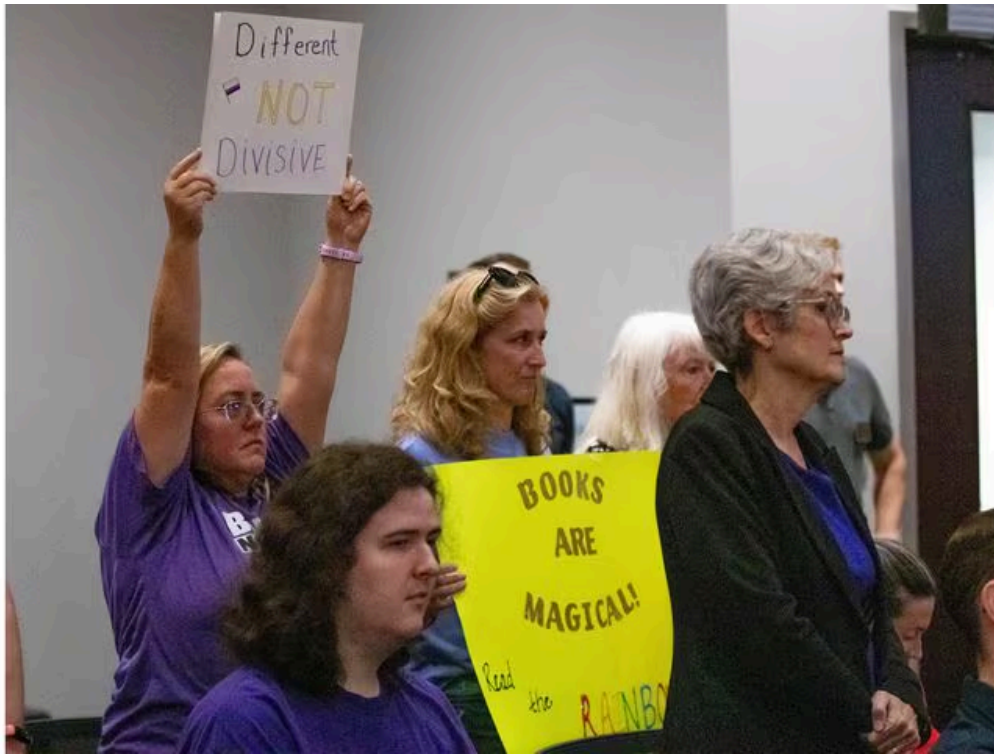


Georgia students go back to school in a time of political polarization



Credit: Katelyn Myrick

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Demonstrators Andrea Kramer and Kristin Thomas hold up signs to urge the Cobb County school board to embrace inclusivity following a teacher's impending termination regarding a book that was read to her fifth grade class in Marietta on Thursday, July 20, 2023. (Katelyn Myrick/katelyn.myrick@ajc.com)

From grade school to grad school, students in Georgia start returning next week to classrooms that have become a battleground in an escalating culture war.

A Cobb County teacher will soon defend herself for reading her fifth graders a book that challenges gender norms. The district wants to fire her. Meanwhile, one of the state's top elected lawmakers has put Georgia's public colleges and universities under a microscope over their spending on "diversity" initiatives.

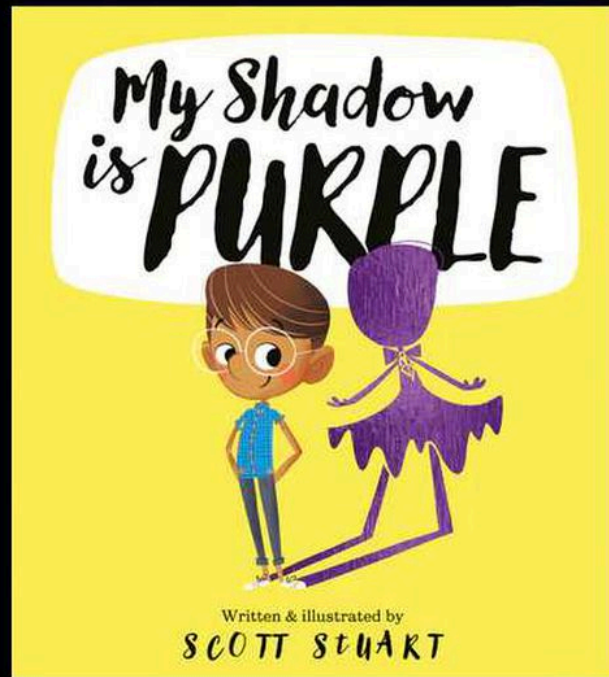
That word has become a rallying cry for conservatives and liberals, as the state agency that oversees teacher credentialing [has removed it](#) from training requirements for future educators. Explore [READ MORE: Book disputes land suburban Atlanta school district in court](#)

State laws that took effect a year ago, and the resulting local policies that implement them, constrain classroom conversations about race, streamline the process for removing school library books and emphasize parental rights.

Some teachers welcome the new rules, one survey found, but others consider them to be vague and menacing, causing them to share less with their students.

