

Is Ron DeSantis's Education Record Anything to Emulate?

THE GOVERNOR OF FLORIDA, Ron DeSantis, has emerged in recent years as a nationally significant political figure and a possible Republican presidential contender in part on the basis of his record in K-12 education. What has he actually accomplished in Florida? Are his tactics there worth emulating elsewhere, or would they best be avoided? William Mattox, the director of the Marshall Center for Educational Options at the James Madison Institute in Tallahassee, Florida, who is a registered independent, offers a more positive assessment, while Cathy Young, a fellow at the Cato Institute who also writes for *The Bulwark*, *Newsday*, and *Reason*, is more cautious about what DeSantis has done.



DeSantis defends values while expanding choice to de-escalate the stakes

By WILLIAM MATTOX

FIVE YEARS AGO, Ron DeSantis toiled away as one of 435 members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Today, he looms large in American politics as Florida's twice-elected governor—and the Republican widely considered to have the best shot at toppling Donald Trump for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination.

While many factors have played into DeSantis's rise, education policy has been at the center of nearly every episode propelling the Florida governor forward. Governor DeSantis has made education a major priority of both terms in office. And he has skillfully tackled some thorny education issues using a two-pronged approach that delights parents who share his views—while neutralizing, or even winning over, many

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DeSantis fights a counterproductive culture war in Florida's schools

By CATHY YOUNG

FLORIDA GOVERNOR RON DESANTIS'S crusade against “wokeness” in education (and in some other areas) has drawn a ferocious backlash. The Republican governor and presidential hopeful has been accused of whipping up a right-wing culture war over a non-issue in a bid to boost his political credentials—and, in the process, imposing his authoritarian will under the guise of championing freedom of speech and expression. In fact, concerns about radical progressive ideologies in education are more valid than DeSantis critics allow, and free speech is not as much of an issue in K-12 education as in colleges and universities since the state has a legitimate role in shaping the school curriculum. But for those who would like to see meaningful reforms to address concerns about overpoliticized education,

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Governor Ron DeSantis greets DeSoto County Sheriff James Potter in October 2022 before touring southwest Florida to survey the damage from Hurricane Ian.

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outside his core group of support.

The first, and more attention-grabbing, part of DeSantis's approach could be called "Defying the Establishment."

The second, and potentially more important, part might be called

"De-Escalating the Stakes." Both merit closer inspection—and the best place to begin is with a fascinating-yet-often-overlooked episode that brought these two strands together.

Defusing the School 'Mask Wars'

In the summer of 2021, education officials in Florida (and beyond) were gearing up for Round Two in the Great Covid Response Dilemma—whether students returning to public schools in the fall would be required to wear masks.

Round Two had all of the appearances of a high-stakes, winner-take-all showdown. One side insisted on Covid caution. The other emphasized personal freedom and responsibility. No win-win solution seemed possible. Public schools were either going to require masks or they weren't. If ever there were a Solomonic conundrum crying out for an ingenious "split the baby" response, this was it.

Enter Ron DeSantis.

Governor DeSantis strongly identified with those emphasizing personal freedom and responsibility, just as he had a year earlier in championing a return to in-person instruction (over the objections of public-school unions, public health officials, and most major media outlets). Among other things, DeSantis worried mask mandates would hinder classroom instruction

Some Covid-wary Florida parents who felt mask-optional policies threatened their child's well-being asked if they too could get a Hope Scholarship to send their child to a private school that mandated masks. "Absolutely," the DeSantis administration answered.

because teachers and students would be unable to see each other's mouth movements.

Still, the governor recognized that some parents wanted their kids to wear masks, often for understandable reasons (such as having an immunocompromised family member at home). Accordingly, he said schools should neither mandate masks nor forbid their use.

In July, DeSantis issued an executive order to "protect parents' right to make decisions regarding masking of their

children." And he reminded Floridians that he had recently signed into law The Parents' Bill of Rights, which affirmed parents' authority "to direct the upbringing, education, health care, and mental health" of their children.

DeSantis's "mask-optional" executive order surprised no one. But what happened next surprised many.

Several Florida school districts announced they were going to defy the governor's order and impose mask mandates anyway. In response, DeSantis instructed Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran to issue a rule



MICHAEL SNYDER / USA TODAY NETWORK

Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran championed Hope Scholarships for students harassed over schools' masking policies.

making students who suffer "Covid-19 harassment" eligible for a Hope Scholarship.

