

EQUITY & DIVERSITY OPINION

## No, Public Education Isn't Too Woke. It's Barely Even Awake

Some politicians are invoking a false narrative for political gain



By [Bettina L. Love](#) — July 14, 2023 ⌚ 4 min read



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## Bettina L. Love

Opinion Contributor, Education Week

Bettina L. Love is an award-winning author and professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is the author of the forthcoming book *Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal* (St. Martin's Press, Sept. 23, 2023). Visit [Bettinalove.com](https://bettinalove.com) for more info.

The hard right wants their political base to believe that public schools are filled with “woke” radical, leftist educators who use their classroom as a political soapbox to make white students feel bad about the sins of their forefathers. They are using their campaigns and their initiatives to crush any efforts that could undermine this notion. At the end of May, [Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders](#) told her constituents that her mission was to protect children from “the radical left woke mob.” During his victory speech last fall, [Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis](#), a fellow Republican, proudly boasted that “Florida is where woke goes to die.” Many other lawmakers continue to invoke this false narrative to gain political power, to stir people into believing that public education is filled with policies and structures that disproportionately support children of color.

Their mission, it seems, is to stop wokeness in our public schools. But this rests on an assumption that wokeness actually exists in our schools.

If you examine public school data on funding or who among our students are surveilled, policed, and suspended or have the opportunity to take AP classes, extracurriculars, and other forms of enrichment, our public education system was never woke; I am not sure if it was ever *awake*. [Black students](#) make up less than 15 percent of K-12 public school students—yet 30 percent of public school students who are suspended, expelled, and arrested. So many Black students cannot even experience the so-called wokeness because they have been banned from the school building.

The use of the word “woke” has grown in popularity with the evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement in the last several years. It serves as an all-encompassing term to describe being mindful of injustice, racism, and being well informed politically on social-justice issues. In some cases, being woke means taking action against racism and all forms of injustice.

Often, this idea of objecting to wokeness arises when a school district hires one person, typically a person of color, to lead the entire district’s diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This individual might be hired to serve in the role of a DEI officer but often lacks staff, funding, and

actual power. And this placement can lead politicians and parents to claim that a district is so woke, even *too* woke, that the position should be banned.

Last year, ProPublica reported on what happened to educator [Cecelia Lewis in 2021](#) after she was encouraged to apply for the Cherokee County school district's first-ever administrator job focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion. News of her hiring kicked off a firestorm of protest with harsh words and public condemnation in the district, about an hour's drive north of Atlanta. With no proof, critics cited Lewis' use of CRT as evidence of her wokeness; in fact, when someone in the district asked if she knew of CRT, Lewis thought the person was referring to culturally responsive teaching.

Just weeks after being hired, Lewis quit before she even had the chance to begin her new role. About 10 days later, the local paper quoted a statement she had written, "I wholeheartedly fell in love with Cherokee County when I came to visit and accepted the position, but somehow, I got caught in the crossfire of lies, misinformation, and accusations which have zero basis."

After she was then offered, and accepted, a position of a social studies supervisor in another Georgia district, Lewis would leave roughly two months later when accusations mounted again that she was a "CRT advocate." In essence, just being labeled woke banned one Black woman from two jobs in Georgia.

Where are all the "woke" books?

Our schools are labeled "woke" when students encounter books that discuss issues of race and racism, among other topics now deemed inappropriate. But where are all these books? From 2020 to 2021, only a little more than [12 percent](#) of the books that made the children's bestsellers list were about Black or African characters. And fewer than [8 percent](#) of bestselling children's books were written by Black or African authors. These numbers mean the average public school library is overwhelmingly filled with books by and about white people. But the way many Republicans tell it, our school libraries are liberal havens for books centered on race that feed the woke movement supposedly taking over our schools.

I wish school funding was woke.

A 2016 report by research and advocacy group [EdBuild](#) found that disparities in local school funding led to majority-white school districts receiving \$23 billion more than school districts serving students of color. School funding experts [Bruce D. Baker and Sean P. Corcoran](#) argue

that even state funding formulas designed to allocate aid to districts serving students of color actually “make disparities worse, not better.” They call this outcome “stealth inequality.” Almost every school district in America is subject to a state funding formula that perpetuates inequalities.

I personally know many amazing educators of color and white educators who are creating loving, caring, and anti-racist classrooms, and many feel alone and isolated at their school. The idea that wokeness is taking over public education is nothing more than a talking point—it is a hoax. At best, it reflects education’s meager attempt to start a conversation about how America’s public school system preserves inequities.

To start dismantling wokeness after more than 180 years of public education is a pathetic attempt at a political power grab. It is political power being expressed at the expense of what Black children need for educational opportunities as well as justice for all children. The banning of wokeness is banning the ground floor of justice work. It is frightening to think of what they will ban next, but I am certain it will come at the cost of racial justice. Banned books taught me that.

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