

OPINION EXCHANGE

Conservatives are the new 'discomfort' police

Everyone hurts sometimes, and using that as a weapon to ban books, art and other content is at odds with intellectual freedom.

By Jeffrey Aaron Snyder | JANUARY 31, 2022 — 5:45PM

"Florida could shield whites from 'discomfort' of racist past." So read a recent Associated Press headline for an article outlining a new bill that would prohibit classroom lessons making students "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race."

Here lies the problem. Everybody hurts. Any person, any group, can and will, alas, claim to feel emotional distress in order to remove "troubling" books from public libraries or drop "upsetting" topics from the curriculum of public schools.

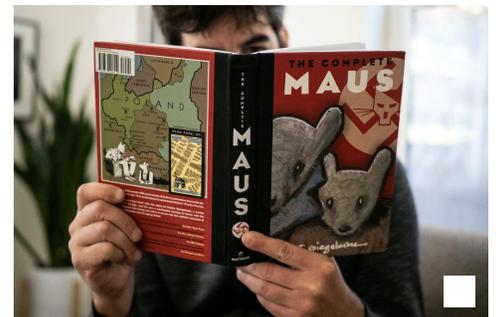
Florida is just one of the 36 states that have introduced legislation targeting discussions of race, racism, gender and U.S. history ("Book ban efforts spread across the U.S.," [Jan. 31 \(https://www.startribune.com/book-ban-efforts-spread-across-the-u-s/600141348/\)](https://www.startribune.com/book-ban-efforts-spread-across-the-u-s/600141348/)). Informed by former President Donald Trump's now defunct "divisive concepts" Executive Order, 14 of these states have already passed bills, which affect more than 17 million public school students.

Free expression advocate PEN America aptly calls this wave of legislation "educational gag orders." Aimed at alleged teaching of "critical race theory" the laws are already having predictable chilling effects, with teachers shying away from vital discussions about systemic racism, gender and sexuality.

We should not be surprised that conservatives are weaponizing the discomfort discourse that has gained traction among many liberals and social progressives within the past decade.

Left-leaning folks, especially those with a strong social justice orientation, have been more willing to turn to censorship of all kinds in order to protect people with minority identities from content deemed harmful.

This overriding concern with shielding people from harm is evident in the push for trigger warnings, which are now being used to allow students to opt-out of classrooms that elicit "difficult emotional responses." It can also be seen in the expansion of "sensitivity readers" in Young Adult literature, whose job is to vet manuscripts for racial



MARO SIRANOSIAN/AFP, TNS - TNS

A school board in Tennessee has added to a surge in book bans by conservatives with an order to remove the award-winning 1986

stereotypes and other "problematic" content; in the rise of campus Bias Response Teams, which are tasked with investigating and responding to complaints about "bias incidents," ranging from microaggressions to "avoiding or excluding others"; and in the move to censor art that is seen as offensive to certain groups.

Consider the decision of the San Francisco school board (overruled by a judge, thankfully) to paint over the Life of Washington mural at San Francisco's George Washington High School. With one panel prominently depicting a dead Native American, the work purportedly "traumatizes students and community members."

Like campus speech codes and "hate speech" legislation, which seek to prevent harm to vulnerable populations, the discomfort rationale is a boomerang that quickly returns to hurt the very people it is meant to protect. As former ACLU President Nadine Strossen explains, "hate speech" laws inevitably "disempower marginalized individuals and groups."

In France, for instance, a hate speech law designed to combat anti-Semitism has been invoked repeatedly to punish speech critical of the Israeli government. In 2015, Russian bookstores stopped selling copies of "Maus," Art Spiegelman's searing graphic novel about the Holocaust, to enforce a law banning Nazi propaganda. Why? The cover of the book features a swastika.

In the U.S., it's the most "diverse" books (texts that feature people of color, LGBTQ characters and themes as well as cultural and religious minorities) that are most frequently challenged as a result of one-off complaints and concerted campaigns.

A decade ago, a proud Polish American wrote to the Pasadena Public Library, asking them to remove "Maus" because its portrayal of Poles made him feel "uncomfortable." Last week in Tennessee, the McMinn County Board of Education voted unanimously to remove it from the school curriculum. Because of its "unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide," the board concluded the book was "too adult-oriented" for eighth-graders. As the New York Times reported, "Mr. Spiegelman said he got the impression that the board members were asking, 'Why can't they teach a nicer Holocaust?'"



To contest the conservative assault on teaching and reading about sensitive topics, we should roundly reject the "discomfort" logic and rhetoric when it comes to public education and public libraries. It's an escape hatch that will be cynically exploited by bad actors to pursue ideological ends.

Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved" has been challenged on multiple occasions for graphic sexual content and violence. But as University of Illinois Prof. Emily Knox explains, what people truly find objectionable about the book is its "unsanitized look at the horrors of slavery."

Applying a "discomfort" litmus test to what we read and teach is fundamentally at odds with intellectual freedom, which the American Library Association defines as "the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction." If reading does not elicit powerful emotions, including sorrow, disgust and terror, why are we even bothering to read at all?

Jeffrey Aaron Snyder is associate professor and chair, Department of Educational Studies, at Carleton College in Northfield.