Florida's Hope Scholarship program allows victims of bullying or harassment to transfer to another school of their parents' choosing, with funds following the student. DeSantis and Corcoran (who had spearheaded Hope's adoption when he was House speaker) maintained that the law's language could be legitimately applied to situations when students are mistreated by local school officials over masking policies.

The governor's move drew modest, momentary, and mostly meh mainstream media attention.

But it sparked an interesting response from some Covid-wary Florida parents who felt mask-optional policies threatened their child's well-being. They asked if they too could get a Hope Scholarship to send their child to a private school that mandated masks.

"Absolutely," the DeSantis administration answered, thereby reaffirming the unimpeachable idea behind Florida's Hope Scholarship—that no child should be required to attend a school his parents consider unsafe.

And with that, the Great School Mask Wars of 2021 came to a peaceful resolution in Florida. Thanks to DeSantis's deft

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the DeSantis “anti-woke” crusade is frustratingly counterproductive.

This crusade goes back at least to 2021, when the Florida State Board of Education approved DeSantis-backed rules that not only called for “factual and objective” classroom instruction but also explicitly banned “theories that distort historical events,” giving “critical race theory” and Holocaust denial as examples, and specifically excluded “material from the 1619 Project,” a *New York Times* package of essays placing slavery at the center of American history (See “‘The 1619 Project’ Enters American Classrooms,” *features*, Fall 2020).

In 2022, as the culture wars heated up, DeSantis signed two major bills that regulated educational practices in the state. The education section of the “Stop WOKE Act” required all classroom instruction to follow “certain principles of individual freedom,” among them that “no individual is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex” and “a person should not be instructed that he or she must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress for actions ... committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.” The “parental rights” bill dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay

The problems are real. But how good are the proposed solutions?

Law” prohibited “classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity ... in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards.”

Apart from its cringeworthy acronym (for “Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees”), the Stop WOKE Act seems clearly unconstitutional with regard to higher education; it has been challenged and blocked by federal courts, with litigation expected to continue at least until the end of this year. But K–12 is not covered by the same legal protections for freedom of speech.

Detractors of DeSantis’s legislative crusade argue that it’s a nakedly demagogic appeal to bigotry and moral panic stoked by right-wing propaganda. They scoff at the notion that children are being taught either Critical Race Theory (CRT)—which they describe as a method used in universities or law schools of analyzing how structural racism operates—or “gender theory” lessons with explicit sexual content. They dismiss objections to materials from the 1619 Project as discomfort with honest

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Highway billboards respond to DeSantis’s parental rights law, which restricts instruction on some sex and gender topics before 4th grade.

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governing, parents on all sides enjoyed access to public funds to send their kids to a school with Covid policies that matched their preferences. Win-win.

Defying the ('Woke') Establishment

Most people outside Florida have never heard the latter part of this story because it runs counter to the dominant narrative surrounding DeSantis's approach to education policy. That narrative emphasizes DeSantis's willingness to stand up for underdog parents who find themselves at odds with the progressive Establishment, often on zero-sum issues with no possible win-win solution.

"Virtually every major institution in our country is attempting to impose a 'progressive' agenda on society," DeSantis told the *New York Post*. "Florida strives to protect the ability of its citizens to live their lives free from this agenda being shoved down their throats."

DeSantis has challenged the "woke" orthodoxy by:

- Championing the adoption of legislation banning critical race theory and its related tenets which, in DeSantis's words, "teach kids to hate their country and to hate each other;"

- Signing into law a measure outlawing male participation in high school sports for females;

- Spearheading the adoption of the Parental Rights in Education Act (or, as critics dubbed it, the "Don't Say Gay" bill) which prohibited public schools from teaching young students about gender ideology and human sexuality;

- Leading an effort to curb the Walt Disney company's special governing privileges after Disney joined LGBTQ advocates in fighting against the Parental Rights in Education Act;

- Denying state approval of the College Board's new Advanced Placement African-American Studies course over its inclusion of "queer theory," "intersectionality," and other problematic content;

- Repealing and replacing Common Core standards throughout the curriculum to encourage greater emphasis on classic literature and the foundations of western thought;

- Vetoing an "action civics" proposal that would have emphasized training in student activism over the acquisition of core knowledge about our political system;

- Engineering a leadership transformation at New College, a state liberal

Just as the founders facilitated the "free exercise" of religion, rather than its Establishment, Florida has facilitated the "free exercise" of education by allowing parents to determine where their child's per-pupil dollars will be spent.

arts institution long dominated (and mismanaged) by left-wing academics; and

- Eliminating funding at state universities for "diversity, equity, and inclusion" programs that directly or indirectly violate federal civil rights standards.

