

Academic Transparency to Protect Students from Radical Politics in K–12 Education

By Matt Beienburg

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Key Points

- States must take action to stem the rise of politics in the classroom, but even aggressive content bans leave lawmakers on defense and allow curriculum activists to ultimately adapt and evade them.
- Parents must be empowered to proactively hold schools accountable. By knowing what content is being taught at nearby schools *before* they enroll their children, parents could force public schools to decide whether pushing a political ideology is truly worth alienating potential enrollees and losing the formula funding those kids would bring.
- State laws often affirm parents' rights to access curriculum information, but in practice, school districts have sought to impede and even intimidate parents seeking to avail themselves of this information.
- A new model legislative solution advancing in multiple states would require public schools to post online a listing of all instructional materials used in the classroom—whether core textbooks, news articles, or resources such as the 1619 Project—just as teachers already disclose their materials to administrators.

The 1619 Project and its companion resources have spread to thousands of schools (and counting) in all 50 states,¹ priming students to reject America's founding principles and even literally black out the Declaration of Independence.² Meanwhile, tales of politically radical K–12 instruction seem to break into the news almost daily.³

Despite a growing chorus among conservatives about the problem of politics in the classroom, those on the right have struggled to advance long-term solutions to it. Indeed, up to now, state lawmakers

concerned about politics in the classroom have typically faced a binary choice.

Option #1: Inaction

The first option is to adopt the path of least resistance and shrug off the accelerating spread of political ideologies being taught in public schools at taxpayer expense.

Many conservatives have largely resigned themselves to the idea that public schools represent local, rather than centralized, government, and

therefore state lawmakers ought not infringe on their activities even when the outcomes are troubling. Meanwhile, progressives, who now largely dominate the levers of this local power via the union political machine, have been more than happy to indulge conservatives' scruples on this point, voicing uncharacteristic reverence for "local control" over K–12 and the authority of school boards and administrators.⁴

Option #2: Curriculum Bans

The second option is to prohibit teaching specific content in public schools.

Several states have successfully passed legislation banning critical race theory and other racially and politically divisive materials. These laws will undoubtedly curb some of the most insidious messages bombarding our kids. But regardless of whether conservative lawmakers in a given state find this approach extreme or essential, it is ultimately only a partial bandage.

As left-wing groups such as the Zinn Education Project help repackage, reword, and reinvent their classroom materials under new slogans (as we're seeing happen *already*)⁵ to evade these laws, conservative lawmakers will find themselves locked endlessly in playing defense—or as observed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, playing political "whack-a-mole all over this state."⁶ So even where bans have been implemented, something more proactive is needed.

Option #3: Academic Transparency

This brings us to a third approach, academic transparency: empowering *parents* to hold schools accountable for the content used in their classrooms. Specifically, under the Academic Transparency Act model legislation that the Goldwater Institute developed, each public school would disclose a listing of the actual instructional materials the school used during the past academic year on a publicly accessible portion of its website by July 1.⁷

With this in place, prospective parents would suddenly be able to see which nearby schools insist on pushing a political agenda—and parents could make their enrollment decisions accordingly. Schools, in turn, would find themselves under a

meaningful spotlight for the first time and have to decide whether pushing political activism is truly worth alienating potential enrollees.

Put another way, schools respond to incentives (particularly financial), and scaring off the \$10,000 (or more) associated with each potential student will force schools to rethink the wisdom of pandering to political organizers rather than committing to classroom fundamentals.

Of course, states across the country—from Arizona to Florida and Texas to Tennessee—already make clear (in theory) parents' rights to review the instructional materials used at their children's schools.⁸ But (in practice) far too often, parents who want to review course materials are required to travel to a district facility or arrive during specified hours (e.g., when they are working or would need childcare), or they are shown only misleading "curriculum" frameworks concealing more controversial content.⁹ Most importantly, these parents typically find out what sort of material is being taught only *after* their child comes home to tell them about it.

But parents' leverage (besides grumbling to an unsympathetic administration or school board) at that point is limited; pulling a child out of school and away from friends is simply too drastic a remedy for most. These families deserve the information to evaluate a school *before* their child is established in a given environment. And, they deserve it *without* threats of retaliatory lawsuits, as one Rhode Island mother recently received from her school board for lawfully asking about the curriculum her incoming kindergarten daughter would encounter.¹⁰

Parents can already easily go online to access schools' financial data, student performance scores, graduation and dropout rates, enrollment processes, and more—all long before being required to make an enrollment decision for their student. Academic transparency would simply extend the same 21st-century access to course content.

But what about all the logistical hurdles involved with listing materials? Well, as I discuss in a Goldwater Institute policy report,¹¹ numerous schools *already* list materials in varying degrees of detail online. The Hillsdale Academy, for example, posts on its website easy access to curriculum, weekly

outlines, course syllabi, reading lists, and a bibliography of materials.¹²

And for those concerned about copyright issues or that teachers would be expected to copy and upload every page of content, the bill would entail neither. Rather, schools would simply list the basic information (e.g., title and author or website) to identify each resource, organized by subject and grade.

In addition, this sort of transparency wouldn't tie teachers' hands or require any additional pre-approval of materials. It would simply require that the materials be documented. The bill would give teachers and administrators the flexibility to post information in a manner as easy and inexpensive as copying the names and links into a Google Doc visible via the school website. Especially when teachers are commonly expected to submit lesson plans with their material to administrators and are already keeping track of their resources to reuse them the following year, the additional workload would be minimal.¹³ As one North Carolina parent and former teacher testified to her state legislators:

As a former Wake County teacher, 20 years ago I provided all of this information. I turned in my lesson plans to my principal. Doing it electronically now would be so much simpler than what I was expected to do. . . . So all of this is stuff that I had to do as a teacher that now as a parent I would greatly appreciate.¹⁴

The academic transparency model has already been adapted into legislation passed this spring by the Arizona State Senate and the North Carolina House of Representatives, and it is now being advanced in Wisconsin and elsewhere. The model has struck a nerve with union political activists, who have labeled transparency efforts—without a hint of irony—as “censorship” and “abuse.”¹⁵

But asking those who teach our children to simply disclose their materials is neither. Rather, academic transparency will simply help ensure that political ideology is never again advanced in our schools under the cover of dark. As in so many other settings, when it comes to politics in the classroom, sunlight is the best disinfectant.

About the Author

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The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.

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