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UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL RAMIFICATIONS OF  
EDUCATION CENSORSHIP TO PROMOTE JUSTICE-ORIENTED SCHOOL  
SOCIAL WORK

by

Brandon D. Mitchell  
B.A., University of Michigan, 2018  
MSW, University of Michigan, 2020

A Dissertation  
submitted to the Faculty of the  
Kent School of Social Work & Family Science  
in Partial Fulfillments of the Requirements  
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in Social Work

Kent School of Social Work and Family Science  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2024

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EDUCATION CENSORSHIP TO PROMOTE JUSTICE-ORIENTED SCHOOL  
SOCIAL WORK

by

Brandon D. Mitchell

Dissertation Approved on

Maarch 22, 2024

by the following Dissertation Committee:

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Dissertation Chair

Dr. Emma Sterrett-Hong, Ph.D.

---

Dr. Lesley M. Harris, Ph.D.

---

Dr. Shantel Crosby, Ph.D.

---

Dr. Davis Clement, Ph.D.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the heroes in my life, including Ahmad Fayed, although no longer with us, his memory lives on in my thinking, writing and philosophy of life. To Alex Matthews, for being a luminary during some of my darkest times. To all of the teachers that believed in me, beginning with my high school teacher, Lisa Twardzik and the linguistic scholar, renowned and remembered as Dr. Samuel Epstein. These people always offered space for me to pose questions, listened with open hearts, and taught me how to be a more compassionate human – I cherish these experiences and life-long lessons. Finally, to my supportive brother, Aaron, and to my parents, for whom this journey would never have been possible.

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ABSTRACT:

UNDERSTANDING THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL RAMIFICATIONS OF  
EDUCATION CENSORSHIP TO PROMOTE JUSTICE-ORIENTED SCHOOL

Brandon D. Mitchell

May 9, 2024

Since 2020, recensions on youth rights and education censorship have been backed by a network of actors and organizations on the political Right, evidenced by race and diversity curricula bans, book bans, and inflammatory media discourse. The scope and prevalence of education censorship are understudied with little known about the policies enacted, and influences of media discourse, school boards, and the effects on schools and the school social worker. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore and understand the scope and prevalence of education censorship, including policies, media discourse, school boards, and schools. To achieve the aims of this dissertation, four studies were pursued. Each study is guided by a unique methodology, however, Fairclough's (2013) exploratory critique is the overarching method to unify all four studies. **Study 1** entailed a legislative analysis of enacted policies in 2021-22 related to race/diversity curricula bans and juxtaposed with media discourse ( $n = 24$ ) on the political right written by Christopher Rufo – the prominent political activist on the Right. **Study 2** included a national analysis of news articles ( $n = 170$ ) published in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and the Tampa Bay Times. **Study 3** analyzed public comments across ( $n = 6$ ) school board sessions in the Traverse City

School District in Michigan and was integrated with anti-CRT articles ( $n = 11$ ) written by network elites and think-tanks on the political Right. **Study 4** concluded the macro-to-micro level focus of this dissertation by analyzing the impact on schools and support-based mechanisms, including the school social worker. This study was operationalized by ( $n = 1$ ) focus group and ( $n = 11$ ) interviews with active SSWs across the US.

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CHAPTER ONE:  
EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES AND CONTEMPORARY MECHANISMS OF  
OPPRESSION

As conflict over education censorship ebbs and flows over time – youth rights to education are guaranteed. Derek Black (2020, p. 15) writes in *Schoolhouse Burning*:

All fifty state constitutions protect the right to education. All fifty states, through constitutional language, place the right on a pedestal. They also attempt something quite curious: they try to insulate public education from partisan politics. As an inherent function of the state, they thought public education should operate under a different set of rules.

Although youth rights to education are guaranteed, state, district, and school orientations to *social justice* are variably subjected to mechanisms of political control and contention. Hytten & Bettez (2011) observed, the implementation and effectiveness of education oriented to social justice is unreliable due to varied conceptual definitions. Labaree (2011) delineates some related educational tensions and conflicting school system goals. First, tension arises due to the attempts to support both individual and collective needs. Second, schools experience tension due to competing goals of democratic politics and market politics. Collectively, these tensions lead directly to educational goals being positioned at odds with one another, including pursuits toward (a) democratic equality, (b) social efficiency, and (c) social mobility. The pursuit toward democratic equality often aligns with liberal democratic values, posing conflict with the goals of social

efficiency and mobility that are aligned with skill development, workforce training, and neoliberal orientations. Labaree (2011, p. 17) concluded:

With this mix of goals imposed on it, education in a liberal democracy has come to be an institution at odds with itself...It is also a failure in solving the social problems assigned to it, since these problems cannot be solved in a way that simultaneously satisfies all three goals.

These tensions and conflicts have played out across all of the major education movements, including the common school movement, the progressive movement, the desegregation movement, the standards movement, and the school choice movement (Labaree, 2011). Arguably, we are amid a contemporary movement underscored by the conflict and tensions of the social justice movement and resistance to education censorship.

Historically, tactics of education censorship have been used to control curricula, dating back to the origins of public education (Hunter, 1992). However, the recent trends of censorship may be deeper than efforts of political control over educational content. That is, the goal of these constraints may be multifaceted, including curricula and behavioral control of youth and educators, but also larger systemic attacks on the very democratic structure of public education (Ferris & Robbins, 2023). As Black (2020, p. 16) stated prior to the education censorship movement: “states – aided and sometimes prodded by top federal officials – are now trying to take the gift of public education back.” Efforts to undermine public education are especially concerning as increases in charter, private, and parochial school are on the rise (Ferris & Burris, 2023)

Although curriculum debates are, at times, a commonplace manifestation and may even be a healthy necessity for redefining and creating more equitable and justice-oriented schools (Ross, 2017), scholars have underscored how the recent trends of education censorship have circumscribed debate and reaffirmed authoritarian policies crafted by the political Right (Giroux, 2022; Henry et al., 2023). Since 2020, a network of influential actors and organizations have implemented state level censorship policies, leveraged support from the mainstream media, and galvanized a “local movement,” including school board contention, policy reform, and (Joyce, 2022a). Meanwhile, as the political Right proposes and enacts oppressive state level policies, the responses from the political Left have, at times, been contentious and reactionary – the result of which may engender *politics of diversion* – with mechanisms of elite capture (Táíwò, 2022) and high conflict (Ripley, 2021) creating distractions, divisions, and solidify political polarization. As Shawn Ginwright (2022) astutely pointed out: “We spend all of our time resisting white supremacy, fighting racism, confronting patriarchy, deconstructing capitalism, challenging oppressive systems, and very little time creating belonging, cultivating healing, inventing new systems, designing our future.” As we move to understand the scope and prevalence of education censorship and its impact on US schools and youth education, we must simultaneously consider more humane responses to re-imagine hope and possibility rather than inflaming social divisions.

As education censorship and political contention ensue, schools exist as a microcosm of social upheaval, as they experience both the impact of censorship and ongoing political polarization. Moving through the political contention and developing forms of education censorship may call for schools to implement radical new strategies in

school-based support and advocacy. It is important to highlight that schools can have a range of relationships to social upheaval. For example, schools may encompass a mere reproduction of society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), and at other times, youth may be liberated through developmentally rich schools that engage in critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2015). This dissertation is oriented toward a liberatory-based education and away from political and social contention. In this pursuit of inclusive youth development and holistic-based support – the role of school social work is emphasized. School social workers can play an important role in this liberatory process by working in multidisciplinary teams to support youth more inclusively (Phillippo et al, 2022), and by engaging in justice-oriented, policy-focused, and structurally oriented practice toward equity and system wide support (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Crutchfield et al., 2020).

As education censorship ensues and liberatory-based mechanisms of support are proposed as counter resistance – several gaps in the literature include: (a) the catalysts of education censorship policies (e.g., networks and influential actors), (b) the effects of state policies on school policies, (c) the impact on school boards, public comments, and the school board impact on schools, and (d) perspectives and advocacy of support-based mechanisms such as the school social worker. The scope of this dissertation will be focused on the trends of education censorship to uncover the developing forms of oppression, to reimagine avenues of practice, advocacy, and mechanisms of healing.

The primary focus of this dissertation spans an examination of the networks of the corporate-conservative political-media influence undergirding the education censorship movement, to map the influences on local school board proceedings and school social work (SSW) practice. Understanding the precursors to and causes of inequitable and

oppressive policies in schools, and their impact on the social justice efforts of school social workers can provide information critical for resistance efforts and ultimately new avenues of equity promotion (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). Four domains related to education censorship will be examined: (a) state education policies, (b) media discourse, (c) school board public comments (d) values, beliefs, and experiences of school social workers (SSWs) related to justice-oriented practice amid increasing trends of censorship.