As this long (and growing!) list makes clear, Governor Ron DeSantis is a man on a mission—to rid his state of the cluster of neo-Marxist ideas that comprise "wokeness."

His efforts to promote "education, not indoctrination" have earned him broad support inside the Sunshine State, where he won re-election last year by a larger margin than any Republican gubernatorial candidate in Florida history.

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Students at Mater Academy Charter Middle/High School in Hialeah Gardens, Florida, demonstrate support for the "Stop WOKE Act," which DeSantis signed in April 2022.

MIAMI HERALD/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE VIA GETTY IMAGES

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discussion of slavery and racism in America.

The critics are wrong on a number of points. CRT has indisputably influenced K–12 schooling. More than a decade ago, an

article in the journal *Educational Foundations* noted that “a growing number of teacher education programs are fundamentally oriented around a vision of social justice” and often incorporate “critical race theory” and related “critical pedagogy.” The nation’s largest teachers union, the National Education Association, explicitly endorsed CRT as one of the “tools” of anti-racist teaching in a 2021 resolution (later scrubbed from the NEA’s website along with other “business items”). Moreover, CRT is not just an analysis of racism but an ideological framework with rightly controversial elements. It makes disputed claims about embedded racism in every aspect of society and in every interaction. It also exhibits hostility to liberal institutions and, as prominent Black scholar Henry Louis Gates noted 30 years ago, to First Amendment protections for speech.

And while claims about the pernicious effects of CRT in school often come from culture warriors with an agenda, such as Manhattan Institute fellow (and DeSantis ally) Christopher Rufo, they have enough documented factual substance to be concerning.

For instance, a classroom project in Cupertino, California, in 2020, canceled after one session due to parental complaints, had 3rd-grade students list their various “social identities” and analyze them in terms of “power and privilege.” Dozens of schools have reportedly used as K–5 reading material a picture book called *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness*, which presents “whiteness” as a literal devil offering “stolen riches” and offers a crude dichotomy in which Black Americans are cast solely as oppressed victims, whites as perpetrators or enablers. High school assignments on “white privilege” can easily devolve into blaming-and-shaming tactics such as asking students to ponder “everything you may be doing to promote/maintain” racial privilege or telling them that “the world is set up for [white people’s] convenience.” This is not only polarizing but inaccurate: While racial prejudice and injustice remain a reality, 21st century America is far more diverse and complex than such perspectives allow.

Likewise, the 1619 Project has been accused not only by the right but by liberal and socialist critics of distorting historical facts to claim that “[o]ur history as a nation rests on slavery and white supremacy”—claiming, for example, that one of the

You could certainly make a solid argument that the “Stop WOKE Act” should actually be called “the Safe Spaces for Conservatives Act.”

goals of the American Revolution was to protect the institution of slavery from supposed British efforts at its abolition.

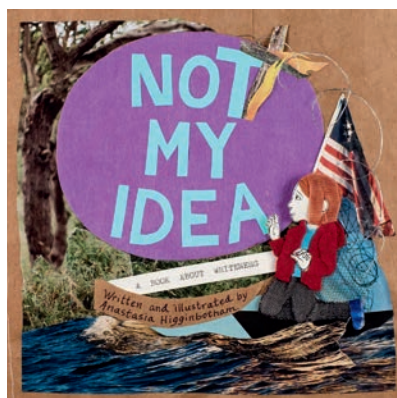
And gender identity education, sometimes as early as elementary school, can include questionable material—for instance, material telling second-graders that “You might feel like you are a boy, you might feel like you are a girl” or “a little bit of both,” regardless of body parts that “some people” associate with male or female sex. Not only conservatives but some suburban liberal parents have objected to readings which not only include overly sexualized content but seem to reinforce stereotypes—for instance, that girls who aren’t “girly” and like to wear pants may actually be boys. (School library books, another bone of contention in Florida, sometimes raise similar issues.)

So the problems are real. But how good are the proposed solutions?

