

Florida censorship laws curtail Shakespeare in schools

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The climate of fear in Florida schools created by far-right censorship laws has reached its logical conclusion: districts are beginning to limit students' access to William Shakespeare's plays, long a staple of the curriculum in any American school, and among the highest products of world culture.

This week, the school board of Hillsborough County, Florida, which includes all of the city of Tampa, issued new curriculum guides for teachers. According to a district spokesperson, Tanya Arja, students will no longer read entire works of Shakespeare, but only excerpts, "in consideration of the law." Arja was referring to the 2022 "Parental Rights in Education" law, better known as the "don't say gay" law, which restricts sexual content in materials that students read or see.

Hillsborough School Board chairperson Nadia Combs told the media earlier this week, "We have to protect our teachers and make sure they are not at risk, and they don't feel at risk, to be arrested or anything inappropriate happening to them."

Other county school boards in Florida have already banned Shakespeare for certain younger grades. Stephana Ferrell, co-founder of the Florida Freedom to Read Project, noted in a media comment, "The reason why districts are choosing to interpret it that way is because they want to avoid having objections filed in the first place. Because the minute you have an objection filed for that reason, you put at risk the district of going all the way with a book to the special magistrate, which is very costly."

The Hillsborough district has also canceled student participation in the Advanced Placement (AP) psychology course and exam, because of a dispute between the College Board, which administers the curriculum of the course and gives the exam, and the Florida Department of Education, which has raised objections over the course's references to gender identity and sexual orientation.

While the Department of Education now allows students to take the course, if taught in an "age-appropriate" manner, school administrators complain that these guidelines are vague, and it is not clear if whole parts of the AP course's scope will need to be changed.

Speaking to the *Tampa Bay Times*, Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, which evaluates AP and similar college-credit courses, said, "My biggest concern about the law is that it prohibits the analysis of a large area of psychology. You can dress it up in a variety of ways, but this is censorship, saying a whole area in the field of psychology is not available for study."

One Hillsborough County School Board member, Jessica Vaughn, said on Facebook that the decision was made by the district without knowledge of the entire school board. She noted that she had spoken to dozens of outraged parents about the Board's action, and commented: "Denying access to things like AP psychology, accurate black history, critical thinking and Shakespeare is not benefitting or protecting our children. It's giving them a disadvantage—nationally."

In response to the Hillsborough district's decision, a spokesperson for the Florida Department of Education told the *Tampa Bay Times*: "The Florida Department of Education in no way believes Shakespeare should be removed from Florida classrooms. In fact, eight works by Shakespeare are included in the sample text list within the (state) Standards for English Language Arts, including 'Hamlet,' 'Macbeth' and 'Romeo and Juliet.'"

To reinforce the point, Florida's education commissioner, Manny Diaz Jr., added Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" to his August books of the month list, released on Tuesday. "This month's book recommendations provide a variety of reading materials that students will find uplifting and will spark a love for literacy," he said in a statement.

Commissioner Diaz doth protest too much. Education in

Florida has been ravaged by book banning for the last year under the “don’t say gay” law as well as other laws that allow parents to object to almost anything in curriculums. In fact, according to the Parental Rights in Education law, Diaz is inviting any Florida educator to lose his or her job—or worse—by verbally recommending “Romeo and Juliet” to a student or including it in a curriculum.

The confusion and fear sown in Florida’s educational standards are a part of the wrecking operation by far-right groups such as Moms for Liberty and their would-be Il Duce, Florida’s governor, Ron DeSantis. A small Evangelical Christian and fascist-minded constituency has lit the bonfire of book banning in Florida’s schools and in those of other American states.

As the WSWS noted in April:

The numbers and types of books that have been removed from Florida schools are truly staggering. In February, in Martin County, Florida, over 80 works, by authors such as Toni Morrison, James Patterson and Jodi Picoult, were removed from elementary school libraries at the request of a single parent, who wrote that these works had no “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value for students.”

The parent, Julie Marshall, is the head of the local chapter of Moms for Liberty.

“One of the books removed, Picoult’s novel *The Storyteller* (2013), is a bestseller that tells the story of the granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor who meets a former SS officer. “Banning *The Storyteller* is shocking,” Picoult told the *Washington Post*, “as it is about the Holocaust and has never been banned before.” This ban recalls the censorship of the graphic novel *Maus* in Tennessee, an action with distinct overtones of anti-Semitism.

“When one parent in Pinellas County [Florida] complained that Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), had a rape scene in it, the principal of the local high school banned it, and it was subsequently banned in the entire county. In February over 100 high school students protested the decision.”

the diary of Holocaust victim Anne Frank, which “was removed from the library at Vero Beach High School in Florida after a complaint from one parent.”

The crusade against culture is not simply one of exclusion, but of active historical falsification. Last month Florida’s State Board of Education approved standards for African American history curriculums that include such historical revisionism as the claim that slavery gave black people a “personal benefit” because they “developed skills,” and that a racist pogrom against blacks in Ocoee, Florida, in 1920 included “acts of violence perpetrated against and *by African Americans.*”

This week, Ron DeSantis, now a candidate for the presidential nomination of the Republican Party, reinforced his fascist credentials by telling the media that the standards are “probably going to show some of the folks [i.e., slaves] that eventually parlayed, you know, being a blacksmith into doing things later in life.”

This is little more than a rephrase of the South Carolina senator and arch-defender of slavery John C. Calhoun’s notorious 1837 speech before Congress, arguing that African American slaves “had attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically but morally and intellectually ... in the course of a few generations it has grown up under the fostering care of our institutions, as reviled as they have been, to its present comparative civilized condition.”

A Civil War was fought to destroy the “fostering care” of those institutions, and it is a marker of the decline of political culture under capitalism that DeSantis can openly echo the reactionary sentiments of the slaveowners.

The book banning, restrictions on Shakespeare and the teaching that slavery was a positive good serve to wipe away all that is progressive and enlightened in world culture and American history and to teach subservience, conformity and worship of authority to a generation of young people now coming into struggle against war, climate change and the very fascism with which the Republicans, with the acquiescence of the Democrats, are poisoning the cultural air.



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Recent banning also includes a graphic novel based on