### **Problem Statement**

Pen America (2023) noted that since the spring of 2021, 41 states have introduced over 200 “educational gag orders” – censoring everything from textbooks, the 1619 project, race and diversity concepts, and LGBTQ+ rainbow pride flags (Freidman & Tager, 2022). Seventeen states have codified education censorship legislation, some of which affects higher education and charter schools, but most of which impacts public schools (Pen America, 2023). *Education censorship* is defined as any constraints on curricula, training, or teaching parameters imposed by legislators; or identity-based exclusionary policies. Zimmerman (2022) affirmed that the attempts to control curriculum may intend to whitewash history, minimize historical content, and falsely position society on equal and equitable footing where meritocracy is attainable for all.

The education censorship movement must be also contextualized by other corollary trends of increased oppression of vulnerable and marginalized groups through legislative means in general. Moving the analytical lens outside of the school system can help to underscore the ubiquity of right-wing attacks on human rights, including voting rights (Abrams et al., 2020), antiunion and worker rights (Lafer, 2017), youth rights related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Movement Advancement Project, 2022),

reproductive rights (Shutt, 2022), anti-drag show bans (Burga, 2023), and de-professionalization (i.e., lowering credentialing standards) efforts against teachers and school-based mental health professionals (Joyce, 2022a).

As the evolution of education censorship ensues and supporting interests identified include politicians, corporations, conservative think-tanks, and nonprofits, efforts to illuminate these networks must attend to the multi-faceted and diverse actors and organizations involved. With this in mind, three concerns are noted. First, the extent to which the media reproduces ideas and arguments advanced by politicians and conservative organizations that help perpetuate and maintain the education censorship movement is unclear. Second, even less is known about how neoliberal networks intertwine to impact school systems through the intersecting forces of education policies, media narratives, and school board policy debates. Third, as these networks coalesce to impact schools, little is known about how support-based mechanisms (i.e., SSW) are positioned to advocate for youth inclusion, or resist the oppressive forces of education censorship. The training of SSWs typically aligns with justice, cultural competence, structural orientation (Crutchfield et al., 2020), and the social work code of ethics – potentially situated to challenge censorship, improve climate, and support youth inclusion (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). Recently, the National Association of Social Workers (2021) amended the Code of Ethics around “cultural competence” – changes that may be directly impacted by education censorship policies, divisive media narratives, and the individual practitioners' educational training, values, beliefs, and ideology. To follow, the theoretical framework is delineated to guide this research.

## Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework for this dissertation includes an integration of four theories: (a) economic imperialism, (b) elite capture, (c) high conflict, and (d) street-level bureaucracy. Collectively these theories help to understand the complexities of educational oppression, recent trends of education censorship and the related aspects of networks, neoliberalism, media influence, school board contention, and SSW practice.

In consideration of education censorship and the persistent social narratives of “culture wars” (Zimmerman, 2022) and “identity politics” (Finkelstein, 2023), the concurrent framework will help to consider: (a) the origins of education censorship, (b) how conflict is manufactured, and (c) illuminate those that benefit from the persistent social divisions (elites) and those that lose (everyone else). Although education censorship has been largely an orchestrated movement by the political Right, the response from the Left may have inflamed divides and dislocated our focus from the policy impact of censorship. Therefore, it may be equally important to understand the scope and prevalence of censorship and the ensuing political conflict that has occurred as a byproduct. Education censorship may be a contemporary manifestation of ongoing efforts to attain economic imperialism, corporate governance, and educational control (Ferris & Robbins, 2023).

As is outlined in Figure 1, economic imperialism may help to explain the origins and underlying goals of the education censorship movement (i.e., to maintain the wage and wealth gaps between the wealthy and other socioeconomic classes), while elite capture can help to facilitate attention to the developing mechanisms of elite-based support (e.g., local advocacy; nonprofits), and how high conflict works to both support

mechanisms of economic imperialism and elite capture by showcasing how divides are leveraged for financial purposes, distraction, political polarization, and the sustainment of status quo neoliberalism. Finally, in schools, bureaucratic elements of control may be used, or may already exist that may dismantle advocacy, resistance, and solidify oppressive educational trends. These theories are described in more detail below.

### ***Economic Imperialism***

Jabbar & Menashy (2022) situate the theoretical framework of economic imperialism to help us attend to social issues with a lens toward economically oriented attitudes, values, and agendas. Extending the work of Edward Lazear (2000), the reinvigorated approach of economic imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022) is used to showcase how capitalism has become an ideology that has permeated all aspects of society and influences human interactions in ways impossible to fully understand. Yet, “capitalism” and “neoliberalism” are increasingly ill-equipped to explain aspects of economic domination that are infiltrating all aspects of our modern society. To fully explain social behavior – we must examine the ways in which economically driven behavior has co-opted mindsets and guides all aspects of thinking and being (Lazear, 2000). Jabbar & Menashy (2022) define economic imperialism as a focus on: “the roots of market-driven or neoliberal policies by examining the roles economists and economic ideas play in laying the foundation for and promoting neoliberal reforms in education.” With this definition, the roots of this ideology and its impacts on society and school systems can be examined.

From the analysis of the bourgeois society in 1848 (Marx & Engels, 2019) to Giroux’s (2022) scholarship on neoliberal fascism – authoritarian-based capitalism – the

analytical focus on capitalism has been sought by many to unravel and better comprehend our complex society. To understand our current environment of education censorship, it may be useful to gather evidence related to financial incentives, ulterior motives, and long-term goals of the organizations involved (Ball, 2012). This can be done in part by examining the actors and organizations involved in education censorship. Most notable in their *public* influence are the Manhattan Institute and Heritage Foundation – although an array of subsidiary and auxiliary networks and organizations exist – these two are the most financially active, funding books, podcasts, anti-CRT news, and pamphlets on school board resistance. These organizations have consistently pushed an agenda to advance school choice, charter schools, and educational privatization (Kovacs, 2010).

In addition, a focus on understanding auxiliary movements on the political Right may be useful. The trends of education censorship have unsurprisingly coincided with calls for parent’s rights, school choice, and curriculum transparency, and this discourse must be contextualized by prior movements, for example, ongoing efforts to undermine the teachers' unions (Lafer, 2017). Collectively, this agenda may (a) undermine public education, (b) facilitate a movement to charter and parochial schools, and (c) distract from ongoing corollary efforts, including the recension of human rights (Shutt, 2022).

Over the last few decades, the push for charter schools has spread across the nation as teachers’ unions have simultaneously been pushed out of power (Saltman, 2010) – a move to increase corporate control, limit teacher autonomy, and eventually move beyond public education (Lafer, 2017). At the same time, the opportunity for corporate privatization and governance in schools represents a massive potential for wealth accumulation (Ball et al., 2019). As corporate efforts aim to undermine the quality

of public education and promote charter schools, there is also a movement to privatize aspects of the school system, including curriculum, staff, consulting, and professional development (Au & Ferrare, 2015).

Saltman (2022) advances this perspective by underscoring how schools are entrenched in a “data-based” movement, overly reliant on interventions to *fix* students, test scores used as a false proxy to measure and evaluate learning, and efforts to privatize and leverage corporate schemes across all aspects of education. Schools have moved away from cultivating youth development to capitalistic ventures designed to generate profit and prepare youth for entering the neoliberal workforce (Baldrige, 2022). Jabbar & Menashy (2022) note the analytical ineffectiveness of the scholarly reliance on notions of neoliberalism, capitalism, and business’ ideology to sufficiently explain these factors.

The theoretical framework of economic imperialism can be harnessed to illuminate the expansive influence of economic inquiry across domains and the influence on language, discourse, policy, and practice (Lazear, 2000). For example, human capital theory and rational choice assumptions of economics are increasingly relied upon to explain the movement to charter schools and the use of vouchers (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022) – rather than a focus on the systemic disinvestment in public schools (Lipman, 2013). In addition, schools are increasingly focused on accountability, efficiency, evaluative metrics, and high-stakes testing dominant narratives, ideology, policies, and practices (Au, 2010). In this case of rising corporatization of educational systems and the increased movement to charter and parochial schools, economic imperialism is a framework to bring together different threads of analysis to assess whether the root

causes are being considered or brought to the surface. To understand the contemporary educational inequities a number of different frameworks have been proposed.