On their face, the “principles of individual freedom” articulated in the “Stop WOKE Act” sound mostly reasonable: most of us will agree that children should not be told that they are presumptively racist because of their skin color or racial identity, or told that they should feel shame and anguish because of racist acts committed by people of the same color or identity in the past. But while the language of the bill makes some attempts to focus on intentionality (i.e. to specify that there must be *deliberate* instruction to feel guilt, shame, etc., or explicit assertion that members of some groups are by definition

racist or oppressive), laws that attempt to regulate speech and ideas are inevitably open to subjective interpretations. In one notorious incident in Tennessee, some conservative activists from a parents’ group combating “CRT” and other “woke” excesses in schools targeted *Ruby Bridges Goes to School*, a children’s book written by Ruby Bridges, the Black civil rights icon who was famously escorted by federal marshals on her way to a previously all-white elementary school in New Orleans in 1960. Some people evidently objected to the reference to a “large crowd of angry white people who didn’t want black children in a white school,” feeling that the passage was too negative, and also complained that the book didn’t offer “redemption” at the end. This is an almost perfect example of how easily a factual account of some episodes from history can run afoul of laws that attempt to target

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Critics of CRT cite books like *Not My Idea: A Book About Whiteness* as evidence of its influence on curricula.

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And Governor DeSantis's commitment to systemic change can be seen in the fact that he broke precedent last year and endorsed more than 30 school board candidates from around the state who share his belief that schools should not be "a tool for a special interest partisan agenda." Almost all these candidates won, flipping control of five county school boards.

Defaulting with 'Normies'

Some critics claim DeSantis is guilty of the very thing of which he accuses his opponents—politicizing K–12 education. But DeSantis says he is simply defending bedrock American values in a time-honored American way.

Just as many of America's first settlers believed the Establishment church of their homeland was coercively teaching heresy, DeSantis believes the Establishment schools in the U.S. today are coercively teaching "woke" ideas contrary to America's founding creed, the Declaration of Independence.

Specifically, DeSantis believes "woke" lessons on race violate the idea that all of us are "created equal"—and that "woke" lessons on gender violate the "laws of nature" also referenced in the Declaration.

DeSantis has seen that education choice not only is good policy but also good politics.

To many people beyond his base, "DeSantis's education efforts carry far broader yet much more nuanced and complex support than might otherwise be suggested," observes Lynn Hatter of WFSU, a public radio station based in Florida's capital.

For example, some election observers attributed DeSantis's 2022 landslide to the fact that he drew strong support from conservatives concerned about "woke" issues and from moderates more attracted to his support for ideas like increasing teacher pay. Yet, even here, DeSantis has kept his opponents off balance by shrewdly combining a 2023 teacher pay increase with a "paycheck protection" measure that requires public school unions to recruit members and collect dues on their own time and with their own dime.

"The governor's top-line promises can sound good, but there's always a catch," says Florida Education Association president Andrew Spar. "Governor DeSantis says he's for teachers' rights, then moves to take away their rights to teach honest lessons or join together to advocate for Florida's students and our profession."

Criticisms like these sometimes fail to land with middle-of-

the-road observers. Indeed, Bill Maher has defended DeSantis, calling him a "normal" governor pursuing reasonable goals. "They called it the 'Don't Say Gay' law," Maher said. "It could have been called the 'Let's do things in schools the way we did five years ago' law. It really could've."

Similarly, a national poll by University of Southern California scholars found that even a majority of Democrats oppose teaching about gender ideology and sexual orientation in elementary schools.

And when DeSantis pushed back against the College Board for "using black history to shoehorn in queer theory," a prominent African-American social-justice advocate came to his defense. "Frankly, I'm against the College Board's curriculum," said Leon County Commissioner Bill Proctor. "I think it's trash. It's not African American history. It is ideology ... sub-mediocre propaganda."

De-Escalating the Stakes

Still, DeSantis remains a frequent target of many progressives, including history professor David Blight from

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DeSantis displays the Parental Rights in Education Act he signed into law in March 2022 at Classical Preparatory School in Shady Hills. Opponents dub it the "Don't Say Gay" law.

DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD/ TAMPA BAY TIMES VIA AP

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deliberate shaming. Some Florida teachers have said that in the wake of the “Stop WOKE Act,” they’re worried about teaching material like Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” because it

could mean “trampling on ... landmines.”

The same problem of subjective standards plagues regulations regarding school library books, the purging of which new Florida laws make it much easier for parents to demand—in some cases without even reading the books in question.

This situation is particularly ironic since so much of the conservative critique of “wokeness” ridicules—for the most part, rightly—claims that people from “marginalized” groups need to be “safe” from words and ideas that could make them feel bad about themselves or their identities. You could make a solid argument that the “Stop WOKE Act” should actually be called “the Safe Spaces for Conservatives Act.”

