

THIS FRAGILE PARTNERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

I could feel the chair breaking underneath me. It was snapping at the base, separating the seat from the swivel as I reached around for anything to keep me from falling. At least one of the muscles in my abdomen started twisting with my awkward and contorting figure, reminding me that *work* was no substitute for *exercise*. And yet fall I did, along with the pens, the bins, and the papers I grabbed on the way down. But there was no time to be stunned, no time to deal with the chair or the mess, or the pain in my body. I was on a conference call with a parent, someone I'd been hoping to chat with for several weeks. So I sat there on the ground in my classroom, phone in hand, listening and talking as if nothing had happened, *as if everything was normal*.

With most parents, it would have been easy to stop the conversation and apologize for the inconvenience. They might have asked if I was okay, I might have asked to call them back, and we both might have shared a good laugh. And to be honest, I could have said something to this *particular* parent. He also would have cared. And he would have waited for a callback, laughing with me on the other side of it. But I wanted *this* call to be perfect. I

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needed this call to be perfect. He was my old boss, from the days before I got into education.

Looking back almost twelve years, back to early November 2010, so much had changed. Back then, he was the general manager of a restaurant in South Florida where I trained all of his servers. Back then, he knew how much I wanted to become a teacher. He knew how hard I was trying. I had worked for his store since it opened in 2005, through college, through the recession and a year of substitute teaching, through two years of countless applications and interviews. No matter how many times I showed up, school after school, no matter much I tried to make myself sound qualified, no principal had ever reached out to offer me a job. The prospect of continuing my search felt useless. At the time, I was willing to keep working in hospitality if need be, but the restaurant was *supposed* to be a stopgap on my way to the classroom. And a part of me was coming to terms with the possibility of a future more like his, a future managing restaurants, working weekends and holidays, making people smile and laugh on *their* days off. It certainly wasn't a far cry from the life I was already living, maybe just a few more steps up and I'd be in his shoes.

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When my phone rang in early November, with that long-awaited invitation to start teaching fourth grade and begin my career, he seemed to already be expecting my resignation. His wife was a teacher and we had talked, many times, about *that* life, her life, the one I wanted. So with a firm and memorable handshake, he let me go and we both moved forward, independent of each other.

For three years, from 2010 to 2013, I continued to teach fourth grade at a Title I school in Palm Beach County, periodically stopping in and saying hello to the servers I had trained at the restaurant, some of them now friends, checking in with my old boss, letting him know how the new job was going. But over time, South Florida became less and less like home. My wife, Melissa, had family in Orlando, so we moved about three hours north. I landed a rare job teaching middle school web design at another Title I school in Seminole County, a position I not only held for six years, but one that I loved, right up until the end, despite my program being carved up and axed. By 2019, after nine years in the classroom, I took a leap of faith, returning to teach elementary at a charter school in the same county, nearly two hundred miles from where I started my career. And yet, just a few weeks before COVID crippled the world in early 2020, I stepped through the courtyard of my new school and saw him

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pacing, on his phone, in a crowd of other parents, like we were back at the restaurant, both of us busy and working.

I knew he had also moved his family to Central Florida, just like my wife and I, but the chances that he would be in *my* school, on *that* day, with a child just a few years away from being in *my* classroom, the whole thing felt surreal and unbelievable. For the first time, I felt a knot, a sense of personal and professional duty, to stay in fifth grade, to continue doing what I was doing, to get better each year until his daughter reached my classroom, like a full-circle act of service, a return on his investment and patience all those years before. With 4,000 schools in the State of Florida and nearly three million students, it was hard to imagine passing up the opportunity, even as the pandemic raged, even as my principal offered me other positions. I didn't budge. I was there, committed, even if my chair eventually broke in the middle of a conference.

At the start of my career, there was a small voice in the back of my head arguing that no parent would ever care what I had to say if they found out that I wasn't a father. I worried that moms and dads would prod too far, that they would ask me why, that I would feel obligated to share too much too soon. But that uneasy, self-conscious apprehension went away quickly as I conceded that no parent conference, not one, was ever about me or my

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personal life. These meetings were always about seeking a solution or sharing the success of *their* child, not mine. I grew to appreciate and admire the teachers who *did* go home to children, who *did* come into a parent meeting with a sense of shared empathy and experience. But I also learned to accept, like every other teacher, that it wasn't necessary for me to have my own child in order to demonstrate that I was fully invested in the care and progress of someone else's child.

During those first three years in education, I worked with several hundred fourth and fifth graders, some in the classroom and others through various events and field trips, enough kids that I was rarely in a parent meeting alone. Two of those years I spent giving lessons in math and science through a dual language program, departmentalized, with students learning their subjects in English for half the day, Spanish for the rest, which meant that a parent conference might include up to four teachers, all of us working with the same child. As a novice in the profession, I often took a backseat in those conversations. It wasn't that I never spoke, but that I didn't need to speak as often. I simply came prepared, waited my turn, and listened.

I saw frustrated parents crying, telling us they were overwhelmed. I saw veteran teachers, leaning in with

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hugs and tissues. I learned that whatever issues or concerns I had with a child on *my* end, it was more important to hear the issues and concerns on *their* end. I watched my colleagues—far more experienced—take time to measure their words without attack or blame. Even when a parent entered a meeting with aggression, I was a witness as they brought down the temperature. In time, I learned to lead similar conversations, avoiding jabs and searching for common ground.

But we weren't always perfect. I still remember a parent storming out of a room, dragging her daughter out like a rag doll. Neither the mom nor my colleague were able to keep the discussion calm even as the yelling passed down multiple hallways. Truancy may have been the issue, but it's hard to remember faces and names, let alone the causes of every concern from that far back.