Pauline Lipman (2013) ties together the signposts of the neoliberal agenda: (a) systematic disinvestment of resources in public schools with the (b) displacement of communities (e.g., school closings, gentrification), and (c) selective reinvestment (e.g., charter schools, for-profit interests). Yet, in this analysis, it is unclear whether these trends are maniacal, intentional, or commonplace manifestations amid a society deeply entrenched in economic imperialism. In a slightly more authoritarian focus, Naomi Klein (2007) proposes the “shock doctrine,” as the strategic takeover of public entities for private financial gain by leveraging an economic or environmental disaster. For example, Hurricane Katrina decimated New Orleans – a city already facing widespread poverty and systemic educational inequities (Giroux, 2006). However, the government responded with an apathetic, yet militarized “support,” perpetuated by racially biased and slanderous media depictions of a war-torn New Orleans, portraying the citizens amid narratives of criminality and disposability (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2007). The hurricane disaster was used as a catalyst for the charter school movement, flipping the majority of public schools into privately controlled charters (Saltman, 2015). Yet, to portray this incidence in purely maniacal terms may not capture the economic driven motivations that undergirded the charter redistribution. In the context of rational choice theory – a prime example driven by notions of economic imperialism – we can better understand the movement through simple, economic strategizing. In this case, the functionality or everyday notions of capitalism become engrained, simplistic, and commonplace (Lazear, 2000). While the result of such thinking can be analyzed as evil or fascist, this depiction

is incomplete in the context of imperialistic rationale (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). In other words, as economic based decisions dominate society, to interpret these decisions as fascist or authoritarian (Giroux, 2022) misses the notion of how our thinking is pre-conditioned by economic imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022).

Education censorship may be partly understood as a manifestation of economic imperialism, whereby censorship may impose new curricula constraints, but also work to dismantle progressive education reform, and perpetuate the reliance on academic rigidity and high-stakes testing. Collectively, these factors and tumultuous social fear about public education may stimulate the movement to charter schools (Joyce, 2022). At the very least, economic imperialism helps to illuminate important contextual aspects when analyzing the scope and influence of education censorship (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). With a foundational understanding of economic imperialism, the remaining theoretical guides can help to showcase how imperialism mechanisms are sustained.

### ***Elite Capture***

The remaining three components of the theoretical framework serve as reinforcing mechanisms of economic imperialism. Táíwò (2022) defines elite capture as: “a system of social advantage continuously gaining control over movements for self-serving financial gains.” This may include elites across political spectrums that play a role in capitalizing on ideas, language, and social movements for personal gain – and not always as a nefarious mechanism of action. In his book, Táíwò reviews several movements (i.e., “identity politics,” “cancel culture,” and “wokeness”) that have been co-opted by elites – shifting the definitions – but underscoring how they also represent: “the increasing

domination of elite interests and control over aspects of our social system” (p. 21). In this section, examples of elite capture are reviewed.

Useful to this analysis is an examination of the evolution of “identity politics.” As Táíwò discussed, the origins of identity politics come from the 1970s when the Combahee River Collective – a Black feminist socialist organization – used the term to develop a progressive political stance that included their experiences (Táíwò, 2022, p. 6). Over the course of several decades, identity politics evolved in definition through political and academic co-optation underscoring substantial contemporary social shifts to better understand experience and inequality. As Kimberlee Crenshaw (1995) pointed out, “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite – that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup difference.” This formulation opened the door to the seminal theoretical development of intersectionality, a framework that has unlocked radical new ways of understanding inequality and human experiences through a deeper examination of the intertwined dimensions of identity. At the same time, this shift may have been perceived as an assault on the status quo structures and dominant academic scholarship. The efforts to understand inequality through in-depth analysis of individual identities and experiences is now being used as a wedge to divide Americans. Where we stand today, includes “identity politics” used to attack anything with progressive or social justice relevance. Táíwò elaborated:

“Identity politics has, however, equipped people, organizations, and institutions with a new vocabulary to describe their politics and aesthetic – even if the substance of those political decisions are irrelevant or even counter to the interests

of marginalized people whose identities are being deployed. But that is a feature of how identity politics is being used, rather than what identity politics is at its core. It is this ‘elite capture’ – not identity politics itself – that stands between us and a transformative nonsectarian, coalition politics (Táíwò, 2022, p. 9).

Building on Táíwò’s philosophy of elite capture, Krugman (2023) added:

...elite capture is a fundamental strategy of bourgeoisie power maintenance and a process that can happen with other ideas. Through radical ideologies and concepts being taken up by elites, depoliticized through using them in ways they were not intended to be, and deploying them for their own benefit, elite capture both hampers political movement and strengthens the status quo.

A second example of elite capture is encapsulated by what some are calling “woke capitalism” – underscoring how corporations are moving toward initiatives of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) as a guise for financial motives and profit-seeking behaviors. In other words, the move to become more inclusive and to care about, for example, bias training may reflect corporate interests to *appear* anti-racist while resembling a greater allegiance toward manipulative goals of wealth acquisition (Kolhatkar, 2022; Ramaswamy, 2021). The co-optation of the DEI movement is important for several reasons. First, DEI is simultaneously on the rise in K-12 schools to address structural racism and promote educational equity, however, as corporations overpower the movement for financial gain it may simultaneously stigmatize and derail the positive movement in schools. Second, the contentious angle of the political Right is noted by the widespread legislation to undermine offices of DEI in higher education (Lu

et al., 2023). The elite capture of DEI represents a profound corporate takeover that perpetuates self-serving financial gains and simultaneously works to undermine social justice-based reform in schools.

To illustrate a third example, Freddie deBoer in his recent book *How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement* (2023) summarized one of the largest social uprisings in American history in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor – a movement that built upon centuries of racism and violence perpetuated by the US government and police (Durham, 2022). As protests for racial justice spanned the globe, very little change toward justice was achieved. As deBoer (2023) explained: elites, namely academic elites on the Left seized upon the racial justice movement and re-aligned it with a movement to “Defund the Police.” The Defund movement represented the desires of only a fraction of the American populace. For example, surveys have shown that Black Americans are more likely to desire decreases in police funding, however, the vast majority of Black and white participants think spending on police should “stay the same” (Parker & Hurst, 2021). Additionally, data from 2019 found a 21% increase in participants that think police funding should increase “a lot.” To many, the Defund movement was linguistically unclear, including definitional variations, and lacked strategic planning to carry out the change. For example, prominent activist and scholar Angela Davis called for true forms of abolition, meanwhile, others incited abolition as a means for reductions in police funding, and still others called for bundling police with social support mechanisms. Speaking to the mismatch in the Defund movement, deBoer (2023, p. 54) concluded that: “defunding the police strikes me...as a distraction from doing something meaningful to mitigate injustice.” The wavering social

and political stance of Defund the Police was boosted by the media in a way that took the steam out of the racial justice movement through sensationalized discourse. Pew Research noted support for Black Lives Matter peaked in 2020 at 67% and has since declined to 51% in April 2023 (Horowitz et al., 2023).

A final example of elite capture is presented in the context of “culture war” discourse often cited to explain the education censorship movement (Zimmerman, 2022). While there may be some truth to the actuality of culture wars – social and political divides over certain concepts – it is often the case that this narrative may intentionally or unintentionally sustain political polarization. An article from the National Education Association illustrated this point:

Manufactured outrage designed to divide educators and parents for political gain didn't work in 2022, a recent survey found. Instead, midterm voters were focused on school safety, the educator shortage, book bans and other challenges.

Unfortunately, as the 2024 campaign season begins to take shape, the ‘culture war’ on public schools doesn't show many signs of abating (Walker, 2023).

First, “book bans” are wrapped up in the education censorship tactics designed to divide, thus any focus on this is an emblematic example of the “manufactured” divides. Second, while the author acknowledges the “designed” attempts to “divide” – the article discourse reifies culture war narratives in the final sentence by stating how they show no signs of abating. It is the very reliance on culture war discourse that (a) dislocates the focus from the elite networks creating censorship, and (b) conflates the elites shaping censorship with everyday citizens who may be in support or against censorship.

The benefits of political polarization that are a byproduct of culture war discourse are multifaceted. Coleman (2021) noted that neither political or ideological polarization has increased over the last 70 years, but our ideas, feelings, and thinking about polarization *have* increased – known as affective polarization. Affective polarization includes: “the tendency of members of oppositional groups to feel negatively about the opposing group members and positively about members of their own group” (Coleman, 2021, p. 21). However, increases in polarization are prevalent among political elites, as both the House and Senate representatives are more polarized today in their voting and cooperation as they were immediately following the Civil War (McCarty et al., 2016). Elite political divergence (i.e., partisan voting) correlates with the political convergence of corporate or neoliberal ideology. That is, although there appear to be major signifiers (policies) that can help to distinctly categorize the political Right from the Political Right – much more political overlap (i.e., centrist convergence) exists than is commonly acknowledged. Lewis & Lewis (2022) noted that our continued reliance on “Right” and “Left” is inherently limiting, and perpetuates our perceptions and reliance on political divides. To illustrate this point, they underscored how one political issue that may have been a republican concern actually shifts to encompass a liberal stance. An emblematic example of this, is former Presidential Candidate Bernie Sanders calling for the continued funding for the Ukraine proxy war with Russia. The once anti-war advocate is part and parcel of the larger Democratic party that is committed to maintaining the military-industrial complex. This shift in political ideology led to the recent arrests of anti-war activists protesting outside of Senator Sanders’ office.