The CRT bans and the restrictions on gender- and sexuality-related instruction suffer from the same problem of subjectivity. Since critical race theory is not directly taught in K–12, the bans would apply to texts or other materials that can be described as influenced by this mode of analysis. But that, once again, opens the way to parental complaints based on interpretation of any text related to either contemporary or historical racial issues. And with regard to gender and sexuality, “age-appropriate” and “developmentally appropriate” may open even bigger cans of worms.

What’s more, the conduct of the DeSantis administration so far does not exactly dispel concerns that its educational regulations are setting the stage for massive overreach. Just recently, the administration moved to expand the ban on teaching related to gender identity and sexual orientation from K–3 to K–12. And a new bill introduced in the Florida House of Representatives in February, based on proposals made earlier by DeSantis, takes the axe to a variety of state college and university programs based on progressive ideas about race and gender—including majors and minors in “Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality, or any derivative

At least in older grades—perhaps 6-12—the best approach to contentious issues should be to teach the debates.

major or minor of these belief systems” and general education core courses that include CRT or define American history in something other than the approved way (i.e. “the creation of a new nation based on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence”).

There are better ways to tackle the problem of ideologically skewed public-school instruction. Reviewing K–12 school materials for accuracy and balance, for instance, should not raise objections. But this task should be approached in the genuine spirit of balance, not culture-warrioring. Once again, the DeSantis administration’s record in this regard is not encouraging. (Witness the recent college-level controversy

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DeSantis’s plan to deny the College Board an Advanced Placement African American Studies course, accusing it of “woke indoctrination,” drew demonstrations outside the state capitol.

JOSHUA LOTT/ THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

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DeSantis's alma mater, Yale. Blight has criticized DeSantis's agenda, echoing a common complaint that the governor's actions raise the question, "Who gets to control knowledge and education?"

While it is true DeSantis is trying to rid Establishment schools of "woke" teachings, it is a mistake to view DeSantis as someone trying to "control" education with an iron grip.

In fact, in many ways, he's doing the exact opposite.

Think back to the mask wars incident and DeSantis's win-win solution that included scholarships for families who felt "harassed" or "threatened." Rather than imposing his own personal preferences on others, DeSantis has sought consistently to empower parents to make decisions about the education of their children.

DeSantis championed a new K-12 voucher program called the Family Empowerment Scholarship as his first major legislative initiative as governor. It added nearly 50,000 lower- and middle-income families to Florida's K-12 scholarship rolls. And it laid the foundation for two subsequent school choice expan-

In 2022, Florida achieved its highest-ever rankings in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a fact that DeSantis attributed to his anti-lockdown policies during the pandemic.

sions, including a monumental 2023 measure that extended scholarship eligibility to all Florida families and converted Florida's state-funded vouchers into flexible-use Education Savings Accounts (ESAs).

Governor DeSantis's aggressive actions in expanding education choice have solidified Florida's position as a national leader in education freedom. And his policies have continued Florida's impressive rise in national K-12 rankings, which began more than 20 years ago with the reforms of then Governor Jeb Bush. Over the last quarter-century, Florida has gone from a Bottom 10 state to a Top 5 state in most measures of student achievement.

In 2022, Florida achieved its highest-ever rankings in the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a fact that DeSantis attributed to his anti-lockdown policies during the pandemic. "We insisted on keeping schools open and guaranteed in-person learning in 2020 because we knew there would be widespread harm to our students if students were locked out," DeSantis said. "[The NAEP results] once again prove that we made the right decision."

Remarkably, Florida has posted record learning gains over the last 25 years while increasing per-pupil spending less than every other state in the nation. Free-market advocates tout these bang-for-buck results as evidence of the improved efficiencies that come with school choice. But the qualitative results of Florida's policies may be as impressive. Among other things, robust education choice has lowered the stakes for all sorts of potentially contentious battles fought out in schools.

Wish your child could attend a school that emphasizes STEM? Or the arts? Or core knowledge? Or learning through play? Or the foundations of your religion? Or project-based learning?

In Florida, you don't have to convince a majority of your neighbors to agree with you. You can pursue the best learning fit for your child, regardless of what philosophy of education your local school district adopts. Currently, more than 250,000 Floridians receive K-12 scholarship assistance of some kind—and nearly half (49%) of all Florida students attend something other than their assigned district school (private, charter, magnet, virtual, homeschool, etc.).