What I do remember, and often regret, was the time I let a parent down by making a far bigger deal of something than there ever needed to be. During one of my days off, I left a test with our substitute, a test that I wanted the kids to take in my absence. But when I graded them the next day, I noticed that several of my students had the same *wrong* answers on the same questions. It was clearly cheating, yes, but the way I managed the situation, you would have thought these were the Nuremberg Trials. I

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made about a dozen phone calls, spoke to witnesses, made sure everyone knew it was a *big* deal, that *someone* would have to pay for messing up like this. What it should have been was an opportunity to coach the kids on the subject of honesty, then learn, as a teacher, to always be present for tests. Instead, what I managed to do was upset multiple families and children with a federal case. I'd clearly forgotten that they were only nine years old, and that it was *my* job to help them succeed, rather than burning and burying them in guilt.

One of the parents in the “cheating scandal” was a peer, a fellow teacher who worked down the hall. At the start of that year, she told me how thankful she was that her daughter would get to have a male teacher, considering how disproportionate the gender roles tended to be in most elementary schools. But in the days and weeks that followed that incident, I could see in her eyes that I was a disappointment, that most of her hope for me was gone. I don't think she saw me as a *bad* teacher, exactly, but I definitely wasn't winning any awards or accolades from her end of the hall. And what it taught me, in retrospect, was to treat every child as if their mom or dad were in the next room over, as if every parent were a colleague, a friend, or a family member. Again, those were my first two or three years, filled with mistakes.

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After those early days of teaching, I grew less rigid in my approach to classroom management, more forgiving and flexible when the situation warranted patience, but I wasn't immune from dropping the ball in a parent meeting. For example, I'll never forget arriving late to a middle school conference with six other teachers and another parent-peer (someone who worked at the other end of the same campus with a son in my web design class). She stared at me with daggers when I found my seat, mostly because I crossed my arms with a coffee and slouched, like I didn't want to be there. The truth was that I had stayed up late tweaking a lesson and my eyes were bloodshot, and because these were all peers, I thought I could get away with being a little less serious. That was a mistake on my part, especially when it must have looked like I was suffering from a hangover. She came to me later in the day, on her own, across campus, and chewed me out so fiercely, so aggressively that I had no choice but to apologize for the mere *appearance* of not caring. Because of course I cared. Of course it mattered to me that her child was struggling, not just in my class but in other classes. Unfortunately, that impression was hard to shake, since I was one of the reasons she asked to meet.

After my apology, after the candor of our conversation grew less hostile, she told me that her son was afraid to

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ask me for help, that he had tried to ask questions in the past and that I had shut him down. So I invited her to sit in on my class at any point down the road to observe. I explained that my classroom and my approach were both built around discussions. I told her that questions were *always* welcome in my classroom, but that once a set of instructions had been given twice, once we had exhausted any remaining questions about how to get started or what to do next, I would set my students loose on a task that had all the instructions repeated in writing. I wanted them to be self-sufficient and self-empowered. So I made it my job to circulate through the room and listen for the better and more relevant questions, things like, "I'm on step three, but I'm not sure how to pronounce this word." If a child simply raised their hand to say "I don't get it" or ask "what are we doing," I would encourage them to reach out to a neighbor or a seat partner, someone who could repeat the basics that we had just gone over. And as I spoke to this mother about my teaching style, I didn't apologize for the method, but I *did* apologize for the possibility that it ever made her child feel unable to ask me questions. We ended with a standing invitation, again, for her to visit my classroom at any point in the future. But she never came by.

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I spent the rest of that semester looking for ways to offer her son more positive feedback, praising him at every small and modest turn of success. I don't know that she ever knew this or saw this, but it was a conscious effort on my part to change. Even if she continued to judge me poorly, even if she continued to feel negative about my abilities as a teacher, I took her words at face value and tried to be better, answering more of his questions myself, with less redirection. Because disregarding her concerns as a mother would have been an act far worse than showing up late to a meeting and slouching. In the aftermath of our uncomfortable exchange, as a result of my shift on her behalf, I became a better teacher to the rest of my students as well, loosening up, less resistant to answer questions a third or fourth time if need be.

The hardest part about hearing something negative from a parent, even if it's necessary, is that I hold onto the information and absorb it. I start to second guess myself. I start to replay conversations and wonder if maybe I'm not that good at the job. But I'm also not alone. Many of my peers have lost sleep, multiple nights, because they got a frustrated email from a parent, late at night or first thing in the morning. It's one thing to believe we've established rapport with our students. It's quite another to learn that the parent of a child doesn't think we have.

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It's even worse if we already think low of our abilities, of ourselves, and then that email shows up. We get overly self-conscious, we lose our sense of rhythm, maybe get defensive. Other times, we fight through the hurt and get better, because we don't want to fail *any* parent in the same way again.

This thing we have with parents is not a fight over who matters more to a child. We're not opposites and we're not enemies. On the contrary, we serve the same children from different ends of the daily hourglass, each of us desperately hoping that they'll succeed in whatever it is they set their minds to achieve, each of us giving them the tools to be better than us. But because we love and care for these children, together, our occasional conflicts are not all that unlike a husband and wife deciding how to manage a house, or a brother and a sister deciding how to care for their aging parents, or two young friends deciding what to do with the \$10 bill they just found in a book. It's a partnership, this thing we have. But it's also a *fragile* partnership, easily rattled by the things we allow ourselves to believe about each other.

On my end, as a Florida teacher, I believe this already fragile partnership was put under tremendous strain at the start of the COVID pandemic, by factors beyond our control. In the beginning, when we were allowed to see

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inside of each other's homes, when teachers were still trying to teach through a camera and parents could sit next to their child during a lesson, it opened a peculiar window that most of us had never experienced. For some, it was a source of shared empathy, teachers being more patient with their students, more cognizant that their voices could be heard by multiple people across multiple houses. Likewise, many parents, still trying to work and maintain their jobs from home, were often quick to share their appreciation with teachers who kept trying to teach through a camera, successful or not. I'll never forget waving to a parent from the door of my house after she dropped off a fresh cup of coffee and a bag of muffins, a gesture that symbolized our common effort to break through the isolation, a reminder that we were in this thing together, that we would figure it out.

