers are allowed to show these 5-minute videos that promote pro-American values. I watched one of these videos titled "Illegal Immigration: It's About Power" where the speaker Tucker Carlson (2018) talked about Cesar Chavez who was a part of the United Farm Workers union. Tucker then talks about how Cesar beat Mexican immigrants with chains and whips and sent union workers to bomb their homes and then proceeded to call him and I quote a "progressive hero." Is this not detrimental to Mexican students, who are now perceived as a potential threat to America simply because they are labeled as "immigrants"? What options do these students have in such a situation? DeSantis specifically said, "We need education in this country, not indoctrination." In my opinion, the allowance of this program goes against what he is standing for, by allowing such harmful words to be said in the classroom.

I have mentioned the harm these bills have and will cause for the students but I also want to focus on how this affects teachers as well. There has been a dramatic increase in teacher vacancies with about 5,294 by January 2023 (Ecarma, 2023). This all started when Ron DeSantis

started his war against woke propaganda in schools. Teachers who are in fear of saying the wrong things in schools or the ones who are a part of the LGBTQ community are no longer safe in their careers. These resignations are now becoming an issue for the students who are a part of overpopulated classrooms and are being taught by unlicensed teachers and substitutes who aren't being properly trained in schools. As a result, to properly educate teachers, DeSantis opened civic training courses for them to take which in return for completing the class got a 3,000-dollar bonus. The real question is what is being taught in these courses? My mother is a 1st-grade teacher in Martin County, and she doesn't get paid the amount she should, so to get a little extra money to get her through the summer she took the civic course. I would often sit with her and listen to the videos that she had to watch to pass the program, and I could say with confidence that most of the videos were very conservative ideologies. It wasn't just me and my mom who thought this way, Barbara Segal a 12th-grade government teacher had a similar experience when she would have to respond to questions with a very Christian fundamentalist perspective (Chu, 2022). Florida's legislation and new goals towards a less political environment and ideological agenda in schools are completely contradicted left and right. The biased teachings that teachers are exposed to, which include stereotypes, undermine the quality of education students receive, thus limiting opportunities for mindful growth. This isn't the type of teaching students deserve. The goal of this letter is to show how Florida's legislation concerning actions in favor of stopping a woke agenda is harmful to both the students and teachers and how it's contradicted through other actions. I am reaching out in hopes that you might think about amending or appealing these new bills.

Sincerely,

Jenna Dunnuck

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