The shifting political alignment with colorblindness underscores another example. At one point, colorblindness was a progressive framework on the Left, and now very much encapsulates the Right as an appropriate course of action to promote racial justice (Hughes, 2022). Lewis & Lewis (2022) stated that we should look at individual policies rather than trying to tenuously group policies together because they are supported by a given political party. Therefore, as legislator voting increasingly corresponds with party alignment – this serves as a guise for increasing political divisions – while the two-party duopoly continues toward corporate governance and neoliberal centrism.

To follow, there is an assumption that elite political divergence is transferrable or replicated across the American populace – and this is not the case. The most significant correlation is that of increasing economic inequality and perceived polarization – a fact that may be a direct result of the persistence of neoliberal enterprise (McCarty et al., 2016). Several indicators underscore American convergence overlooked by the media. For example, the majority of Americans support a \$15 minimum wage (Dunn, 2021) universal health care (Jones, 2020), and reproductive rights (Saad, 2022). The majority of Americans oppose corporate control and support relinquishing power from corporations (Gray, 2022). While the media persistently positions narratives of *culture wars*, *identity politics*, and *political polarization* – the elite corporate structures that sustain global calamities and economic inequality are masked. In understanding elite capture, it is crucial to link the mainstream media control to only a handful of controlling corporations (Giroux, 2014), as the “profession is filled with a highly unrepresentative fringe of the most educated” (deBoer, 2023, p. 144). What this means for American politics is that discourse can exude (a) outside of working class interests, while being (b) disconnected

from the damages that may persist from overrepresented narratives (e.g., culture wars). Furthermore, elite capture dislocates the responsibility of elected officials and government leaders by showcasing and representing their divides as symbolic of the divides between Americans – which is not the case. The media works to solidify this perception of polarization, leading to a *perception gap* – the gap between actual divides and the perception of divides (Hawkins et al., 2022). Therefore, as systemic issues ensue, Americans are held responsible – a byproduct of economic imperialism working to dislocate responsibility from the government and align the responsibility of systemic inequities with individualized responses (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). Elite capture also functions through distraction and psychological manipulation, working to damage coalitions and impede transformative politics. Elite capture, in part, may serve as a framework for illuminating how the mechanisms of high conflict are sustained. Once high conflict is sustained it may be very difficult to overcome the divides both real and perceived.

### ***High Conflict***

If elite capture is one potential outcome of education censorship, then high conflict may be a mechanism through which success (distraction and conflict) can be harnessed to sustain elite capture and ultimately economic imperialism. Amanda Ripley (2021) noted that when proclivities are entrenched in adversarial standpoints, the likes of which are harnessed, co-opted, and amplified by the media, high conflict is the only outcome. High conflict entails a type of conflict where hearing and communication dissipate and preexisting biased political perspectives fuel the divides and reinforce culture wars. An example includes us vs. them narratives and political polarization

(Ginwright, 2022). Distinguishing between good conflict – which emphasizes movement and pushes people to be better – and high conflict – entails stagnation, where conflict becomes the destination that is solidified through good vs. evil and us vs. them narratives. The divides (i.e., real and perceived) may be exacerbated by factors such as identity politics, culture war narratives, and progressive frameworks used to explain, for example, the persistence of racism, oppression, and inequities (Finkelstein, 2023; Kovalik, 2021). Unfortunately, some limitations in these progressive frameworks (e.g., white privilege and fragility) may have unintentionally elongated challenges alongside an increasing lack of racial sympathy (Chudy, 2021) – consider DiAngelo’s (2016) potentially stigmatizing conceptualization of white fragility (Church, 2020; Finkelstein, 2023; Snyder, 2021). As the progressive trends have increased and coincided a growing number of deficit-based explanations of systemic racism – education censorship may be, in part, understood as resistance to these progressive ideological trends.

High conflict is useful for underscoring how divides may result from social contention that minimizes our ability to hear, listen, and consider counter-arguments (Ripley, 2021). High conflict refers to a type of conflict that impedes social progress, fuels divides and ongoing perceptions of polarization. Examples of high conflict are notable in the divergent social and media discourse related to identity politics (Finkelstein, 2022), cancel culture (Kovalik, 2021), narratives of political polarization (Hawkins et al., 2019), and depictions of culture wars (Zimmermann, 2022). Although it may be true that elements of high conflict are associated with these concepts, more often is that these polarizing narratives represent a small portion of the population and are manufactured in a way that benefits aspects of elite capture. In consideration of education

ensorship, it is common to hear those on the political Left say that Republicans want to abolish history in K-12 schools (Zimmerman, 2022). While this may be true for some, other research points to added complexity. For example, Hawkins and colleagues (2022) point out an overwhelming convergence in population desires for history curricula. Moving beyond aspects that perpetuate high conflict may help us better examine nuance, complexity, and the full spectrum of arguments. Considering education censorship, we often come to understand the divides as the “Right vs. Left,” yet this ignores the majority of the population that falls somewhere in the middle, including a large percentage of people that could potentially be reached through reasonable conversation (Haney-Lopez, 2019; McGee, 2020; Yancey, 2022). By recognizing elements of high conflict – the inability to have productive dialogue and conversation – can help to (a) observe how conflict is shaped through the media and mechanisms of elite capture, and (b) help to move the narrative beyond blame of individuals.

Culture war narratives offer an emblematic example of high conflict. For example, individuals on the political Left may insist that critical race theory is not taught in schools. This stance may implicitly dismiss the perspective of the Right and deemphasize understanding and lead to aspects of high conflict. Overcoming high conflict is not about shifting values but more akin to becoming capable of understanding a given disagreement. Putting this into context, it may be useful to pursue the depths of the arguments, even if we disagree with the parameters of censorship. Deeper questions remain about the empirical validity of understanding the politics on the political Right as fascist or authoritarian (Giroux, 2022) and whether these conceptualizations direct us toward building unity, overcoming divides, and building a positive tomorrow. One can be

analytically correct in their argument, but the discourse may unintentionally inflame and exacerbate social divides. Divides that, as already stated, are sensationalized and blown out of proportion by political elites and the mainstream media (Yourish et al., 2022). As policy changes, interlocking systems of oppression, and trends of economic imperialism converge to sustain injustice, the impact on the practice of those in affected systems, such as SSW, is unclear.

### ***Street-level Bureaucracy***

As efforts to sustain economic imperialism are mechanized through elite capture and high conflict, school systems endure competing controlling forces, including state-level policies and school district policies. Street-level bureaucracy is useful to help understand the work of public service employees, such as school social workers (SSWs). Lipsky (2010) defines street-level bureaucracy to include public services workers (e.g., social workers, teachers, police officers) that operate within a level of discretion, but often work to reinforce societal structure and status quo. This framework is useful to examine the mechanisms of practice, including the usefulness, utility, and community-based benefits. Lipsky (2010) proposes that the work of street-level bureaucrats may conform to reinforcing mechanisms of social control and align with organizational goals rather than the public who is intended to be served (Bloomer et al., 2022). Hall & Hampden-Thompson (2021) discuss teachers as pivotal actors with significant agency related to policy implementation. Their research shows how teachers adjusted practice based on curriculum reforms – showcasing the rising academic rigidity related to neoliberalism and how policy works to minimize teacher agency, control outcomes, and guide practice in subtle, yet significant ways. This research poses substantial implications

in the context of education censorship across the U.S. – as it remains unclear how school systems and support-based mechanisms (i.e., SSW) will employ their agency and discretion in response, advocacy, or resistance (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). To focus on the role of SSWs, Lipsky’s framework will be used to understand how patterns of practice are shaped across three areas: (a) resources, (b) goals and performance measures, and (c) advocacy and alienation.

### **Resources**

To understand the practice orientation of SSWs, funding mechanisms and resources in the schools are necessary to consider. Schools are predominantly funded by property taxes, reinforced by segregation – leading to disproportionately low funding and resources in schools where a higher percentage of minoritized youth reside (Weathers & Sosina, 2022). Diem & Welton (2020) highlighted the \$23 billion funding gap between white and nonwhite school districts. Funding mechanisms then impact youth in a myriad of ways. For example, the underemployment of school-based mental health professionals (SMHPs), lower salaries and certification standards of teachers, and privatized mechanisms to cut costs, often erode service delivery – especially in lower socioeconomic regions (e.g., Teach for America; Clement, 2018; Kelly et al., 2023). Further, the underemployment of SMHPs may disproportionately impact equitable hiring practices of SSWs (Johnson & McKay-Jackson, 2020), in part due to inconsistent state certification standards (Mitchell et al., 2021), competition with other SMHPs (e.g., counselors, and psychologists; Kelly et al., 2023), and inconsistent administrative understanding of SMHPs (Frey et al., 2022). Limited school resources may impact the role and practice of SSWs when they are hired, due to high caseloads, practice in multiple

schools, and role ambiguity given the competing priorities of their role (Thompson & Frey, 2020). In addition to the impact of resource inequities, organizational goals and performance also guide SSW practice.