But as the weeks turned into months, as we started a new school year, all of us frustrated, all of us still trying to break through the isolation, our partnership was put under a different kind of strain, also beyond our control. Without a voice of our own in Tallahassee, we were told that our views were binary, that we often had to choose between *elected* officials and *health* officials, politicians and school boards, good guys and bad guys. And even then, as health officials were silenced, as school boards

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were bullied, our choices grew more narrow. You were either *with* the state or *against* it, all or nothing. That consolidation of political power in Florida made our fights a little different than the ones people were having in other states. Everyone around the world and around the nation was debating if and when to open schools, if and how often to get vaccinated, if and whether to wear masks. But in Florida, the governor and his party took a unique stance, actively telling parents that they should stand up to districts and schools and teachers, that they should view us as a potential threat to their children if any of us should express disagreement with the state.

Deep within this pool of contention, most of us were just barely treading water, trying not to drown. Parents were eager to find normalcy again, to get back to work if possible, and move past the pandemic. Teachers were as well, but as the climate of education grew more tense, many of my colleagues turned somber. Once cheerful and optimistic, some of them left the profession entirely. Others continued showing up, present in body but not always in spirit, their joy sapped by impossible hurdles and unreasonable expectations. But instead of lowering the water levels and helping to put us back on familiar ground, together, the voices in Tallahassee grew louder and more aggressive. Again, parents were told that we

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were a danger, that teachers were loose cannons, that our textbooks were a source of liberal indoctrination, that too many of us were teaching racial hatred over racial harmony and sexuality over basic math. On their own, these accusations were almost enough to choke our profession of its most creative, effective educators. But that's when the state began writing and passing laws meant to enshrine and formalize their accusations, making sure we knew that parents could now sue us, our schools, and our districts, if we ever dared to say the wrong thing, whether by accident or intention.

At the start of 2022, I couldn't help but feel a strange, defensive nostalgia. As I watched those laws moving through the state, from simple committees to the desk of the governor, I couldn't help but think about all the parents who had entrusted me and my colleagues with their children over many years, how easy it was for laws like this to make it seem as though their trust was somehow misplaced. I couldn't help but wonder if it was possible to restore what was breaking or broken, to give parents and families a small sense of what it's been like, what it feels like, to be a Florida teacher right now. Without the microphones of Tallahassee or the pen of a politician, I decided to lend a voice to the conversation, however small or seemingly irrelevant.

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These essays are both a reflection of my experience as an educator and a reaction to the rising tone of animosity that swirls above and toward this profession. Sometimes they were written and shared with friends. Other times I kept them to myself, wondering if they would ever have an audience. In a field of work where I've seen far more goodwill than resentment, this air of bad blood seems misaligned and off balance. That doesn't mean I believe that every parent needs to favor every teacher, or that every teacher needs to get along with every parent. But rather, that the vast majority of us, on both sides, have gotten along quite well for many years. In writing and sharing these pages, I'm appealing to men and women, moms and dads, colleagues and legislators at every level, to remember that we are on the same side in the same endeavor. At the very least, we *have* been and *ought* to be. All of us have laughed together, told stories together, cried and hoped, together. So I chose to follow every essay with a break, a reflection of the warmth, the love, the humor, and the heartbreak that makes us all human.

I don't pretend to be a voice for *every* teacher, no more than I can appeal to the grace of *every* parent, but I do believe that we are both vulnerable to the manipulations of those with a larger platform, those in positions of power. And I do believe that this fragile partnership we

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share can benefit from a simple yet necessary reminder that we are both imperfect and capable of greatness, that we both cherish home as much as we love to see the world, and that we're both working toward the success and future of every child we have in common.

When I fell out of my chair that day, when it crumbled underneath me without warning, this father, my old boss, told me he was moving his daughter to a different school. A hard decision, he said, but one their family *had* to make, because the cost of the drive was too much, too far from where they had recently moved. We spoke for a while about her challenges in math and the way our lives had crossed paths. Eventually, I said goodbye, got up off the floor, and took a deep breathe, fighting back the knot in my throat and the tears in my eyes.

Our relationship is not permanent or indestructible. At our best, we become friends, celebrating every new job, every new love, the eventual graduation of every child, together. At our worst, we never speak again. But somewhere in the middle, we learn to trust each other and make it from year to year, hoping and working, on both ends, so that these kids will be okay where they are. What we've never been and never will be is competitors.

We are partners. We will *always* be partners.

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“The world, today, is ablaze with the fires of hate and suspicion. The hands of too many men today are raised against their brothers. In these trying days, the reputation of no man — no woman — is safe from suspicion and attack. The enemy has come among us! What then, my friends, must we do to be saved? We must cast out the devils of suspicion when they lay hold against us, so that they may no longer make mockery of decent human relationships.”

Mary McLeod Bethune

Florida Educator

1952

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Throughout the first full year of school during the pandemic, from August 2020 to May 2021, my homeroom class got lucky. We never got sick. We never had to quarantine. We kept noticing all those other classes that were disappearing across the school for multiple days, sometimes multiple times in the year, but it also left us with quieter hallways and a peculiar sense of unity. Unfortunately, the start of that second full year — August to December 2021 — was harsh and relentless. Nearly every one of my students got sick at some point in the first month or the first semester, frustrating all my efforts to establish routines and maintain peace. The kids were often tense, snapping, fighting, crying. On top of the sickness and the madness, I was beginning to feel the weight of so many fatalities across the state, including one of our class grandparents. So when we returned in January and two more students got COVID, I felt the weight of our collective vulnerability, teachers and parents alike.

EVEN OPTIMISTS CAN CRY

JANUARY 15, 2022

It all started on January 5, a parent email, a mother telling us that everyone in her house was positive. Mild symptoms, but definitely sick. Next day, same thing. Different parent, different child. One by one, they filled up our inboxes. Fifth grade. Middle school. Every school. The whole state.

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When we left for break near the end of December, it all seemed to be leveling off. COVID cases were high, but no more than they had been throughout the months of October and November. And honestly, I think we were all trying to ignore the news, eighteen months of endless fighting over masks, over vaccines, over if and how and when to open schools. We didn't want to hear that there was a new variant, something moving through the air at a faster rate than ever before. We didn't want to know that we'd be starting a new year with a surge of illness, fatalities rising at the same time. We were all just tired.