In essence, Florida is offering the nation a lesson in why America's founders were so wise in crafting the language of the First Amendment. For just as the founders facilitated the "free exercise" of religion rather than its Establishment, Florida has facilitated the "free exercise" of education by allowing parents to determine where their child's per-pupil dollars will be spent.

Governor DeSantis's anti-establishment posture, and the mostly negative media attention it has generated, often worked in his favor. For example, during Covid, many frustrated parents from around the country moved to Florida so their kids could get in-person instruction. And this great migration wasn't limited just to public school families. Many Jewish schools in South Florida saw a significant uptick in their enrollment, thanks especially to a large influx of families from the New York City area.

DeSantis has seen that education choice not only is good policy but also good politics. It has won him a number of unlikely allies. For instance, during the Florida Legislature's 2021 consideration of a major expansion to DeSantis's Family Empowerment Scholarship program, a gay teen testified that school choice had "saved his life" by providing him a way out of a school bullying situation that had led him to contemplate suicide.

Moreover, many Floridians who don't share DeSantis's party affiliation have found it's better to be a dissenter in the "free state of Florida" than in any other state. In Florida, hippie homeschoolers don't get hassled. John Holt disciples are free to use vouchers to send their kids to Montessori schools. And African-American moms unhappy with their local public school can "vote with their feet" and enroll their child elsewhere.

This last group is notable because their votes in the 2018 election were responsible for DeSantis's improbable, razor-thin

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victory over African-American Democrat Andrew Gillum. DeSantis won that first gubernatorial election by less than 40,000 votes, thanks to 100,000 African-American “School Choice Moms” who voted for him

because they worried Gillum’s vocal opposition to school choice would end programs benefiting their children.

Delighting the ‘Deplorables’ (and Others Who Dissent)

As the 2024 election approaches, many conservatives are hoping DeSantis runs for president.

But before anyone gets too carried away imagining the implications of a DeSantis candidacy, it may be worth considering what would have happened if Gillum had shown “School Choice Moms” the same consideration DeSantis showed Covid-wary families who wanted a scholarship to leave their “mask-optional” school.

Had Gillum embraced school choice for Florida families, he would have won the 2018 Florida gubernatorial election. He might have subsequently wound up as either the presidential nominee or vice-presidential nominee in the 2020 national election.

Instead, Gillum squandered a winnable election. And he lost not just the “School Choice Moms,” but the “School Choice Daughters” as well. I recently spoke with Hera Varmah, a graduate of Gillum’s alma mater (Florida A & M) who told me she cast her 2018 ballot for DeSantis because she knew from personal



AP PHOTO / WILFREDO LEE

Andrew Gillum’s narrow loss to DeSantis in the 2018 governor’s race was partly due to the Democrat’s opposition to school choice.

experience the life-changing power of school choice.

The number of such “School Choice Voters” is sure to increase as more states expand education options. And, hopefully, school choice expansion will help de-escalate the stakes over school policies in places way beyond Florida as more states seek to imitate the success of Governor DeSantis’s two-pronged approach to K–12 education.

William Mattox is the director of the Marshall Center for Educational Options at the James Madison Institute in Tallahassee, Florida. He is a registered independent.

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over the “anti-woke” takeover of New College Florida, where DeSantis packed the board of trustees with people who were both his personal loyalists and Donald Trump supporters—and

who immediately embarked on a project to make over the college in an explicitly political way.)

Some “woke” excesses can be curbed with rules that prohibit the personal targeting of students—for instance, with exercises suggesting that they or their families are racist or complicit in white supremacy—without broad bans on certain types of ideas or concepts, especially if those concepts are defined so broadly and subjectively that they could apply to a wide range of material. Other matters might be more constructively addressed by school districts rather than statewide.

Lastly, at least in older grades—perhaps 6–12—the best approach to contentious issues should be to teach the debates. The 1619 Project is a perfect example: instead of turning it into forbidden fruit and putting the state in the role of curriculum censor, why not have students read excerpts from the project as well as the critiques? The same approach could

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be taken to other issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—issues to which students will invariably have exposure one way or the other, via social media, journalism, or entertainment. Teaching the controversies would alleviate concerns about indoctrination in one or the other direction and instead encourage critical engagement with both historical sources and modern media. Likewise, asking school libraries to add more ideologically diverse content rather than remove content some parents find objectionable could be a constructive approach to the library wars.

More is better. Done right, such an approach in K–12 would promote genuine diversity of viewpoints, intellectual tolerance, and understanding instead of polarization.

Cathy Young is a fellow at the Cato Institute who also writes for The Bulwark, Newsday, and Reason.