

## Ron DeSantis's war on "woke" in Florida schools, explained

Vox, by Fabiola Cineas, April 20, 2023

*From book bans to a hostile campus takeover, here's a rundown of DeSantis's conservative plan for Florida education.*

In 2020, Ron DeSantis's administration declared him the "Education Governor" for how eager he was to dramatically change the state's education system. Three years later, he's provoked — and been engulfed in — an ongoing list of education controversies as part of his fight against "woke ideology," or schools acknowledging or teaching about systemic injustice in American society.

As DeSantis prepares to announce his campaign for the presidency, as many have speculated, he has ramped up his involvement in Florida schools. Not only is he doubling down on existing legislation, he's also introducing new rules and regulations — and making sure the Education Department follows through. While he largely focused on K-12 in the early years of his term, this year he has launched new plans to remake higher education. In January, DeSantis unveiled an aggressive higher education proposal, and in late February the Florida House followed the announcement by introducing HB 999, a bill that outlines specific changes to how public postsecondary educational institutions operate. If adopted, the legislation would take effect on July 1, 2023.

Before this year, DeSantis had already signed a bill to ban transgender athletes from women's and girls' public school teams and banned more than 40 percent of math textbooks that publishers submitted for review, which he said contained "woke" ideology.

He passed the Florida Parental Rights in Education Act that took effect in July 2022, which he called an effort to give parents more control over what their children learn at school but which critics called the "Don't Say Gay" bill for how it bans talk about sexuality and gender in grades K-3. In April, the state's Board of Education took it a step further by expanding the ban to cover grades 4-12 too, after DeSantis's administration proposed the change in March. He endorsed more than a dozen candidates for school board in 2022 and spent more than \$2 million in the races, with 24 out of the 30 candidates he supported winning, while he won reelection by 19 points. Earlier in his term, he passed a contentious bill that allowed more teachers to be armed at school in response to the Parkland shooting.

Florida's Individual Freedom Act, colloquially known as the Stop WOKE Act, took effect in July 2022 to "prevent discrimination in the workplace and public schools," according to the text, but has caused confusion for educators who describe "walking on eggshells" in their classrooms so as to not violate the law.

This year, DeSantis isn't slowing down. He has picked a fight with the College Board over AP African American studies and has hinted at doing away with AP courses altogether. His laws against the teaching of race, sexual orientation, and gender have led to strict book bans in various school districts. In higher education, the governor is rolling back diversity, equity, and inclusion

initiatives; reducing tenure protections; and moving school leaders to review core courses to make sure they're free of "liberal indoctrination."

All of this has ramifications beyond DeSantis himself — and could end up playing a role in Republicans' national strategy. The Republican Party sees DeSantis's approach to education as a winning strategy that could provide a blueprint for the 2024 election, Axios reported earlier this month. Former President Donald Trump has unveiled proposals of his own, calling for parents to vote on school principals. DeSantis isn't just choosing to make education central to his persona, hoping to benefit from parents upset about the direction of schools; he's inspiring other potential presidential contenders to follow suit.

It can be hard to keep track of it all. So here's a look at why Florida education is in the headlines.

## K-12 public schools

### The ongoing book banning campaign

Book banning isn't new, but Florida's book regulations take the practice to a new level. A Florida law signed by DeSantis last March requires that all books available to children be "reviewed by a district employee holding a valid educational media specialist certificate," such as the school librarian, since the state says teachers cannot be trusted to select appropriate texts for their students. This means that classroom libraries assembled by teachers violate the law, and parts of the state — up to one-third of the state's counties, according to reporting from the New Yorker — have restricted access to all books until they could be reviewed.

As a result of recent rules about the type of books that are unacceptable, announced by the Florida Department of Education in compliance with the law, teachers were required to bar students from accessing school libraries until the books are reviewed. According to an investigation by Popular Information, books in some school districts including Manatee County must be checked against the school district's library catalog: If it's in the catalog, it is approved, but those that aren't in the catalog must be reviewed. Students are also not allowed to bring books from home or read books on apps.

Teachers or librarians who fail to follow the new guidelines may be subject to criminal prosecution.

Florida's Education Commissioner Manny Diaz Jr. defended the law in a tweet last month: "A teacher (or any adult) faces a felony if they knowingly distribute egregious material, such as images which depict sexual conduct, sexual battery, bestiality, or sadomasochistic abuse. Who could be against that?"

### Rejecting AP African American studies with the Stop WOKE Act

DeSantis announced last month that the state is blocking AP African American studies, a new class developed by the College Board, on the grounds that it is "a political agenda" and an example of "woke indoctrination." The administration objected to certain topics contained in a

draft framework for the course: queer theory, intersectionality, Black Lives Matter, reparations, prison abolition, and more.