But now that we're here, now that I'm down multiple students across multiple classes, it's worth stopping for just a moment, considering what we're up against as teachers, even as parents, as the sun now rises on 2022. I don't want to hash out numbers, or talk about the issues we already understand. There's no point in saying, out loud, that we have more than five million cases in our state right now, more than sixty thousand people dying every day, because that doesn't appear to rattle anyone anymore, not enough to slow down the pace of schools and our desperation to make up for the months our kids already lost when this whole thing began in 2020. The governor himself announced that everything would go on as it always had, no closures, no stoppage, no worry.

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Unfortunately, while moms and dads are taking care of their sickest kids at home, while teachers are trying to stay healthy enough to keep up with the ones that come to school, our state appears to be drafting a new age of controversy for public education, perhaps hoping that those of us most affected by their laws won't have the time or the energy (or the life, God forbid) to notice or care. But I'm in the early hours of a three day weekend. I *have* noticed. I *do* care. And I *will* respond.

On January 7, State Representative Bob Rommel, out of Naples, referred a new bill, HB 1055, to three education subcommittees and one employment committee, a bill that authorizes every district to police their teachers and their staff with video cameras across Florida classrooms. If passed by the legislature, this law would begin in the summer. If accepted by a district, this law would cause a legal and logistical nightmare for every school, perhaps even more than any breach of trust that it implies for the teachers under a new red light of supervision.

As a teacher, I'm no more opposed to *being* recorded as I am to having a parent or a member of the district or the state visit my classroom at any point during any day. A recording alone is not the cause of my apprehension. On the contrary, what concerns me is the potential for more than a mere observation. What concerns me is how a

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video could usher in a new wave of discontent among families seeking to follow up on every major and minor conversation that happened in a classroom, exaggerated lawsuits based on incidental, unpredictable, or off-hand phrases used by a teacher in the process of instruction. In a simple scenario, Jenny gets into her father's car after school and says that she overheard her teacher telling a child she couldn't go to the restroom. Where that might have once led to an email and a follow up question, a teacher simply clarifying that the child was told to wait a few extra minutes until the lesson was done, an upset parent could immediately request footage, parsing word after word, civility and trust eroding with every minute.

On January 11, State Representative Erin Grall out of Vero Beach and State Representative Joe Harding, out of Ocala, co-sponsored a new bill that was filed and read in the Florida House, a bill that implies, by its very title— Parental Rights in Education— that parents have been left out of the decisions most relevant and serious to their child, as if schools or teachers or both have been serving under a covert operation to subvert the will of every mom and dad in the state. If passed by the legislature, teachers would no longer be permitted, for example, to give a child a bandage without formal and written authorization from a parent. And if passed, the most

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glaring fault is that any gay or lesbian teacher would no longer be able to answer questions about his or her partner or spouse, fearing that such a discussion may lead to their removal by the district.

On January 12, State Representative Bryan Avila, out of Miami-Dade, referred a new bill, HB 7, to three different committees—judiciary, state affairs, and education—for the singular purpose of revising how teachers as well as employers address race in the classroom and the office. If passed by the legislature, this law would immediately ban the facilitation of *any* discussion that leads *any* child or *any* adult to ever feel guilt and anguish over the prior behavior of their own race or gender. Never mind that social studies is, by its very name and essence, a course for open discussion of difficult topics that range from slavery and civil rights to war and poverty, all of which provide children, more than anyone else, with a chance to think critically, rather than superficially, to consider where we've been, in reality, and where we need to go, with all honesty. To forbid anyone from having an emotional reaction to such topics would be to forbid them from hearing anything uncomfortable or, in many cases, unfamiliar, such as white children being unaware of the concerns that may still impact a black community, or boys recognizing, even on their own during a lesson,

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that women often lacked a voice in the political process of early American history. No charge of guilt is ever levied by a teacher, not intentionally, but our students are indeed asked to study the social impact of one thing or another, without bias, thereby granting the term *social studies*. Emotions are often a byproduct of studying this imperfect human existence, no matter what laws are written or passed to suggest otherwise.

That's three bills in less than a week, each one nipping at the heels of public educators whose work has always been in tandem with parents, teachers who are, at this very moment, bending over backwards to help children and families deal with lags in attendance, gaps in our gradebooks, and the general welfare of our ailing school communities. I don't pretend that I can stop the tide of these laws, nor blunt their momentum with legislators who seek no audience with my profession. But it does appear that we are under a peculiar and growing attack, for doing things we have not done, for saying things we have not said, for a trust we have not broken.

At the start of this school year, I sat in my car and cried for a parent, a parent and her family who had just lost someone they loved to COVID. I cried because I was angry, because I was sad, because I was a lot of different emotions, for a lot of different reasons, but mostly

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because I felt guilty, trying to be an optimist. I felt guilty for trying to color a darkened world with more light, for turning phrases and thoughts and moments into some illusion of hope. It's not even a far cry to admit that I feel rather guilty having gone *this* long, having been exposed to *this* many people, without getting sick. Because it kills me to know that my students are sick right now, that some of my friends and colleagues are sick right now, that even vaccinated friends and colleagues are sick right now, while somehow I keep skating along the margins of another pandemic surge, serving and swimming in the air of closed-door classrooms where no one is obligated anymore to look out for one another's health.

In the face of a still-raging pandemic, I had a natural and unpredictable response, a sense of guilt that I need to let out with a few tears before moving on.

I'm not saying I'm down or out, or that I'm frustrated, sad, or angry beyond control. I just need to admit, for anyone who might think us naive, for anyone who might think our positive spin on the world means we don't understand, don't empathize, don't feel the agony or the pain or the weight of everyone around us, that we feel it all. I need to admit that even optimists can cry.

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A RECESS FOR THIS MIDDLE AGING TEACHER

I've always had a hard time with field trips. Unlike the classroom, where I have some control over the space, and the safety of the kids in it, field trips add too many variables, too many risks beyond my control. I worry about medicines, slips, accidents, and all the other people who might pose a danger to my students. But I've gone on them enough times to know they're good for the kids. Because they need the breaks, just like we need the breaks. So I try to have fun.