### **Goals and Performance**

The goals and performance of street-level bureaucrats (i.e., SSWs) are influenced and shaped by organizational priorities, performance metrics, often in competition with individual goals and perspectives of SSWs (Crutchfield et al., 2020). This means that varied professional guidance shapes the practice of SSWs, influencing discretion, agency, and goals on multiple levels (Lige, 2021). First, outside of the school, education policy on the federal and state level may shape SSW practice (Frey et al., 2022). Organizational goals are shaped by state mandates of professional training and development, as well as institutional goals, influenced by school boards, superintendent, administration, and school-based goals (Villareal Sosa, 2022). Collectively, a long-list of factors may influence and undermine the practice of SSWs.

School system goals – while largely shaped by policy – are influenced by administration (Lige, 2021). This underscores the importance of having educational leaders at the helm that emphasize equitable and restorative practices SSWs (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). This is a crucial point because our perspectives of youth are often unconsciously guided by dominant ideology (Giroux, 2009) and may determine the goals of the school system (Crutchfield et al., 2020). As noted in the introduction, school-based problems, including the punitive reliance on discipline and surveillance may contort professional practice toward oppressive institutional goals under the guise of added safety and improved school climate (Kupchik, 2017). These aspects may appear auxiliary to

SSW practice; however, the goals and punitive orientation of schools may create an oppressive and alienating experience for youth – that may challenge the equitable practice orientation of SSWs (Mitchell & Greer, 2024). As corporate education reform (e.g., surveillance, testing) infiltrates schools, practices, and behaviors of professionals may shift in punitive ways, leading to the adultification of youth, where relationships are overshadowed by mechanisms that sustain fear and obedience (Giroux, 2009). In this environment, school-based goals cannot be successfully aimed at promoting relationships that are crucial for education and learning at all levels (Felton & Lambert, 2020; Milner IV, 2015). Collectively, these factors influence the advocacy and alienation of SSWs.

### **Advocacy and Alienation**

In theory, the field of social work emphasizes advocacy, notable in the profession’s ethical mandates (National Association of Social Workers, 2021), however, advocacy in practice may be limited by resource inequities, organizational goals, bureaucratic responsibilities, and dominant systems of control (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). In other words, SSW advocacy, at times, may be eclipsed by pressures to meet organizational goals, diminishing the advocacy for youth. SSW advocacy is shaped by ethical mandates, professional guidelines, education, and training to position social work as a “helping profession.” Lipsky (2010) noted: “The helping orientation of street-level bureaucrats is incompatible with their need to judge and control clients for bureaucratic purposes.” Thus, SSW practice may operate through an assumption of effectiveness. Scholars have pointed to an array of practice shortcomings, including ambiguous roles (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013), competition and lack of collaboration with SMHPs (Weist et al., 2012), and lack of macro-level focus on educational justice (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020).

Finally, due advocacy barriers, SSW alienation may occur as a natural byproduct (Lipsky, 2010). In school systems, the role of the teacher offers an example of this process. American culture is one of hostility toward teachers, where we see an undervalued role, privatization of service delivery, and underpaid, high teacher-to-student ratios, in combination with a neoliberal school system that demands ongoing testing and curriculum control (Chung, 2019). Collectively, these trends diminish teacher agency, limit discretionary action, minimize their advocating efforts, and ultimately shape their alienation – leading directly to a wave of educators leaving the profession. In the last two years, over 600,000 teachers have left the profession, citing concerns over diminishing autonomy, increased anxiety, and burnout (Mineo, 2022). Teacher alienation, role instability, and low wages may have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – but not caused – as economic, health, and food insecurity, and mental health challenges were increasing prior to the pandemic (Mate & Mate, 2022; Mitchell, 2021).

The alienation of SSWs could be noticed in a variety of practices, including fragmented practice (e.g., competing obligations), working in multiple schools, resource inequities, and the pace of work (Kelly et al., 2015). Alienation may be perpetuated by low autonomy and discretion, lack of SSW specialization in training and education, role ambiguity in the school, competing demands, and inconsistent resources and support (Mitchell et al., 2021). As bureaucratic barriers accrue, SSW practice may align with organizational goals and mechanisms to promote job security (Lipsky, 2010). Thus, advocacy and support for youth development and well-being may be diminished by the dominant forces that seek to instill neoliberal control (Greer et al., 2024).

## **Theoretical Framework Conclusion**

Often, we may turn to SSWs as the torch bearers of resistance, however, it is unclear the extent to which their roles reinforce systems of domination and oppression or support avenues of resistance and inclusion (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020). While it is crucial to better understand their role in the shifting landscape impacted by education censorship, it is equally important to understand how their role and the larger school environment is shaped by ongoing efforts of economic imperialism, and the mechanized aspects of elite capture and perceived polarization encapsulated in trends of high conflict. We cannot simply work to reform schools without understanding how divides are manufactured, illuminating what this process looks like, and to document the aspects of high conflict. Moving beyond divides must begin by showcasing how elites are constructing divides and sustaining them through portrayals of polarization and culture wars.

## **Literature Review**

For my dissertation, a confluence of mechanisms both in and outside of schools will be analyzed to understand the underpinnings of education censorship and its impacts on the practice of SSWs. To inform this work, I review literature across the domains of (a) education censorship, (b) network influence, (c) media and culture, (d) school board action, and (e) school social work practice. To begin, a review of the recent trends in education censorship will be provided, including an empirical summary and a timeline of key events. To follow, the literature review will be offered to zoom out on the supporting mechanisms of influence, including networks, media, and culture, to showcase the impact on local-level advocacy, and ultimately schools. This section concludes with a review of

SSW to consider the conglomerate impact of censorship and conceptualize mechanisms of advocacy, resistance, and justice-oriented practice.

Although these domains of literature will be independently reviewed; the cross-sectional overlap is significant, whereby censorship may be facilitated by collective influence. Therefore, in the literature review I aim to illuminate the trends of education censorship, the systems of oppression related to network influence, relevant aspects of media and culture, local-level action at school board meetings, and pre-existing educational conditions and inequities. This review of the literature is intended to situate the domains of influence that continue to shape education and schools across the country, however, historically far-reaching inequities (e.g., academic; disciplinary; resources) predate the development of education censorship. Although the pre-existing educational environment is not the primary focus of this research, however it is important context that may add to the effects of education censorship. Finally, additional information is provided in the appendices. Appendix A includes historical and contemporary racism in public education, including a historical view of inequities, culture wars, and curriculum censorship. Appendix B briefly reviews aspects of systemic oppression, including inequities, high-stakes testing structures, and punitive environments.

### **Education Censorship**

In 2010, Arizona passed HB2281 which banned historical curricula of Mexican Americans. This Arizona bill passed in a state with a substantial Hispanic/Latino(a) population of over 31% – eradicated inclusive history, an effort that may have propelled subsequent censorship attacks (Giroux, 2014). The benefits of exploring and learning about different cultural perspectives have been linked to higher levels of achievement and

inclusivity (Trumbull & Rothstein-Fisch, 2011). The lack of diversity representation poses barriers to equity in schools that are woefully underrepresented in their inclusive socialization and curricula (Milner IV, 2015). As progressive movements were steadily increasing, networks on the Right were solidifying their power toward increasing school governance (Bell, 2012; Saltman, 2015). Figure 2 provides an overview of important key events related to education censorship over the last two years.

### ***Education Censorship Timeline of Key Events***

The timeline (Figure 2) provides a snapshot beginning prior to the development of education censorship, including the influences of the 1619 project, the COVID-19 pandemic, and coalescing networks of influences shaping the movement backed by the political Right. There are many events that influenced our current structure before 2019, but the intent here is to convey the current movement and recent trends, contextualized by the preexisting educational landscape described in the remainder of the review.