At a press conference in January, DeSantis said the course is on “the wrong side of the line for Florida standards.” He added, “We believe in teaching kids facts and how to think, but we don’t believe they should have an agenda imposed on them. When you try to use Black history to shoehorn in queer theory, you are clearly trying to use that for political purposes.”

Florida rejected the course under its Stop WOKE Act (Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act), which bans schools and businesses from teaching anything that could make anyone feel “guilt, anguish or any form of psychological distress” because of their race, gender, sex, or national origin. Though a judge ordered a temporary injunction against parts of the law that limit conversations about race in public colleges and universities, the law remains mostly intact.

Florida’s rejection of the course has created nonstop controversy for the College Board and opened up a broader discussion about how race is taught in America and who gets to control knowledge in public schools. Since DeSantis denounced the course last month, it has been revealed that the College Board likely sanitized the curriculum after communicating with Florida’s Department of Education, though College Board denies this. The fight between DeSantis and the College Board isn’t over, either: This week, DeSantis hinted at ending the state’s relationship with the College Board altogether.

## Higher education

### Eliminating DEI programs and initiatives

At the start of the year, DeSantis called for the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. The programs became required in 2020, ordered by a largely Republican-appointed board, while he was already in his second year as governor. A January 31 order from DeSantis prohibits higher education institutions from using any funding, no matter the source, to support DEI or critical race theory — the besieged academic framework that says racism is systemic — and anything else the administration considers “discriminatory initiatives.”

Last month, higher education officials who work on DEI committees reported having their emails searched. Others reported that their institution’s administrators canceled all scheduled DEI programs.

Some institutions rushed to go along with it. The presidents at 28 Florida state colleges pledged to end all “discriminatory DEI and CRT initiatives” at their institutions beginning February 1. In a letter, the presidents wrote that historically, DEI initiatives “served to increase diversity of thought as well as the enrollment and the success of underrepresented populations and promote the open access mission of our state college system.” But they argued that some of these initiatives and classroom lessons “have come to mean and accomplish the very opposite and seek to push ideologies such as critical race theory and its related tenets.”

The letter went on to say that they also wouldn’t support any program, initiative, or academic requirement that “compels belief” in concepts like “intersectionality.” The letter also states that

if critical race theory is part of a postsecondary curriculum, it has to be presented among other viewpoints.

The diversity, equity, and inclusion restrictions would extend outside of the classroom and beyond school faculty, too. Under HB 999, schools cannot spend money to “promote, support, or maintain any programs or campus activities” that violate the Stop WOKE Act or “espouse diversity, equity, and inclusion or critical race theory rhetoric.” This means that student groups and the events they organize may come under greater scrutiny.

### Cracking down on coursework

DeSantis wants school leaders to routinely review course material to make sure they align with new legislation. On January 31, he announced that the State University System Board of Governors and the State Board of Education must review general education core courses to make sure that they are historically accurate, “foundational,” and “career relevant.” The administration has not publicly explained what “foundational” or “career relevant” means. The boards must also ensure that core classes don’t “suppress or distort” historical events or include “identity politics” in their curriculum.

HB 999 instructs Florida’s Board of Governors to regularly examine the academic offerings at schools in the state university system to make sure there are no majors or minors in critical race theory, gender studies, intersectionality, or any related subjects. The bill also bars the teaching of “identity politics” and critical race theory, two concepts it does not define. General education core courses also must not define American history as something “contrary to the creation of a nation based on the principles stated in the Declaration of Independence.”

The bill provides additional broad ideas about the goals of communications, humanities, social science, natural sciences, and mathematics courses. The bill vaguely rejects general education course curriculum that is based on “unproven, theoretical, or explanatory content,” which leaves much room for interpretation at universities.

The governor also wants to require schools to give priority to “graduating students with degrees that lead to high-wage jobs, not degrees designed to further a political agenda,” but hasn’t specified which degrees they are referring to. His proposed overhaul would also mandate courses in Western civilization.

HB 999 requires that each university, before class registration each year, provide students with a list of the “top 25 percent of degrees reported by the university in terms of highest full-time job placement and highest average annualized earnings in the year after earning the degree,” as well as a list of the bottom 10 percent of degrees in terms of lowest full-time job placement and annualized earnings in the year after earning the degree. The requirement is part of the state’s goal to make sure every student’s education is “for citizenship of the constitutional republic” and cultivates “intellectual autonomy” within undergraduates.