In this case, we took our kids skating, but one of my littlest fifth graders got so discouraged after falling that he left the rink and refused to go back out. I wasn't much for skating myself, hadn't done it in decades, but some of the parents, my wonderful and tickled chaperones, kept teasing me to get out there. So when I saw my student sitting alone, I told him I was nervous and asked if he'd go with me. I laced up my skates, took him on a lap, and neither of us fell. He even went around several times on his own after that. This was how I turned 45, holding a wall and trying not to fall.

January 24, 2022



THIS FRAGILE PARTNERSHIP

Throughout the month of January, I was wrapping up a collection of essays that accounted for the prior six years of American rage. I was coming to terms with my own reaction to the world as it was, rather than the world I wanted. And for the bulk of that month, I stepped away from social media and wrote for myself, for posterity. But in the process, I realized that so much was happening in education, in Florida, that I had to keep track of it, I had to reflect on it, I had to talk about it. But I also had to get it right. I had to be careful.

AT THE RISK OF GETTING IT ALL WRONG

JANUARY 26, 2022

Fake news. The first time I heard Donald Trump say it in 2016, all I could think about was *The Daily Show* and maybe *Saturday Night Live*, programs that were intentionally satirical, the not-news news. My other thought, as a web design teacher at the time, was that he must be implying the threat of false stories on social media, fictitious claims that were often and easily made up, then passed around like candy among those willing to repost on a whim, presuming the worst about someone or some group and sharing their overblown, unnecessary anger with everyone else. These were two forms of *real* fake news and they made sense to me. But I

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quickly came to understand that the president-elect was using the term as a matter of contempt for any story he didn't personally like or agree with, any narrative that made him look bad. I also learned, over time, that the more he used the term, the more he threw it at CNN, or MSNBC, or simply a random person who talked about him on television, he could be as hyperbolic and loose with the facts as he wanted to be, but if anyone in the media did the same, exaggerating or overstating details, even accidentally, he would win the argument. Voters were already primed to believe the media was biased, that it never offered the full picture of anything beyond a tailor-made account. So if they talked about President Trump, and he called them *fake news*, they couldn't slip up or make mistakes. Their reports had to be iron-clad, beyond reproach, without the glare of propaganda.

I face the same challenge in Florida, writing about life as an educator in the face of so many daunting, legislative changes that impact my profession. If I were to say, for example, that teachers were being oppressed, or that the government in Tallahassee was behaving in a manner fit for authoritarian and fascist leaders, that our governor was censoring all the voices of opposition, then I would be overplaying my hand, denying the reality of my own words, since I am and remain free to speak about our

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situation. However, should I or any of my colleagues begin losing our jobs and our credentials for what we have said or will say about the things we see, hear, feel, and know, then by all means, yes, this is our oppression, and yes, we are no longer free.

In the meantime, at the risk of getting it wrong, I need to be honest and forthright about an error I made in 2020, a matter of news—*fake* news, if you will—that got the better of me during the first few months of isolation and pandemic frustration. Early on, when our schools were shut down and all testing was cancelled in the interest of public health, I felt like our state was in good hands. I hadn't voted for Mr. DeSantis, but he appeared to have the temperament for reasonable governance. Within just a few weeks of school closures, his administration had a plan for reopening, with multiple, sensible phases that showed, or at least implied, that he cared about getting Floridians back to work, back to normal. After trying to teach virtually, after watching so many of my students struggle to connect at a distance, I understood the need, across every state in the nation, to restore what was lost. I think we all did, back then. No one liked wearing the masks. No one liked being told that they couldn't kiss the ones they loved. No one was enjoying this new and unfamiliar separation.

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But something about the data was mysterious, a reality that lulled us into the belief that COVID-19 was either passing or past. From the middle of March to the end of May, the number of cases and deaths in Florida stayed relatively low, mostly under 1,000 per day. But in a state with more than 21,000,000 residents, the percentage felt lopsided, like there was no reason to stay inside or keep our distance, not anymore, not with these numbers. For several weeks, my wife and I had been picking up food for her parents, dropping off groceries in the driveway, and either waving or miming a hug. By May, we had started to meet them in their backyard, sharing meals outside, inching closer to that physical connection. The only reason we held off, the only reason we didn't come all the way inside and embrace, was because we knew the virus was still out there, and that it was impacting a lot of people, even when it didn't appear to be having as much of an impact on Floridians just yet.

Unfortunately, that's when I fell prey to a misleading story in the news, a story about Rebekah Jones, the data specialist who was fired from the Florida Department of Health in the middle of May. According to every source I read at the time, from NPR and the Associated Press to the Florida Times-Union and the Sun Sentinel, Jones was the ultimate whistleblower, telling reporters and all of us

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by extension that she had been asked to falsify the COVID numbers in our state, that the governor needed to see data that would support his reopening plan. In some cases, writers portrayed her as a “top” scientist at the DOH, which she may very well have been. But I never questioned the veracity of those accusations, nor did I even think to question the possibility that she, like all of us, could embellish the truth. I simply took that story as gospel, because it hit all the major networks of respectable journalism. Seven days later, an officer in Minneapolis put his knee on the throat of George Floyd for 8 minutes and 46 seconds of brutal suffocation, a murder that sparked a national reaction and made me forget all about Jones. Between the end of that unusual school year, saying goodbye to students online, and preparing to march, arm in arm, with members of the community, I never looked back at the DOH story.

And then it popped up again on December 8, when the same sources showed a clip of law enforcement raiding the home of Rebekah Jones. In the video, she was heard saying that guns were pointed at her children, though this was not visible. But what I remembered, back then, was a feeling of shock, a sense of frustration, that no one else seemed to care or notice what was happening, as if we were suddenly caught in a police state, all dissenters

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under siege. Again, I never went back to do the research or to figure out what really happened. The whole thing was so dystopian, so crazy, so outlandish, yet I took her at face value. Reports indicated that Jones had tried to access the DOH database from a private server, that she had sent a message to her former colleagues, urging all of them stand up and speak out. It sounded like she was a hero of sorts, bravely warring against the monsters of misinformation. In my head, I applauded her bravery.