In August 2019, the 1619 Project was published, which represented an important moment of repositioned narratives to understand the historical ramifications of slavery amid our current structure enmeshed with aspects of systemic racism. Returning to this date later on, as schools began implementing 1619-based curricula, and to an even greater extent after the racial reckoning movement in the spring of 2020. In January 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global COVID-19 pandemic. First, the outrage and resistance to vaccines, mask mandates, and school closures was widespread and curiously inflamed by the media discourse on the political Right (Jen et al., 2021). Relevant to this timeline is Klein's (2007) concept of "shock doctrine" – which underscored how social or geographical disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina) are leveraged into a political tool for

economic domination (Henry & Dixon, 2016). In the case of the pandemic, fear was leveraged by corporate interests in educational privatization through sensationalized narratives of learning loss (Mitchell & Greer, 2022) and reinforced by divisive media narratives. As academic concerns were prioritized, mask mandates and school closures were weaponized by the political Right leading to local level resistance and backlash at school board meetings (Jen et al., 2021). Collectively, these pandemic fears were then catalyzed and transitioned into anti-woke and CRT hostility (López et al., 2021).

Second – amid the pandemic – were two gruesome murders in the police-involved killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. These tragic events led to an increasing focus on education about interpersonal and systemic racism as observed in the national media and among local community activists and policy makers (Durham, 2022). Consistent with historical patterns of backlash against progressive movements (Zimmerman, 2022), this systemic realignment was met with widespread legislative attempts to restrict access to information about historical and contemporary forms of racism, and other forms of oppression (López et al., 2021). As awareness increasingly shifted toward systemic racism, critique of progressive education reform unfolded.

### ***Anti-Critical Race Theory***

Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo is often credited with galvanizing the censorship movement through ideological attacks on CRT (Joyce, 2022b). Rufo has credited James Lindsay for the theoretical basis of his work and ongoing strategies, as noted in Joyce (2022b) for “translating the theory into the realm of practical politics and then translating this kind of esoteric knowledge that school moms and school dads can use at school board meetings and hammer their school boards with.” Although Rufo has

both organizational and individual ties to other actors involved in shaping and perpetuating the education censorship movement, Rufo largely represents the face of the movement – especially in the mainstream media.

Rufo’s influence has been driven by his self-proclaimed “investigative contributions” and publications in the New York Post, City Journal, the Wall Street Journal, and live television appearances (ALEC, 2021). In August 2020, Rufo appeared on Tucker Carlson Tonight where he was highly critical of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) training in the federal government, taking umbrage with “segregated” training sessions (i.e., white and Black groups) and notions of white supremacy, victimhood, privilege, and fragility (Garcia, 2020). Rufo called on President Trump to intervene, Kiernan (2020) confirmed: “White House chief of staff Mark Meadows called Mr. Rufo the morning after the TV program and asked him to share his findings, saying President Trump had watched it, a person familiar with the matter said.” A month later in September, President Trump signed Executive Order #13950 – Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping – imposing barriers on federal DEI training (White House, 2020).

By December 2020, network influences were in full effect, notable in the anti-CRT workshop hosted by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC; 2021) – offering advice to push back against the perceived attacks on white Americans. To galvanize the local movement, Moms for Liberty, 501(c)(4) formed in January 2021 – an anti-CRT school board advocacy group working to upend equity-based initiatives in schools (Joyce, 2022a). By April 2021, Idaho HB 377 passed – becoming the first in a flurry of curriculum censorship bills.

This timeline of key events helps to shed light on three important aspects. First, critique on the political Right began, as stewarded by Christopher Rufo and with respect to DEI training in federal government before evolving to anti-CRT discourse – this point was confirmed during a workshop hosted by the American Legislative Exchange Group (ALEC; 2021). Second, the movement on the political Right shifted from the government sphere to education through a refined and expanded critique – a change stewarded by Rufo. As Allen (2022) emphasized, CRT has been increasingly linked (conflated) with at least 88 concepts and terms. This expansive conflation of CRT underscores how the movement may represent bad-faith actors that are engineering self-serving interests (e.g., efforts to undermine public schools). Third, the sensationalized work of Christopher Rufo may be intentionally overblown – masking the influence of conservative network forces involved in the anti-CRT movement (Joyce, 2022a). To be clear, Rufo – funded by the Manhattan Institute – has been a significant contributor in the education censorship movement, however the sustainability of education censorship is maintained through a vast network of actors, organizations, and media support (Cunningham, 2022). Because Rufo represents the face of the movement it may be useful to explore the prevalence of state level education censorship policies in concert with a review of articles written by Rufo. The coordinated attacks on public education and human rights are largely being produced outside of schools and reinforced by a network of influential actors.

### ***Education Censorship Empirical Summary***

Several organizations (e.g., Pen America; Human Rights Campaign) are working to provide ongoing updates regarding the prevalence and scope of education censorship, however limited empirical data exists. Broadly we know several factors. First, education

ensorship began with race/diversity curricula bans – the primary target of analysis in this paper – but we still know very little about the overall content and impact of these state legislative bans. Kelly and colleagues (2023) reported preliminary findings in a *Rethinking Schools* article showing increased teacher fear, concerns over curriculum restrictions, worries of job security, and responses to censorship policies such as self-imposed censorship and curricula constraints. Second, as the movement shifted from anti-CRT to anti-LGBTQ+, additional policies were proposed and passed, much of which is evolving and ongoing. Thus far, legislators have imposed bans on gender-affirming health care in 18 states, and similar legislation proposed in another 12 states (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). Trans youth have endured bans from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity in 21 states (Movement Advancement Project, 2023a), state level prohibitions on trans youth utilizing restroom facilities (e.g., lockers; changing rooms; bathrooms) that align with their gender identity, and an additional 474 anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced this year alone (ACLU, 2023). Discursive criticism has evolved to encompass progressive frameworks such as social-emotional learning, with NPR noting: “evidence of disputes specifically concerning social-emotional learning in at least 25 states,” due to purported connections to CRT (Anderson, 2022). Additional legislation is aimed at institutions of higher education, with bills proposed in at least 34 states targeting limitations or removal of DEI (Lu et al., 2023).

Scholarly explanations of education censorship, include the conceptualization of anti-CRT discourse as a conservative bogeyman (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), or “minoritarian rule” achieved through intense vilification of the Other (Ferris & Robbins, 2023). Henry and colleagues (2023) understand education censorship as a form of “white

epistemological capture” reifying decades of white domination, power, and systemic racism. Conservative curricula explanations have also emerged, as we are beginning to see the implementation of new American and neoliberal based curricula (e.g., Hillsdale 1776) and alternative forms of educational content that circumvents curriculum accreditation standards (e.g., PragerU; Green, 2023). Several gaps in the literature remain, including a need to analyze and understand: (a) the legislative content of education censorship, (b) to what extent the media has supported or influenced these trends, (c) the impact on school boards, and (d) school-based impact of censorship and the support and advocacy of school social workers. As the macro trends emerged to enact censorship on the state level, local level advocacy was administered through the breadth of network influences, most notable in the local level books bans.

### ***Book Bans***

Pen America (2022) detailed over 1,586 books that have been banned from classrooms and libraries. The number of attempts, 729, to ban books in libraries in 2021 was the largest number banned since 2000, when the American Library Association started tracking this data (American Libraries Association, 2022a). Of those, 41% include main or secondary characters who are Black, Indigenous, or persons of color and 22% of the titles are directly related to racism (Pen America, 2022). Moreover, the number of attempts to ban books in libraries in 2022 was on pace to exceed this number as of August 31, 2022, at which point 681 attempts had been made in the year (American Libraries Association, 2022b). Importantly, the increase in education censorship runs contrary to the will of parents. For example, a recent study found that of parents who were also voters, 87% supported teaching about the civil rights movement, 86% about the

history and experiences of Native Americans, 74% about slavery, and 73% about racial inequity in U.S. history in schools (Campaign for Our Shared Future, 2021).

Furthermore, the burgeoning influence networks have supported education censorship and book bans (Bell, 2012).

## **Networks**

The network society – corporations, non-profits, foundations, politicians, and media representatives – has most recently united conservative, religious, capitalistic ideological pursuits toward education censorship (Joyce, 2022a). The convergence of networks across a range of actors and organizations can be useful for masking power, propelling advocacy, and developing governance of educational policies and school functionality in K-12 schools and higher education (Ball, 2012; Banks, 2020). The network of actors and organizations across the corporate-political-media sphere has impacted education in a variety of ways, including through the privatization of educational services, including curriculum, textbooks, staff and teachers, (i.e., Teach for America); schools (i.e., vouchers, charter schools), and the global education reform movement and testing paradigm, including the Programme for International Student Assessment (Giroux, 2022; Lafer, 2017; McLaren, 2015; Ross, 2017; Saltman, 2015). Often at the top of the network, writing and shaping policy reform is the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) – where coalitions are built to unite organizations, including think tanks (e.g., Heritage Foundation; Manhattan Institute) and corporate foundations on both sides of the political spectrum (e.g., the Chan-Zuckerberg Foundation; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation; Kovacs, 2010; Saltman, 2022). Once ALEC constructs an ideological movement, it often

activates ancillary connections, including think-tanks, national organizations, and local organizing efforts. For example, Moms for Liberty, which has been linked to the Heritage Foundation, is a parental rights organization founded on January 1, 2021, by former Florida school board members to organize and advocate for greater parental control over the curriculum in K-12 schools and COVID-19 related risk mitigation strategies. Moms for Liberty has garnered 100,000 members, with 167 chapters across 30 states (Roche, 2021). Of the approximately 300 currently operating local organizations dedicated to education censorship and banning books currently in existence in the U.S., more than 70% were created in 2021 (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). As evidenced by the large number of state and local policies introduced and passed related to education censorship, the corporate-conservative political-media network has significantly restricted equity-based reform in schools. This situation exemplifies how the role of SSWs can be impacted by national events, which is important in the context of their ethical mandates which clarify the goals of SSWs to: “enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 2021).