After all, who wants to be the next Katie Rinderle, the teacher facing a termination hearing in Cobb?

She read her students “My Shadow is Purple.” It challenges binary gender conventions, using shadows as a proxy. Cobb sees that as a violation of its new policies, even though they do not explicitly prohibit discussing gender identity. Her [lawyer said she was told](#) she violated Georgia’s “divisive concepts” law.



Credit: Larkin House

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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. (Courtesy of Larkin House)

Gov. Brian Kemp signed [the divisive concepts legislation](#) in the spring of 2022. The law took effect that July, giving local school boards a month to adopt policies to handle alleged violations.

It says teachers, curriculum and school training “shall not advocate for” nine notions that involve race. For instance, teachers cannot tell students that America is fundamentally racist; and they cannot assert

that “an individual, by virtue of his or her race, is inherently or consciously racist or oppressive toward individuals of other races.”

Other bills Kemp signed into law last year address related issues. One [expedites the review and potential removal](#) of school library books alleged to be obscene. Another, [titled a “Parents’ Bill of Rights,”](#) emphasizes parent rights, including to review instructional materials and “to direct the upbringing and the moral or religious training” of their children.

Teacher advocates contend the laws were unnecessary, saying few if any teachers were crossing the lines drawn by Georgia lawmakers. They add that the lines are fuzzy, which makes teachers likely to censor themselves.

“Educators are very uneasy about anything that they might do or say,” said Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators. “The anxiety and fear of what might happen is in many cases having a bigger impact than the letter of the law.”

Her observation is echoed by a recent [RAND Corp. report](#). It found that only a quarter of about 1,400 public school teachers surveyed nationally were ordered by school or district leaders to limit their discussions of political and social issues, yet 65% said they were voluntarily doing so.

Classroom disharmony

Even seemingly innocuous subjects have been affected.

Morgan said an art teacher was accused of violating the divisive concepts law by using a George Floyd painting in a current events discussion.

And a [report by the National Association for Music Education](#) (NAfME) several months ago found that about two-thirds of 136 music teachers surveyed last fall in Georgia and 18 other states with divisive concepts prohibitions reported negative effects on their teaching, their students or themselves.

One Georgia teacher feared getting in trouble “if I unknowingly use content in my classroom that is not okay,” according to anonymous responses the association shared with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Karen Salvador, who wrote the association’s report, said some music teachers are wary of genres associated with Black artists, including jazz, spirituals, blues, civil rights anthems and some current pop.

Teachers “feel like either they have to sanitize what they’re teaching or they just can’t teach it at all,” said Salvador, an associate professor at Michigan State University and a member of the NAFME executive board.

Melanie Powers retired from teaching music in the Athens public schools just before the laws took effect. She said she taught music as social history, using songs to connect with slavery, Jim Crow and the civil rights movement. She wonders whether teachers can still use that approach when parents feel emboldened to complain because of the divisive concepts law.

“Those people who wrote it, they’re talking about white people being discriminated against,” said Powers, who is white. “I don’t know where the persecution complex is coming from with white people, but it is real.”

Not all teachers feel that way. That NAFME survey found that about a third reported no negative effect on their classrooms from the prohibitions, and some supported them.

“Hopefully, it will help curb the rise of teachers pushing their liberal sexual agenda on the kids,” one Georgia teacher wrote.

Differing interpretations

Georgia’s 180 school districts had to translate those new laws into policy last school year, and the interpretations differed in detail and in tone.

Atlanta emphasized open discourse, referencing [the First Amendment](#) and [the 1964 Civil Rights Act](#).

Cobb warned that the theory of evolution is “socially controversial and potentially divisive,” instructing teachers “to set limits” when discussing politics and religion. The rules do not specifically forbid discussing gender identity but do quote “the moral or religious training” language in the parent rights law.



Credit: Jenni Girtman

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Rashad Brown teaches Advanced Placement African American Studies at Maynard Jackson High School on Friday, Feb 17, 2023. Students participate in dialogue and debate, present projects and consider why restrictions are being put on the course in other states. (Jenni Girtman for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

The new laws, and the community sentiment behind them, are changing public education in subtle ways.

A middle school teacher in Forsyth County used to discuss current events with students but decided to hew closely to the state's official learning standards, the teacher told the AJC.

Tapping students' background knowledge and drawing historic parallels to current events, like the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, is an effective way to engage them and make them think, said the teacher, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of job loss. "But I wouldn't do that now as freely or as easily."

Diversity under scrutiny

[In May](#), the Georgia Professional Standards Commission, the agency that licenses teachers, started [stripping rulebook references to "diversity," "equity" and other terms labeled "ambiguous."](#) The requirements guide colleges that train prospective teachers. Agency officials [have said](#) the revisions were requested by the University System of Georgia and are aimed at terms that have taken on "multiple or unintended meanings."



Jonathan Peraza Campos yells at the Georgia Professional Standards Commission members after they voted during their June 8, 2023, meeting to delete words such as "diversity" and "equity" and scores of references to so-called “ambiguous terms” from the rules that guide the colleges and programs that train future educators. (Christina Maticotta for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

The cost of college campus diversity initiatives is also under scrutiny. Georgia Lt. Gov. Burt Jones [recently asked](#) the University System about the price of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.