But several months later, the story of Rebekah Jones came back to me like a haunted memory, like something that had happened to me, personally. I felt aggravated and guilty that I hadn't kept up or followed up. So I started digging. And the more I read, the more I regretted those earlier feelings. With each new piece of information, I had to concede that even I, as a lover of research, had fallen prey to a singular narrative, an anomaly that no one else at the Department of Health had authenticated.

The reality was more nuanced, easy to understand, and harder to dispute. Jones had never worked in isolation. She worked with a team of specialists, epidemiologists and data managers, each of them accountable to the rule of order and professional conduct, where information is forced to work its way through a set of proper channels, where nothing leaves the office without authorization.

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Only in this case, more than a month before her firing, Jones had started sharing *unauthorized* information on social media and through public interviews. And even though she was praised for her great work, a supervisor asked her to get approval for any future posts relating to her work at the DOH. Jones continued, giving out charts and commentary that forced her department to take further action, which led to additional conflicts on the team, which led to her ousting. In the aftermath, it was also made clear that Jones had faced (or was facing) criminal charges for stalking a student when she was working on her doctorate at Florida State University.

Each of these issues, the irresponsible management of information, the disregard of hierarchy, and the charges dating back to graduate school *could* have been an effort to gaslight the public, to make us look the other way, to make us ignore what was really happening. But then I caught the interview Jones gave to Chris Cuomo on the same night as her house raid, a conversation where she appeared to say, in a roundabout way, that she wasn't very tech savvy, despite six months earlier having built an entire database on her own. And then I learned, from police cams, that officers had been knocking on her door for twenty minutes before she let them in, that the video

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had time to be set up, and that there was still no proof that anyone had ever pointed guns at her children.

In other words, while I found other stories that showed the governor was trying to keep his administration on message about the plan to reopen, that certain officials had been told to speak about COVID with an optimistic tenor, there was no glaring evidence that the governor had asked his top scientists to manipulate any figures. If anything, as the numbers *did* go up over those first two summers, as we all saw the cases rising, the governor appeared even more emboldened to reopen, to keep everything as normal as possible, which was a separate issue entirely, a matter to be argued, but not illegal.

During my six years as a web design teacher, when I felt as though the programs that I built and cultivated were being taken away from me, when I felt as though there were decisions being made outside my control, when I was certain there were nefarious means at the highest levels, I got defensive. I wrote emails that demonstrated my lack of patience, my disrespect of the process. I used my voice, my position, and my sense of invincibility to irritate a few too many people. So when the programs *did* come to an end, no one was inviting me to be a part of anything else. I was cut out and cut off, even though I had been pretty good at the job. Point being, the story of

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Rebekah Jones, right or wrong, was a similar model of self-defense, blown up and into something else.

I have never had any allegiance to the media, nor any brand of news. What I have had, and still have, is a belief that information belongs to the public, and that the sharing of that information is an imperfect process, similar to what I'm doing right now. Just a few lines up, I had to check the name *Chris Cuomo*, because part of my brain was telling me *Jake Tapper*, because I'm human. This process of sharing information can be managed by good, honest people, those who try to give out the most accurate, fair version of that information. Or it can be handled by heartless, devious people, those with little respect for their audience, and the news they share.

Over these next several months, perhaps over this next year or more, I intend to keep as close a record as I can to the truth of what's happening in Florida education. I intend to write as a teacher and a citizen, as a husband and a voter. I intend to write with and without emotion, with and without bias, with and without the trims of exaggeration. I intend. I intend. I intend.

If I fail, if I go too far and let you down, I apologize. But at the risk of getting it all wrong, I intend to get it right.

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A SWEET, UNBELIEVABLY BIG GESTURE

I've always loved food. Sweet food. Salty food. Everything food, minus the healthy stuff, the vegetables and the vitamins. As a young teacher, I figured out that by skipping lunch, by skipping treats and mostly eating at home after a long day, I could sustain a reasonably decent weight, even if I had a poor diet. During the first half of my career, hiding in my classroom and avoiding the lounge during break time was easy. So I avoided it for years, until I realized that this was a time and a space where teachers were free to mingle.

During the second half of my career, as I built more relationships with educators, I began to eat with them, and snack with them, and join them for happy hours. I even set up a candy jar, a microwave, and eventually a coffee machine, with a corner of my classroom set aside for snacks I would share with friends who came to use my room as a hangout. Ultimately, saying no to food was becoming pointless. So when a parent realized she had missed my birthday earlier in the week and dropped off two box-sized donuts, I said yes.

January 28, 2022



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On the first day of Black History Month, Florida House Bill 7, otherwise known as the Individual Freedom bill, reached the Education and Employment Committee, having only been written and filed about three weeks earlier. In the most obscure language possible, HB 7 declared that it would now be discriminatory to teach matters of history if such a lesson ever made a child “feel guilt” over the wrongs of someone else who shared their race or sex. But just a few days before that, HB 1557, filed on the same day as HB7, also reached the House Judiciary Committee, a law that “prohibits classroom discussion” of sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels explicitly and in other grades more vaguely. Among the early sponsors of these bills were men who had, at one time or another, advocated for students to sue teachers. And with neither bill facing much of an objection in Tallahassee, it seemed that our state was now, quickly and officially, going to war with teachers, convincing parents that we were an urgent threat.

A MESSAGE TO PARENTS ABOUT MY PROFESSION

FEBRUARY 1, 2022

The gods of education must have laughed when I got my first teaching gig, when someone handed me a guide and told me I'd be teaching science. It wasn't just that I *preferred* other subjects, but that I literally *detested* science, in the same way a lot of people

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hate math and social studies. I was so bad at science that any high school or college professor would have been embarrassed to learn that of all their students, *I* was the one teaching fourth graders about planets and plants. What a sham, on paper.