### **Networks and School Governance**

Beyond influencing education censorship-related policies directly, the corporate-conservative political-media network has influenced education censorship indirectly by facilitating greater privatization of both schools themselves and metrics through which schools are deemed as successful, both of which create environments conducive to school censorship. Specifically, since 1965, the standards and accountability paradigm – driven through decades of evolving support, corporate and bipartisan political influence (Lafer,

2017) – has demanded an ideological shift toward efficiency, data-based, testing, and corporate driven reform and interventions, transforming schools to governmental control (Kumashiro, 2020). Bipartisan political support has greatly validated this major reconfiguration of educational structures (Mahta, 2013). These shifts have led to the corporate takeover of public-school systems, notable in cities such as New Orleans, Chicago, New York, Detroit, and across the United States (Garrison, 2009; Saltman, 2010; Klein, 2007). Saltman (2022) noted the convergence of data-based privatization, social-emotional learning, automated data systems, and the entrenchment with corporate and media influences. The increasing complexity of education censorship and network influence is confounded by the mainstream media (Cook, 1998), where financially-based marketing strategies shape the news, leading outlets to rely on “culture war” narratives, and fueling sensationalized and divisive discourse (Yourish et al., 2022).

### **Media and Culture**

The recent wave of educational censorship has been greatly supported by the media, most notable in the attacks on CRT, the 1619 project, systemic racism, and wokeness (López et al., 2021; McWhorter, 2021). Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo has been a leader in the anti-CRT movement, relying heavily on media support. In August 2020, Rufo spoke out against CRT on Tucker Carlson Tonight (Garcia, 2020) – the most widely watched television news program of all time (Giroux, 2022). Rufo was highly critical of federal diversity and inclusion training, taking umbrage to segregated training sessions (e.g., White and Black groups), notions of white supremacy, victimhood, privilege, and fragility (ALEC, 2021; Rufo, 2021). Rufo (2021) criticized the Federal Treasury for a training session that conveyed: “virtually all White people

contribute to racism.” President Trump was quick to advance Rufo’s investigative work by signing Executive Order 13950 (2020) Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping. By 2021, Rufo tweeted on the progress of conservative attacks:

We have successfully frozen their brand – “critical race theory” – into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category... The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think [of] “critical race theory ”

The diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) attacks advanced by Rufo were supported by the media narratives which showcased the hypocrisy of corporate trends associated with stakeholder capitalism – an idea that business’ in a contemporary society must do more than advance profits above all else, such as by attending to ethical responsibilities and employee well-being (Kolhatkar, 2022). Fox News hosted interviews with business leaders such as Vivek Ramaswamy – the founder of Anti-Woke. In his recent book (Ramaswamy, 2021) he embraced the critique of corporations as they advanced DEI efforts as a guise for profit expansion (Kolhatkar, 2022). In all of this conservative media critique is an undercurrent of sensationalism and fear used to captivate viewers on a nightly basis (see Yourish et al., 2022).

By April 2021, Idaho HB 377 codified the first in the contemporary wave of education censorship legislation in response to the well-rounded attacks on “divisive concepts” and CRT. This synopsis sheds light on three important aspects. First, the critique of CRT began with respect to the DEI federal government training – a point boasted about during an anti-CRT workshop (ALEC, 2021). Second, the advances in

conservative attacks shifted from the government to education. Third, sensationalizing the work of Christopher Rufo may be intentionally overblown – masking the deepening influence of network forces (Joyce, 2022).

Corollary attacks followed suit, including from public intellectual John McWhorter (2021) and his book, *Woke Racism* – published in October – where he equated progressive ideology, including antiracism and white fragility with the transgressions of a religious cult. The next month, Nikole Hannah-Jones’ 1619 Project was published by the New York Times – a radically inclusive effort to improve historical honesty and cultural responsiveness. Public scrutiny against the 1619 project was widespread, including from economic historians (Magness, 2020) and media pundits (López et al., 2021). The emerging critique of progressive ideology, including “antiracism,” “whiteness,” “privilege,” and “white fragility,” may suggest the lack of inclusivity in these frameworks (Ramaswamy, 2021) and the potential alienation of white populations (Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019). For example, Ibram X. Kendi’s (2019) antiracism articulated a dichotomized position of individuals being either: “antiracist” or “racist” – downplaying the opportunity for human development (McWhorter, 2021).

On the liberal side of the debate, these frameworks attempt to underscore the decades of inequities facing racially minoritized communities by offering new terminology to better understand the effects of systemic racism as shaped by a myriad of historical, structural, institutional, and individual level inequities (Radd et al., 2021). Many argue that these frameworks of inclusivity are crucial for schools to move toward an equitable re-alignment (Ladson-Billings, 2021) and are not utilized in K-12 schools (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Thus, the question for progressive liberals is whether these

trends clearly articulate a path forward toward solution-based reform and unity or are potentially adding to the divisiveness and political divides. Many on the liberal side argue that the attacks on CRT are blown out of proportion and often misinterpret the theoretical framework (López et al., 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021).

Additionally problematic – as noted in the introduction – is how academic scholarship and the bipartisan media influence may be perpetuating “culture war” narratives, alongside the trends of “cancel culture” which depict a society with only two competing political standpoints (Hunter, 1992; Nolan, 1996; Zimmerman, 2022). Notably, the media is very much in the hands of corporate control with only six companies controlling over 90% of all media (Giroux, 2014). At the same time, wealthy elite – billionaires – are buying up control of news services across the globe and eliminating local news (Giroux, 2022). The media greatly supports the arguments on both sides – depending on which form of news you obtain – fueling divisiveness through sensationalized narratives of culture wars (Yourish et al., 2022). The reach of national discourses related to education censorship may leverage influence in communities and at school boards through increased pressure from parents to enact specific policies.

### **School Board Influence**

School board meetings have become a key avenue for mechanizing the influence of corporate-conservative political-media networks. The first step in this process is funding school board elections. The Trump administration strongly encouraged Right leaning political groups to organize around school board control to “save the nation” (Mooney, 2022; Zimmerman, 2022). In response, conservative financial support for school board elections has crested (Atterbury, 2022). In recent years, dark money

operatives, such as 501(c)(4) (i.e., social welfare organizations) and Super PACs have poured money into school board elections in the hope of flipping them toward conservative control (Mansfield & Jimenez, 2022). In Texas, the Christian conservative wireless provider Patriot Mobile financed the elections of 11 recent school board members across four districts (Mooney, 2022). A primary example is 1776 Project PAC, with their mission statement:

“We are a political action committee dedicated to electing school board members nationwide who want to reform our public education system by promoting patriotism and pride in American history. We are committed to abolishing critical race theory and ‘The 1619 Project’ from the public school curriculum” (1776 Project PAC, 2022).

Mansfield & Jimenez (2022) reviewed the 1776 Project PAC’s support and opposition of school board candidates in dozens of states. In an analysis of 400 school board elections in 2022, candidates often campaigned on “conflict issues,” such as COVID-19, race/CRT, and sex and gender (Kronaizl, 2022). Findings point to the lack of public support for topics that have been most often rallied against and emphasized in the mainstream media. For example, school board candidates supporting race equity and diversity plans won 41% of elections compared to 30% for the candidates with an opposing stance, and 19% won their election with unclear stances (Kronaizl, 2022). However, these numbers appear to be closing from the previous year statistics (56% support; 30% opposed; 14% unclear), which could point to the growing influence of network influence and local advocacy. Meanwhile, discussions of race in education were emphasized in 108 district elections and 258 seats (Kronaizl, 2022). While the outrage

and contention at school board meetings may look like a majority movement in the mainstream media – it is far from it. Dark money is a critical force in fueling divisiveness (Ravitch, 2021).

