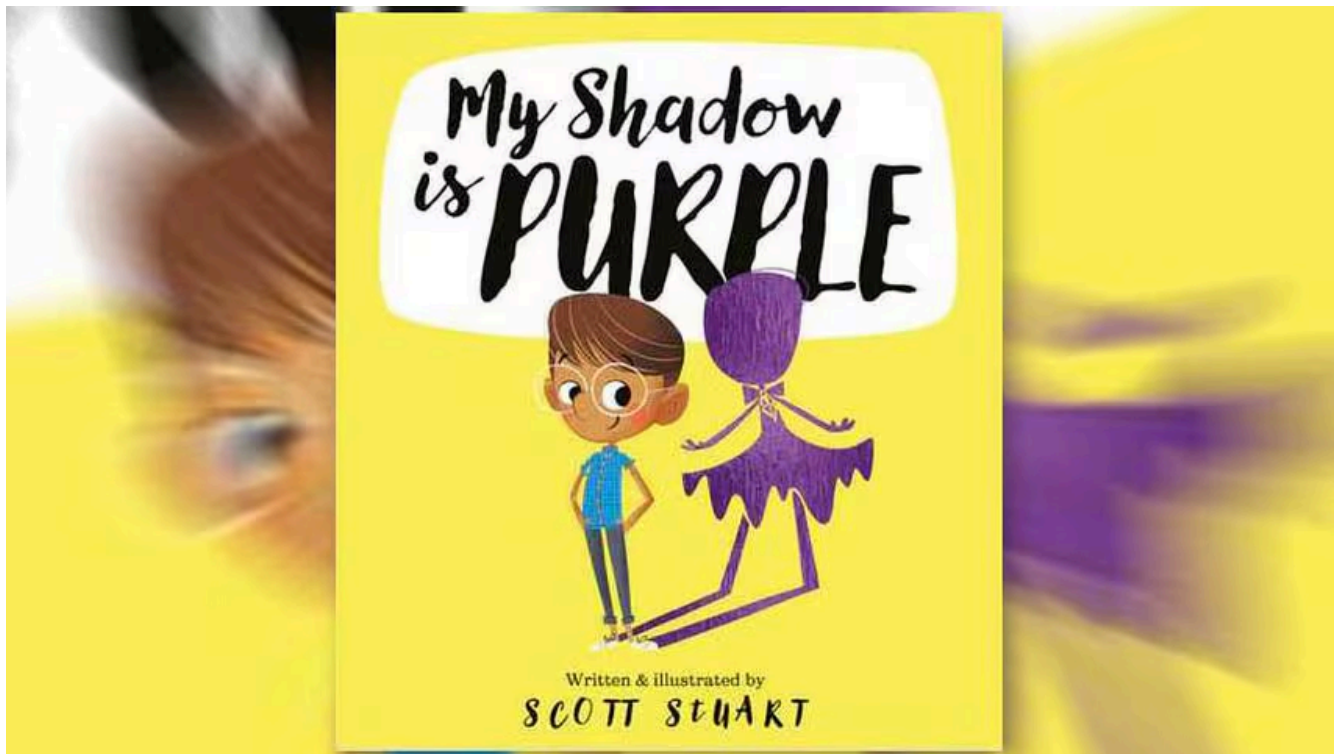


Georgia divisive concepts law allegedly why Cobb put teacher on leave



Credit: Larkin House

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My Shadow is Purple — A Cobb County elementary school teacher was placed on administrative leave after she read this book to her fifth graders, which has a message that challenges gender norms. Photo Credit: Larkin House.

A Cobb County teacher may be the first casualty of laws passed last year amid a conservative backlash against “woke” classrooms.

Katie Rinderle, who taught gifted students at Due West Elementary School, was placed on administrative leave after she read her fifth graders a book of rhymes with a message that challenges gender norms.

“She made the book part of a lesson about diversity, inclusion, acceptance, understanding and all the positive things that we want to have out of our public school students,” said her lawyer, Craig Goodmark.

Goodmark said a student told a parent, who quickly complained to school administrators. Rinderle was then summoned by the principal and placed on paid leave before the school year ended, he said. A termination tribunal is scheduled for Aug. 3. Goodmark said she otherwise has a “stellar” personnel file.

Goodmark said his client was told she had violated Georgia’s [“divisive concepts” law](#) passed in 2022. It was focused mainly on classroom discussions about race but included a passage about transgender

athletes.

He said the law, and two others associated with parental rights and school materials, were so vague as to sow confusion, adding that his client was not told specifically how she had violated the law.

She acquired the book, “[My Shadow is Purple](#),” at a school book fair, and said her students voted to have her read it to them.

The Cobb County School District said the action against Rinderle was “appropriate considering the entirety of the teacher’s behavior and history.” The statement did not elaborate except to say that the district remained “committed to strictly enforcing all” school board policies and the law.

Cobb school board chairman Brad Wheeler said in an email: “This is a personnel matter, I have no comment on it.”

State Rep. Will Wade, R-Dawsonville, authored House Bill 1084, now a law that prohibits teaching “divisive concepts,” such as that America is “fundamentally” racist.

It does not address gender discussions in classrooms, but Wade noted that other legislation passed the same year gave parents more control over content.

Wade said the intent was to focus classrooms on core skills, like reading and math — and to ensure material is age appropriate. He said the book Rinderle read to her classroom did not sound like something he’d want read to his own two kids, rising second and fourth graders.

The Southern Poverty Law Center said [in an online post](#) that it is the first known case involving the 2022 laws limiting teacher speech.

Legal expert Tanya Washington said the teacher could sue claiming violations of her federally protected rights to free speech and due process.

Teachers and other employees give up some speech protections at work, but in this case Rinderle could argue she was reading a book she thought was appropriate because she acquired it at a school-approved event, said Washington, a Georgia State University law professor.

Georgia is an at-will employment state, so workers can be fired for any reason that’s not illegal. But the U.S. Constitution requires fair notice, and Rinderle could argue the Georgia law was too vague to provide a clear warning she was crossing a line.

“What’s divisive to one parent or one child may not be divisive to another. Who is the arbiter of that determination? And the statutes are not providing much guidance in that regard,” Washington said of the law, adding that it may spawn many lawsuits, with taxpayers footing the bill.

Teachers and civil liberties advocates [have often criticized the new laws](#) as overly vague. They say teachers, wary of crossing a line they cannot see, will simply withdraw from addressing controversial topics.

Jeff Hubbard, president of the Cobb County Association of Educators, said the divisive concepts law — and the district’s reaction to it based on the complaint of one mom, who happens to be another district teacher — could destroy Rinderle’s career.

He described her as an “exemplary” teacher and predicted a backlash from her colleagues. They were just beginning to react Thursday on a Facebook page restricted to Cobb teachers.

“Absolutely insane,” wrote one in a post that Hubbard read aloud. Another: “When did teachers become the enemy?”

Staff writer Alice Tecotzky contributed to this report.