Jones raised concerns about conservative voices being shouted down on college campuses and said tax dollars shouldn't be spent “advancing divisive concepts like DEI.”

I'm going to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent wisely to support a higher education system that equips students for future success—not on advancing divisive concepts like DEI.

This report shows more work to be done—but commend USG on first step.
<https://t.co/i4baiQVDrF> #gapol

– Burt Jones (@burtjonesforga) July 3, 2023

In April, the Georgia Board of Regents approved a [statement of principles](#) on academic freedom and free expression that affirms the University System “values the diversity of intellectual thought.” At that meeting, the board’s chair said students sometimes avoid discussing controversial topics out of fear they could be canceled.

Gideon Fernald, 21, a senior from Norcross and chairman of the University of Georgia College Republicans, said some classes were built on a foundation of “liberal biases.”

”I’m not saying all liberal professors are intolerant,” Fernald said. But he added: “In certain classes that has definitely been a worry for me to kind of just stay more silent and not really engage in that freedom of expression that I think every American college should be allowed to participate in.”

Matthew Boedy, president of the Georgia Conference of the American Association of University Professors, said faculty know their course syllabi could be posted online or their classes recorded, generating a “hurricane of emails” [from critics](#).

“There’s a climate of fear... from the pressure of Joe Citizen or whoever is watching Fox News,” said Boedy, an associate professor at the University of North Georgia.

Protecting students?

Classroom discussions about race [were the animating issue](#) at school board meetings back in 2021. That passion has since broadened to include sexual content in books.

Forsyth residents combed school libraries and found at least 100 titles they deemed to be objectionable. Their critics contend they are targeting works by people of color or those with non-conforming gender identities. But Cindy Martin, one of the parents complaining about books, said she and her allies are only concerned about sexually explicit content.

The school district removed some books, but returned most of them after a months-long review.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights then [reviewed a complaint](#) about Forsyth’s process, and determined it might have [created a “hostile environment”](#) for some students.

Martin said she believes the federal agency is promoting a “trans” agenda to “indoctrinate” children. She said federal officials want to expose kids to “beliefs about being transgender or gay or homosexual, any kind of sexual ideas ... to just change who they are.”

She called it “a battle for our children’s minds.”



Credit: TNS

Credit: TNS

Alison Hair (left) and Cindy Martin stand in front of the Forsyth County Schools building on Aug. 15, 2022, in Cumming, Georgia. Hair and Martin, who dubbed themselves as the "Mama Bears," have been vocal in their opposition of materials they believe are sexually offensive and inappropriate for students. (Jason Getz/Atlanta Journal-Constitution/TNS)

Such views drove Sarah Sterner and her wife out of Forsyth. Both were teachers for the school system.

Sterner quit in the fall of 2021 after she was attacked on social media for revealing that her wife had become pregnant through in vitro fertilization.

She said the new laws could hasten the departure of other teachers who support LGBTQ students. That, in turn, could lead to more youth suicides, dropouts and homelessness, she said.

“People don’t understand the impact of their words. They think that they’re protecting their kids from something,” Sterner said. “They’re not protecting their kids from anything. Their kids are who they are. Teachers can’t make their kids gay. We have no desire to make their kids gay. We just want them to not kill themselves if they are. And there just doesn’t seem to be any willingness to consider that side of it.”

In Cobb, a tribunal will soon determine the fate of Rinderle, the fifth grade teacher who read a book about shadows and gender to her students. It was an attempt, her lawyer said, to [encourage inclusion and acceptance](#).

But [parents complained](#), and a termination document says the book she read was part of a lesson that “was a controversial subject (gender identity/fluidity) that is not an appropriate school topic for ten and eleven-year-old students.”



Credit: Olivia Bowdoin

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Erick Allen, former Representative and Chair of Cobb County Democrats, gives a motivational speech at one of the Banned Bookmobile Tour stops in Marietta, Georgia on Thursday, July 20, 2023. The national bus tour aims to distribute books that have been banned by Florida Governor, Ron Desantis, as an initiative to raise awareness for freedom of expression. The pink t-shirt of one of the audience members reads, "Libraries are full of ideas -- perhaps the most dangerous and powerful of all weapons." (Olivia Bowdoin for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Jennifer Kunz, who has kids in middle and high school in Cobb, said she understands why parents at Rinderle's school might have been upset about her book choice. But she said firing her seems like an overreaction.

"These are issues that are going to come up: These kids are going to encounter nonbinary kids as they move into middle school," Kunz said. "And the way the school has handled it has made it seem utterly taboo rather than something that we really should be talking about no matter what your opinion on it is."

In June, soon after the news about Rinderle's pending termination in Cobb, the AJC asked the governor about her case. Kemp declined to comment on it but defended Georgia's divisive concepts law.

Educators were consulted in writing a law with a "fair process" that protects families, he said. "So I'm sure the process will play out in a really good way."

Staff writers Cassidy Alexander, Greg Bluestein and Alice Tecotzky contributed to this article.