## Dismantling tenure and tamping down on hiring

DeSantis urged schools to bypass their tenure systems to conduct post-tenure reviews of faculty members “at any time with cause.” “They can be let go if they’re not performing to expectations,” he observed, adding that “the most significant dead-weight cost to a university is unproductive tenured faculty.”

HB 999 requires institutions to undergo a comprehensive post-tenure review every five years to address a professor’s accomplishments and productivity, research and teaching duties, and compensation, as well as improvement plans and consequences for underperformance, the bill states. The bill also gives a school’s board of trustees the power to review any faculty member’s tenure status, and this provision of the bill does not include the phrase “with cause.”

In his proposals, DeSantis also empowered school presidents and boards to “take ownership” of their hiring and retention decisions without interference from unions or faculty committees. HB 999 removes faculty involvement in hiring processes and delegates hiring decisions to an institution’s board of trustees or president. Universities are also forbidden from using diversity, equity, and inclusion statements or “critical race theory rhetoric” at any point during the hiring process.

## Targeting trans health care

Last month, the governor instructed state universities to report on whether they used public funding for gender-affirming health care, a move that’s in line with the administration’s broader effort to end health care for transgender people. In a memo, Chris Spencer, the director of Florida’s Office of Policy and Budget, wrote, “Our office has learned that several state universities provide services to persons suffering from gender dysphoria. On behalf of the Governor, I hereby request that you respond to the enclosed inquiries related to such services.”

The memo directed the universities to report the number of people who received that gender-affirming treatment in the last five years and where it was provided. Schools were instructed to also report how many students were prescribed puberty blockers, hormones, or hormone antagonists, or underwent a surgical procedure. The administration also requested information about the number of students diagnosed with gender identity disorders.

It’s unclear what the administration plans to do with the information. The LGBTQ activist group Equality Florida told Politico that the decision was “incredibly disturbing” since it is “another example of DeSantis using his office to attempt to intimidate colleges and universities into becoming less inclusive of their students for his political gain.”

The administration’s memo comes at a time when the Florida High School Athletic Association, the group that controls school athletic programs across the state, was weighing whether to make optional questions about students’ menstrual cycles mandatory on athletic participation forms.

## Reining in the progressive New College of Florida

DeSantis is staging what's being called a "hostile takeover" of the New College of Florida, a small school in Sarasota. As part of his 2023-2024 budget recommendations, DeSantis wants to spend \$100 million to recruit and retain faculty members at Florida's state universities, and in addition, he wants to allocate another \$15 million to "overhaul and restructure" the New College of Florida.

The budget request and the appointment of new board members has students and faculty at the college staging protests against him to "Save New College and Defend Educational Freedom." According to students, as DeSantis looks for targets in his ever-expanding education culture, he's using them as guinea pigs to show the rest of the country what he might be capable of as president.

The New College of Florida is really small, with enrollment at just 650 to 700 students. Progressive-minded undergraduates have long flocked to New College, founded in 1960, for its tolerance of queer students and a kind of academic freedom that's at odds with DeSantis's platform.

On January 6, DeSantis announced that he was appointing six new members to the college's 13-member board of trustees. Each new member is a right-wing ally of DeSantis's, including Christopher Rufo, the political strategist who takes credit for launching the war on critical race theory in 2021.

One of the new board's first moves was to fire the college's president, Patricia Okker, without cause, and replace her with Richard Corcoran, a former Florida education commissioner and Republican legislator, who has been called out for having not any academic qualifications to lead an academic institution. The board has also suggested that the school adopt a curriculum based on the conservative, Christian Hillsdale College based in Michigan whose graduate school dean joined New College's board. The board told students that its next moves will likely be to dismantle all DEI programs and initiatives.

Questions:

1) Find in the text the words for:

Submergé par

Admettre/reconnaître

Redoubler d'efforts / Monter en puissance:

Renchérir

Exposer les grandes lignes de

Conseil d'établissement

Marcher sur des oeufs

Contrarier/bouleverser/chambouler

Concurrent/candidat

Sciemment

Crime

Agression sexuelle

Cadre préliminaire

Faire entrer de force

Faire allusion à

Assiéger

Principe/dogme/précepte

Etre examine à la loupe

Sévir contre/réprimer

Ressource pédagogique

S'aligner sur/s'adapter à

Tronc commun

Réprimer/étouffer/interdire

Bannir/interdire

Les lettres

Révision/refonte/restructuration

Imposer/rendre obligatoire

Démonter/démanteler

Titularisation

Limiter

Contourner

Peser

Affecter/allouer

Membre du conseil d'administration

2) In your own words, summarize in 200-220 words what is at stake with DeSantis's Stop W.O.K.E. Act.

