

Editorial: A counterproductive strategy

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It seems counterintuitive to alienate the very people one needs to accomplish a desired task, but Gov. Glenn Youngkin has managed in only three weeks to unite the commonwealth's education establishment against his first actions in office.

It's understandable that the governor wants to move fast, given he is limited to a single four-year term in office. And he may even revel in the ferocity of opposition pouring forth, spinning it as an indication he's on the right path to bring change to Virginia.

But he will need educators on his side if he hopes to deliver on his campaign promises, and the gap between his position and theirs grows wider by the day. That portends bad news for Youngkin's agenda and, likely, bad news for Virginia.

If there was any question about where Youngkin stands with commonwealth educators, it was answered this week in the form of a joint letter issued by the commonwealth's largest school advocacy organizations.

The Virginia Education Association, Virginia Counselors Association, Virginia Association of Colleges and Teacher Educators and, importantly, Virginia Parent Teacher Association were among the groups which called on Youngkin to shut down the "divisive, unnecessary" tip line and rescind Executive Order No. 1.

That directive seeks to eliminate "inherently divisive concepts" from the classroom, advancing the fiction that "critical race theory" — a topic of study in law schools — is part of public school instruction in Virginia.

To enforce this order, Youngkin's office established an email tip line for parents to submit complaints about schools and educators they feel are teaching "inherently divisive concepts."

What will the governor do with these complaints? He has yet to say and, this week, denied media requests to review submissions, hiding behind a provision of Virginia's Freedom of Information Act that shields the governor's "working papers" from public view.

So to recap: The governor issued an order to ban a theory not taught in public schools, set up a government email address for Virginians to report teachers, and won't let anyone see those emails.

That's quite a start. Is it any wonder that educators are worried about the potential consequences to their careers and reputations as a result? (And that's to say nothing about the fear many have that rescinding the masking order could put their health at risk.)

The ironic thing, the infuriating thing, is that these are the educational professionals the governor could enlist as agents of change had he adopted a different approach. After all, they are deeply invested in the excellence of schools, the betterment of instruction and the success of Virginia's children, and educators are remarkably adaptive to new ideas and strategies when they have the potential to improve outcomes.

That's what it means to lead. And that's what it takes to govern a large and diverse commonwealth, full of people who supported you for election and plenty who did not. The election is over, and Youngkin's goal — pledged during his inaugural address — should be to build bridges across those constituencies, not drive wedges that divide them further.

Worse for the governor is that these actions threaten to undermine what most expected he would do best, which is to bolster the state economy and make Virginia more competitive for business. A strong public education system should be the foundation of those efforts, but the commonwealth will struggle to attract and retain the best educators if they feel the governor is at war with them.

If there is a silver lining, it is this: The Youngkin administration is less than one month old. There is plenty of time for a reset, for the governor to sit down with the voices of dissent and hear them out with an eye toward finding middle ground and common-sense compromise that serves Virginia students.

But that depends on whether the governor truly wants all hands in Virginia pulling together or if stoking outrage is the point itself. The coming weeks will certainly tell the tale.