

# Opinion: Behind the latest GOP restrictions on race teaching: A hidden, toxic goal

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Glenn Youngkin's victory in the Virginia gubernatorial election persuaded Republicans that there's political gold in attacking teachers for supposedly indoctrinating the nation's children about race. So in GOP-controlled state legislatures, efforts to place new restrictions on teachers are accelerating.

But behind these efforts lie specific trends that could prove particularly toxic. The risk: They may make teachers believe they are on such thin ice that they end up whitewashing the U.S. past rather than dare to communicate hard truths about it.

That's the key takeaway from a [new report from PEN America](#) on the latest batch of restrictions moving forward in GOP legislatures. The report shows that these efforts are expanding and getting more pedagogically pernicious in their goals.

The report's top-line [finding](#): Dozens of proposals have already been introduced this month to limit how our nation's racial past and present are taught. That's striking enough, but what's underneath these efforts also matters.

There are three important features of these efforts, the report finds. The first is sloppy drafting: Many leave terminology vaguely defined, such as the idea that certain "concepts" are in some vague sense off limits. The second: Many explicitly target teachers' speech and require direct punishment of speech that's deemed a violation.

The third: Many come with a "private right of action," allowing parents and citizens to seek to levy their own punishments against teachers, such as suing them in court. Put all this together, and the aim seems to go beyond the traditional exercise of state authority to set curriculums.

Instead, this seems to treat teachers as subversive internal threats who must be zealously rooted out at any deviation from orthodoxy. The vague drafting of prohibited concepts, combined with threats of action and/or punishment, seem structured to make educators feel constantly at risk, chilling the range of discussion.

"This is about putting the fear of God into teachers and administrators," Jeffrey Sachs, the political scientist who authored the new report, told me. "Teachers are going to avoid discussing certain topics altogether — topics related to race, sex and American history that as a society we might want to discuss."

For example, the report cites a [proposal](#) in the Indiana legislature that would prohibit use of any materials that "include" concepts such as the notion that the United States was "founded" as a "racist nation" or that it is "irredeemably" racist.

Another Indiana proposal would bar teachers from using materials that “include” what it describes as “anti-American ideologies.” The report notes that the bill text doesn’t describe what these might be.

“A parent could complain that a teacher’s lecture about the Jim Crow era or about the persistence of racism and sexism in American life constitute anti-American ideology, and must be punished with the full force of the law,” Sachs told me.

Something like this already happened. Tennessee parents objected to the teaching of a book that portrayed the Jim Crow era in blunt and graphic terms, insisting it would make kids “hate their country.” Tennessee law prohibits teaching “concepts” that might make someone feel “discomfort” due to their race.

A ban on teaching a supposed “anti-American ideology” could open up more such objections, Sachs told me. This label, he said, might be applied to anything a teacher says that betrays someone’s “personal idea of what constitutes the nation and its values.”

All this points to a deeper question. Let’s say you accept objections to the idea that the U.S. founding was inherently white-supremacist or that our national experiment is irredeemably doomed to fall short of our founding values. Even so, why should teachers fear raising such concepts in classrooms, if only as ideas that have been debated throughout U.S. history and still are?

Some of these laws ban the “concept” that the United States is “irredeemably racist or sexist,” and some ban the idea that slavery and racism represent anything more than full-scale betrayals of our “authentic” founding. Proponents sometimes cite Martin Luther King Jr.’s belief in the ultimate promise of America’s founding in justifying this.

But things are not this simple. King described Whites as “the oppressor” and Blacks as “the oppressed.” He said “we must not consider it unpatriotic” to ask whether the U.S. needs a “radical restructuring” precisely because its current trajectory may not ultimately realize its founding principles.

“King said he hoped America could live up to its stated ideals, but nevertheless he wrestled with whether that was possible,” historian Kevin Kruse tells me.

As Sam Adler-Bell explains in an important essay on these laws, one of their goals is to place that very inquiry by King — whether that was possible, whether that *is* possible — beyond the reach of pedagogy, to remove it from the agenda entirely.

Similarly, some abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison, believed white supremacy undergirded the Constitution itself. Irredeemably so, in fact.

The question is whether teachers may fear that offering materials that treat these questions as up for debate is itself too risky, Kruse noted. But don’t we want kids to learn that these questions really were seen as up for debate by great historical figures?

“We shouldn’t shy away from this more complicated, more accurate picture,” Kruse told me. “Democracy is an ongoing project, and we should all be wrestling with whether our actions live up to our ideals.”

Judging by the way some of these laws and proposals are drafted, however, this seems to be exactly what they’re designed to discourage.

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