But I don't think the school hired me for that gig because they thought I was proficient in science. I think they hired me to fill that role because they needed someone who was willing to learn, to do whatever it took, whatever was necessary to be a good educator. I think they hired me because they were trusting that I could get the job done. So I took that guide, I took that subject, and I studied it. I figured it out. I did what they expected of me and I don't think I let any of my kids down. I'm sure some of them thought it was my favorite subject, because I taught it with a level of enthusiasm that would have made me a star on Broadway. And today, as it so happens, I still teach science, one grade up, along with math and social studies.

The thing about my profession, about my colleagues, the thing that makes us all unique, is that we're always learning, we're always reading, we're always studying. And even on topics that we're uncomfortable, we never want to stand in front of our students and wing it. We believe in knowing and planning what we're about to say

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before we say it, anticipating the types of questions our kids might ask, and the things we might need to answer back. And believe it or not, we've always been pretty careful with our words, conscious of what may help or hinder someone's education, regardless of our individual views on a subject. I won't deny that there are some in this profession, Florida especially, who prefer to swing from the hip and tell kids the first thing that's on their minds, but most of us don't treat our classrooms like the sounding board of our personal and political thoughts. As loud or quiet as we might be about our views of the world beyond the classroom, each of us different, each of us hailing from dissimilar backgrounds and parties and experiences, we also recognize that there's a time and a place for sharing, and an audience of young kids is *never* that time and place. Again, they need our *help*, not our rants. And we know that. We're professionals.

This trait of educators is part of the reason we've been entrusted with children, with *your* children, because we take pride in our work. We know that there are those who provide superficial instruction, merely passing the hours between drop off and pick up, telling children to do this or do that, like babysitters. But they do not speak for the bulk of us. We, the teachers, are the ones who put the time in, the ones who stand at the head of our classrooms

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with a plan, a lesson, an idea of how to help our students feel just a little more confident and comfortable with our subjects, the very subjects prescribed by the state under which we've been certified. In the end, we want our kids to walk away, day after difficult day, a little more knowledgeable, a little more inspired, a little more willing to take risks to improve the world we're leaving for them. And we work hard because you work hard.

This thing we do is a partnership with families, with all the moms and dads, aunts and uncles, grandmas and grandpas we send kids back to each afternoon. And to be honest, most of us who can actually reach the parents take pride in having the best relationship possible, having empathy for those occasional challenges at home, and helping parents through the ins and outs of their child's assignment, if and when it seems a little overwhelming. Moms and dads have far too much on their plates to remember the steps for multiplying and dividing fractions, or the details of ancient civilization. That's why we're here, to learn, to study, to teach, and *always* to help. As a matter of necessity, many of us have become the jack of all subjects, master of several more.

And one thing we know is that teaching is more than following a book or a standard or a rule. Teaching is about relationships. It's about honesty and authenticity.

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It's about being prepared, much as we can be. It's about dealing with uncomfortable topics from time to time, for us and for them. Frankly, I'm certain there are parents who could argue, quite reasonably, that learning about algebra has no lasting merit on their son or daughter, that they tolerate what we teach because for a few hours every day, they trust us to take care of their child. But we, as their teachers, believe we might be looking at the next great engineer, the next aspiring astronaut, the next pediatrician. So we keep teaching those topics that might seem otherwise useless, because they might actually mean more to a child than we recognize in the moment. As I said before, we don't teach them to pass the time, but to give them the tools, the information, the skills they need to succeed and aid the world and our nation to better itself.

But of late, there's been a pretty radical push to muzzle the freedom of teachers to do what they do. And I don't use that word lightly. Anything can be *radical*, left or right, up or down, if it seeks to upend the fundamental structures that exist. And certainly not all things radical are bad, even if they feel contentious. But this current wave is rooted in fears either unfounded or overblown. And it's having a dangerous impact on our ability to maintain a healthy, positive relationship with families.

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We, the teachers, have lately been accused of not only introducing lessons on sexuality and gender identity, but of doing so in our earliest primary curriculum. We, the teachers, have also been accused of teaching history in such a manner that unfairly discriminates against *white* Americans. Neither of these things are even remotely true, but even if they were, even if they were real enough and serious enough to warrant action, what concerns me is the pace at which these accusations are simply being turned into laws, without our voices, without an honest conversation, without reason or patience, as *conservative* legislation was always meant to be. I don't mind being proven wrong if there is indeed something dangerous in our classrooms, beyond the evidence that I have witnessed as a teacher myself, but in the absence of dialogue, such action is indeed *radical*. And it all fosters an unnecessary tension, a breach of trust between those three bodies that normally work in tandem: parents, teachers, and the Florida government.

At one point, before I was born, there was talk of removing any mention of evolution, until many came to terms with the possibility that religion and science weren't so far removed from each other, or didn't need to be. Then came global warming, until someone decided, after all, that it was okay to encourage our kids to recycle.

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And now, it seems, we're being told that history itself is no longer open for discussion, that it's merely a timeline of uncriticized events, that if anyone in any classroom *feels guilty* as a result of those covered events, then it is the fault of the teacher for crossing a line of ethics. We are also being told, in the same broad brush, that sexuality and gender nonconformity has become a part of our ongoing conversation with young children, as if we now seek out ways to inject such complicated and post-puberty questions into the minds of boys and girls still learning to write their own names.

Having made their voices extremely loud, many parents have already achieved their goal, with or without a law, causing teachers across the spectrum to tiptoe through their instruction, to dance around words, trying not to trip, twisting themselves in pretzels so as not to dare mention anything that might, in an upside down world, get them fined or fired at best, sued at the very worst.

God forbid they try to address an issue that comes up naturally. In the past, for example, if a child called another child *gay*, we might address it by saying that *gay* is not an insult, that it means several things, and that we should use words that are clearer and more appropriate. But today, if a child calls another child *gay*, we get stuck in a loop of awkwardness. *We don't use that word, Sam. But*

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why? Because we don't. Are you gay? We don't talk about it, Sam. Why? Rather than helping them to process *their* choice of words, carefully and maturely, we end up stifled, more worried than ever before about *our* choice of words. In a classroom where we strive to maintain civility, we're losing our freedom to manage those abrupt and undeveloped acts of incivility. We're losing our first and most elementary amendment, and not for any reason other than the growing belief that *what* we say has become dangerous.

