

We Censor Ourselves in Education

WHEN I WAS A TEACHER in China, my intern ultimately became the anchor of the evening news on China Central Television. When she appeared a few years later at an educational forum in Cambridge, Mass., this brilliant and self-assured journalist startled the audience by saying, “We have no censorship in China.” When she was challenged at this evidently absurd statement, she replied, “We do not need censorship in China. We censor ourselves.”

So it is in American education today.

This is not about critical race theory, a subject that does not appear in the curricula in any of the 50 states. This is about benign subjects that, until recently, parents and educational leaders expected teachers to understand

and teach as they had for decades.

The pursuit of equity, for example, is not a political agenda, but merely an evidence-based approach to acknowledging that different students have different needs and documented techniques exist to improve the literacy and math skills of all students.

This is not about indoctrinating students that America is a fundamentally racist country, but rather about acknowledging that our founding documents, including the Constitution which is rightly revered as the longest-serving democratic governing system in history, included the three-fifths compromise.

This is not about indicting Washington and Jefferson by contemporary standards, but about acknowledging the reality that both of these heroes of the American Revolution owned human beings.

Shielded From Truth

Yet in the contemporary rosy view of American history, these subjects are off limits in many parts of the country. While some school officials have implemented official policies of censorship of controversial topics, the more common practice is redolent of journalists in Communist China, where censorship is unnecessary because teachers and school administrators censor themselves.

I know of no better way to ensure the absence of critical thinking of today’s students and their inevitable future rebellion than to have a generation of young people who soon will realize they were shielded from essential truths about our history. It is possible to love our country, serve in the military and devote oneself to education, as I have, and nevertheless acknowledge our imperfections.

If we believe the purpose of education is to avoid encountering contrary views and then critically examining

them, we rob our students of one of their essential roles as citizens.

A Lofty Toll

The cost of self-censorship by teachers and school leaders goes beyond the stifling of intellectual arguments that are the lifeblood of democracy. These costs are revealed in the teachers and administrators leaving our profession at the earliest opportunity and fewer students entering teacher and administrator preparation programs. The turnover rate by teachers and administrators is especially severe in high-poverty schools, leaving students and the remaining faculty with a sense of cynicism and fear.

The cost of teacher turnover already is being felt in poor urban and rural areas where the teacher shortage leaves students taught by 18-year-old substitute teachers with a driver’s license and unburdened by any knowledge of the subject they are teaching. The inevitable result is students who are unprepared for high school, leading to a pending dropout time bomb of students who cannot graduate.

This is not a 2023 problem, but a 2073 problem, as those dropouts will face decades of poverty, unemployment, medical care costs and involvement in the criminal justice system. These are costs that all of us — including the censors — will pay.

The Communist Chinese press and those who object to discussions of unpleasant parts of American history might mutually resent the comparison. But their methods of intimidation leading to self-censorship are the same. It is not too late to back off from the brink, teach the facts and let our students learn.

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