

Editorial: Teachers are watching

Feb. 16, 2022

Virginia lawmakers turned public school instruction into political performance art on Monday night. And while citizens might not have been watching, rest assured that the commonwealth's educators were — likely with some mixture of trepidation and abject horror.

The bill before the House of Delegates was HB787, the so-called “divisive concepts” legislation sponsored by Del. Dave LaRock, a Republican from Loudoun County, which would declare “unlawful and discriminatory” the teaching of certain concepts to “any public elementary or secondary school student.”

Those concepts include that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex”; that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously”; and that “an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of the individual’s race or sex.”

Those seem rather benign, right? Nothing to worry about. After all, nobody wants kids to be taught that one race is superior to another or that one gender is inferior to another.

But to legislate that, to make it unlawful? Well, that’s when things get tricky.

Begin with the simple matter of enforcement. Who is to say what would run afoul of the law? Is the state to police classroom instruction? And if so, how?

Surely it won’t be through deeply flawed and troubling initiatives such as Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s email tip line. Allowing disgruntled parents, upset students or any old Joe off the street — a vindictive ex-boyfriend or spouse, perhaps? — to register complaints about teachers that could affect their professional reputation and career is absolutely the wrong way to go.

The primary concern for Virginia’s future isn’t turning citizens into informants (though that is frightening), but the notion of adopting broad-based language to expel certain concepts from the classroom.

That would discourage the instruction of ideas that are necessary for a thorough understanding of our commonwealth and our nation. And it would create a minefield for teachers, who might rather leave the profession (or Virginia) to avoid it rather than marching through.

Guarding against those outcomes prompted Democratic lawmakers on Monday to propose a series of amendments to ensure foundational concepts would continue to be taught in Virginia classrooms.

These included an amendment to protect teaching about “The Lost Cause of the Confederacy,” the false narrative which marginalizes the role slavery played in the Civil War. There were amendments to protect teaching about Jim Crow laws, the “three-fifths” compromise and school integration.

There were amendments to protect teaching about racial and gender discrimination, about wealth and income gaps by race and gender, and about the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, which sharpened the nation’s focus on the discrimination and hatred faced by Asian Americans.

There was an amendment to protect teaching about Obergefell v. Hodges, the U.S. Supreme Court case which asserted a fundamental right to marriage — including same-sex unions — in the United States, and another that read simply, “nothing in this act shall prevent training or instruction about Supreme Court precedents and arguments.”

Each of these was rejected by the House on party line 50-47 votes, with Republicans voting against. And they did so because a small but vocal minority of parents in Virginia demanded it and, rather than doing what’s best for students, the House GOP did what was opportunistic.

Here’s the most ridiculous part: This is all for show. A Democratic majority in the Senate will likely kill the bill when it reaches that chamber. And this effort to prohibit “divisive” instruction will be banished to the legislative dustbin where it belongs.

But for teachers, the message is crystal clear. Republican lawmakers in Richmond want to decide what is “lawful” for them to teach. They want to identify violations and punish infractions. And they’re not concerned how that might affect instruction central to student growth and understanding.

If you’re a teacher, watching this unfold, you might start asking yourself if you have a future in Virginia’s classrooms. Honestly, who could blame you?