Tomorrow, I'll be teaching my students about the value of coins, about whether we need them or not, especially when they get such little use, like all those pennies that cost more to make than to spend. But I don't imagine someone from the U.S. Treasury Department, someone who mints coins for a living, will be asking me to step down from teaching, or accusing me of American betrayal. If anything, my goal is to foster a conversation, because neither I nor my students are in a position to change the role of coins in our economy. What we will be, however, is well informed of their value to society at large, how companies have ushered in a wave of "round up" charities, taking those loose dimes and quarters to use them for something better than a dirty pocket.

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Teachers don't succeed in engaging their students or raising critical thinkers when they follow a script, or when they're told that they can't talk about this or that. If anything, it either crushes their spirit and they quit, leaving a vacuum that equally dampens the quality of a child's education, or it emboldens them to push back, to become incidental activists, to become unnecessary rebels, simply to say what still needs to be said.

So here's my message to parents, to every mom and dad who looks at me, at my colleagues, at my profession with fear and suspicion, as if we're all conspiring in dark rooms to warp the minds of children.

Please trust us.

Let us do what we've been trained to do. Let us do what we read, study, and spend all our waking hours trying to do. Let us teach. Most of us are pretty good at it, not because of what we teach but because of who we teach, because we care more about your child, your family, our nation and state, than we do any of our individual and imperfect subjects. We are now, will always be, and have always been your partners, each of us seeking the best interest of a generation whose potential for tomorrow depends on how we train them today.

TIMELINE OF RELEVANT LEGISLATION

Date in the Left Column is the Original Statement or Filing

Notes in the Right Column Show Dates of Death/Approval

Dec 29, 2020 Florida House Bill 131 (HB 131)

Educator Conduct; Requiring DOE to maintain a disqualification list of individuals in education; Revising the provisions relating to employment and termination of public/private school employees

Approved by the Governor, Jun 21, 2021

Jan 13, 2021 HB 233

Requiring DOE to conduct an annual assessment on intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity within postsecondary schools; justifying the recording and publication of certain videos; revising provisions related to protected expressive activities, student governments, and conduct

Approved by the Governor, Jun 22, 2021

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Jan 13, 2021 **HB 241**

Parents' Bill of Rights; promoting parental involvement in a child's studies and instructional materials; allowing parents to withdraw their child from objectional curriculum

Approved by the Governor, Jun 6, 2021

Jan 21, 2021 **Florida Senate Bill 84**

Proposing to end the Florida Retirement System (FRS) Investment Plan for specified employees, thus defunding it for current enrollees

Died in Committee, April 30, 2021

Jan 25, 2021 **HB 419**

Establishing a post-COVID gap in learning; allowing Pre-K parents to determine readiness for K-12 learning based on pre-assessment

Approved by the Governor, May 4, 2021

Jan 28, 2021 **HB 529**

Mandatory Moment of Silence; requiring all students in all schools across the state to acknowledge a two minute pause after the pledge

Approved by the Governor, Jun 14, 2021

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Jan 28, 2021 **HB 545**

Reproductive Health and Disease Education; requiring districts to publish notice of parental rights to exempt students from reproductive health and disease education

Approved by the Governor, Jun 4, 2021

Feb 11, 2021 **SB 1028**

Fairness in Women's Sports Act; Prohibiting transgender girls from playing on any K-12 sports team intended for those who were born girls

Approved by the Governor, Jun 1, 2021

Feb 11, 2021 **HB 935**

Youth Gender and Sexual Identity; criminalizing health care practitioners who engage in specified practices with or on minors

Died in Subcommittee, Apr 30, 2021

Feb 12, 2021 **SB 1108**

Requiring certain students to take a specified course and assessment relating to civic literacy

Approved by the Governor, Jun 22, 2021

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Feb 12, 2021 HB 5

Civic Education Curriculum; Requiring DOE to develop or approve civics education to meet certain (new) requirements by the state

Approved by the Governor, Jun 22, 2021

Feb 15, 2021 FLDOE Announcement

Informing all state schools that they can install one of several panic alarm systems on behalf of Alyssa's Law; resulting from the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, three years earlier

Feb 26, 2021 HB 1159

Authorizing parents to retain their child for academic reasons post-COVID

Approved by the Governor, Jun 29, 2021

Feb 26, 2021 HB 1475

Designating sex-specific student athletic teams or sports, based on the gender assigned at birth

Died in Rules, Apr 30, 2021

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Mar 2, 2021 Senate Bill 2012 (SB 2012)

Promoting Equality of Athletic Opportunity; requiring certain athletic teams or sports be designated on the basis of students' biological sex

Approved by the Governor, May 4, 2021

Mar 2, 2021 HB 7011

Student Literacy; Tracking students from K-8 to identify underperformance in math and reading

Died in Rules, Apr 30, 2021

Dec 28, 2021 HB 1055

Authorizing districts to police their teachers with video cameras inside classrooms

Died in Subcommittee, Mar 14, 2022

Jan 10, 2022 HB 1467

Revising district requirements for the selection and adoption of certain materials; Requiring that all classroom and school library resources and materials be published and accessible to parents

Approved by the Governor, Mar 25, 2022

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Jan 11, 2022 **HB 1557**

Parental Rights in Education; limiting teacher discussion and otherwise standard interactions with students including basic student health assistance and matters of sexual orientation

Approved by the Governor, Mar 28, 2022

Jan 11, 2022 **HB 7**

Individual Freedom (colloquially known as the Stop WOKE Act); Revising instructional practices on the history of African Americans and diversity

Approved by the Governor, Apr 22, 2022

Apr 15, 2022 **FLDOE Press Release**

Rejecting publishers' attempts to indoctrinate students with critical race theory, common core, and social emotional learning