

The Delray Democrat

“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”¹

June Sandra Neal

That was the title of Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum’s 1997 pivotal book on adolescent racial identity. In 2018, it was the theme of a 10-part documentary series, “America to Me.” In 2021, self-segregation in school cafeterias remains, just one manifestation of the racism that continues to roil America, whether structural, implicit or extempore. It is the most consequential social issue of our time.

Schools are the laboratories for helping races understand one another. Despite the 1954 US Supreme Court ruling that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools is unconstitutional, a plethora of studies reveal an increase in the dual prisons of poverty and race in Florida. According to a major study commissioned by Florida State University in 2017, we made good progress through the 1980s. So, what happened? The conservative school choice movement, beginning with the Reagan and George H. W. Bush presidencies, and continued under Governor Jeb Bush, the subsequent conservative governors and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, left impoverished schools in worse condition and more segregated than ever. The report noted that Jeb Bush was the “first governor in the U.S. to end affirmative action in higher education under his own authority.”

In addition, the Supreme Court’s 1991 decision in the Board of Education of Oklahoma v. Dowell case gave lower federal courts the power to decide that school districts had met their integration goals and could thus “dissolve court-ordered desegregation.” And they did.

Florida’s situation was found to be so serious that *The Miami Times* summarized the FSU report with: “Miami Is Full of ‘Apartheid Schools,’ and Segregation Is Getting Worse.”

On March 17 Governor Ron DeSantis proclaimed that “Critical Racial Theory” is henceforth banned from Florida public schools. “Florida’s civics curriculum will... expressly exclude unsanctioned narratives like critical race theory and other unsubstantiated theories. Let me be clear: There is no room in our classrooms for things like critical race theory....”

Since CRT isn’t even taught in Florida schools, DeSantis’s ban seems to be a water hose in search of a fire. But beware. We’re still triaging the effects of Trump’s diabolic policies, including his own ban of CRT and the defunding of federal sensitivity training. Trump remains the puppeteer behind the Republican governors who continue to execute his Make America White Again propaganda.

In the stead of something that doesn’t exist, the governor offered up his “Civic Literacy Excellence Initiative,” now HB 611, designed to “help students evaluate the roles, rights, and responsibilities of United States citizens and identify effective methods of active participation in society, government, and the political system.”

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, April 2021, p. 4.

No argument there. Americans of all ages are embarrassingly ignorant of their own government.

- Only 8 percent of high school seniors listed slavery as the central cause of the Civil War.
- Sixty-three percent of millennials and Gen Z did not know that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust.
- Only one-third of Americans could pass the U.S. Citizenship test given to immigrants.
- Only a quarter of Americans can name all three branches of government.
- Only 29% of 1,000 people could name the vice-president under Trump.

The good news is that Florida's curriculum includes American History and Black studies. And individual school districts have the power to interpret the state's standards in their own curricula, as long as they meet those standards.

But—no mandate from the Trump syndicate, administered by the Republican governors, has been good for America. DeSantis can't prohibit what isn't there, but we don't yet know what his "Civic Literacy" will look like. Will his ban have a chilling effect on the history and Black studies courses? On the study of the great black authors, many of whose themes are founded on institutional racism?

In 1967, a young teacher named Jonathan Kozol wrote a seminal, heartbreaking book about racism, "Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools." He was fired for teaching a poem by Langston Hughes. *A district official said no literature outside the Course of Study can be read or taught without prior permission from a higher authority. Fifty-four years later, we'd best remember.*