Republican politicians, dark money networks, and local advocacy groups have worked together to create upheaval at school board meetings, often reinforced by polarizing media narratives. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2020) turned out to be a key moment in the timeline of education censorship. The corporate-conservative political-media network leveraged unity to create upheaval at school board meetings, often reinforced by polarizing media narratives (Ravitch, 2021). Narratives surrounding school-based mask mandates were co-opted by conservatives, legislators, and media pundits, and repositioned as attacks on civil liberties, rallying advocacy groups to disrupt school boards. This is important because it wasn't until the summer of 2021 that school closures and mask mandates emerged – with an undercurrent of anti-CRT rhetoric simultaneously rising (Wong, 2021). The National School Board Association executive director calls the level of engagement and anger at school board meetings “unprecedented” (Wong, 2021). In several regions, key state leaders were instrumental in fueling fear-based discourse and rallying local advocacy groups.

### ***Political Support***

Republican politicians at the state level, including Governor DeSantis (Florida) and Governor Abbott (Texas) reconfigured the mask mandates as a political opportunity – threatening school districts with lawsuits and withholding salaries from school board members. In Virginia, Glenn Youngkin leveraged anti-CRT and anti-masks discourse to support his campaign – eventually winning an extremely tight race for Virginia

Governor. The rising contention with protests and hostility spread across the nation in states including, but not limited to, Alaska, Florida, Michigan, Oregon, Pennsylvania Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin. School board members have been receiving death threats and have been leaving the profession over safety concerns (Wong, 2021). Yet, as much as this movement and uproar at school boards appears to be locally rooted it has largely been funded by corporate interests and dark money (Ravitch, 2021).

### **The Guise of “Local Support”**

One way to observe the lack of localized roots related to education censorship and attacks on school board meetings is noted in the evolution of contested topics. In only two years, debates have moved from anti-CRT to mask mandates, back to anti-CRT, and more recently to social-emotional learning, equity, wokeness, and diversity and gender studies. The influence of the corporate-conservative political-media network has been sustained through an evolving list of attacks. For instance, the 501(c)(3) Parents Defending Education – noted by Cunningham (2021) as a billionaire funded privatization org – stakes claim as a “national grassroots organization fighting indoctrination in the classroom,” and hosts a well-developed media presence, showcased by their “IndoctriNation Map” (Parents Defending Education, 2022). Their map lists “incidents” in schools where resistance should be aimed, noting “problems” in all 50 states. They track school-based developments of inclusion, equity, anti-racism, and identify forthcoming policies to push back against. The data is often falsely represented to facilitate contention at school board meetings. For example, in Michigan, the “IndoctriNation Map” notes forthcoming anti-racist policies in West Bloomfield, and the addition of “anti-racist” books (i.e., Paulo Freire) in Mason public schools. However,

these initiatives are over two years old but are categorized as forthcoming events in 2023. The indoctrination map (see Figure 3) is filled with misrepresented data, with data points in dozens of states listing “2023” issues regarding policies and changes that have already occurred in these school districts (Parents Defending Education, 2022). The abundance of misrepresented data runs concurrent with the politicians and the mainstream media’s sensationalized reporting efforts (Yourish et al., 2022). Cunningham (2021) noted the three major “local orgs” attacking school boards funded by corporations, including No Left Turn in Education, Moms for Liberty, and Parents Defending Education – none of these agencies have achieved non-profit status from the IRS. The misrepresented data may signal a longitudinal movement, part of an agenda to attack school board meetings, and promote fear and hostility over the everyday practices in public school systems (Ravitch, 2021). Fear motivates political voting, undermines, and eradicates trust of public education, and perpetuates movement to charter and parochial schools.

### ***Local Impact***

The impact of school board censorship-focused activism has been multifaceted, most notable in the prevalence of book bans and resistance against equity, anti-racism, sex, gender, and diversity inclusion policies. In Michigan – a geographic region that has circumvented state level censorship policies, however, the Traverse City School District proposed an anti-racist policy which was met with widespread community resistance at school board meetings, leading to multiple policy revisions and the removal of all six action steps on the anti-racist policy (Milligan, 2021). Community concerns were most notably against CRT, Marxism, indoctrination, and all the consistent buzzwords positioned in the conservative mainstream media discourse (Natanson, 2021; Yourish et

al., 2022). In Florida, 54 math textbooks were banned due to the connections to CRT (e.g., implicit bias) and social-emotional learning (Luscombe, 2022). Governor Youngkin has been linked to these changes, as the one remaining math book is owned by Accelerate Learning, a subsidiary of the Carlyle Group – owned by former CEO, Youngkin (Kennedy, 2022). These examples illuminate the relationship between education censorship and political financial gain. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the latest in the conservative attacks – likely due to the framework’s emphasis on identity, culture, inclusivity, and youth development (Meckler et al., 2022). With this overview of education censorship, including book banning trends, network influence, the role of media and culture, and school board action, it may be useful to move inside the school to understand the environment impacted by the rising trends of oppression. The attacks on SEL are significant for the future role and viability of SSWs, as a large part of their role and training is being re-positioned around SEL (Massat & Kelly, 2015; McGee et al., 2022). As SEL attacks ensue, SSW may be linked as an indoctrinating profession and may undermine their mechanisms of support in schools.

Furthermore, schools lie in the valley of this conglomerate and omnipresent influence of networks, policies, media discourse, and school board contention. School social work practitioners may be impacted by these trends of education censorship as practice obligations may be altered, and as youth and school systems are forced to navigate these oppressive trends. Conversely, education censorship may also pose an opportunity for a re-alignment toward justice-oriented SSW.

## **School Social Work**

The practice of SSW is heavily influenced by school organizational structures and policies (Germain, 2006; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2018). Scholars have illuminated the utility of SSWs, noting influence across all levels of the schools, including students, teachers, school procedures and processes (Badillo-Diaz, 2022). Crutchfield & Eugene (2022) underscored the potential negative impact of curriculum censorship on the racial climate of schools, which may challenge the equity-based work of SSWs. They highlighted the need for SSWs to work across multiple levels, including policy advocacy, leadership, and structural efforts toward improving school climate and racial inclusion (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). However, a recent study of 112 SSWs found that they were engaged to a very limited extent in educational justice, particularly at the macro-level (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020). While this may appear as a current shortcoming to SSW practice, the opportunity for an equitable re-alignment may be more obtainable especially in the throes of rising trends of education censorship. Before exploring an opportunity for SSW reform, a review of practice limitations may be useful.

### ***SSW: Limitations of Practice***

Roles and practice obligations of SSWs are varied and influenced greatly by state and district policies, as well as educational and training components (Frey et al., 2022). School-based mental health providers (SMHPs) – psychologists, school counselors, school nurses, and SSWs – face an array of professional and school-based challenges. For example, underfunding, underemployment, high caseloads, role ambiguity, and professional competition all confound the practice of SMHPs throughout the school system (Kelly et al., 2023). SSWs are the most under-employed of the professional

domains, with the highest caseloads, and often work in multiple schools (Mann et al., 2019; Thompson & Frey, 2021). In addition, SSW is hampered by varied state certification standards, much lower than other SMHPs (Altshuler & Webb, 2009).

Mitchell and colleagues (2021) reported on state certification standards of SMHPs and found very consistent standards for counseling and psychology, with all 50 states requiring master's level degrees. For SSW, only 32 states require master's level education, 13 require SSW specialization programs, and a handful of states have yet to define policy requirements. Certification standards are but one area that influences SSW practice, but it may also impact the hiring practices of school administrators (Frey et al., 2022), especially as role ambiguity ensues, and clear divisions across SMHP are notable in state certification requirements, education and practicum standards, and evaluation components (Phillippo & Blosser, 2013).

As competition between SMHPs ensues (Weist et al. 2012), and state certification standards undermine the value, utility, and hiring of SSWs (Mitchell et al., 2021), the variations in how they may respond to education censorship is quite unclear (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). For example, as the theoretical framework of street-level bureaucracy alludes to, SSWs may work to ensure the organizational goals are achieved and reinforce mechanisms of control (Lipsky, 2010). Meanwhile, as the education and training of SSWs is widely inconsistent, disconnected from structurally-oriented practice and policy work (Crutchfield et al., 2020), more research is needed to understand the values, beliefs, perspectives, and practices of SSWs (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020). Given the ecological and structural orientation (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022) and ethical mandates of inclusion and justice (Teasley & Richard, 2017), the SSW may be well positioned to advocate for

equity. As Ball & Skrzypek (2020) point out, SSWs often have a strong desire for justice-oriented practice, but more work is needed to unearth the obstacles to equitable practice.

### ***SSW: Opportunities for Re-alignment Toward Justice-Oriented Practice***

Recently, the American Council for School Social Work (2019) reaffirmed the role of SSW to justice-oriented practice. In addition, the scholarly focus on SSW has increased in substantial detail with advocacy and support toward increased efforts of justice, equity, and inclusion. Notably, scholarship has positioned SSW to effectively boost support in times of crisis (Phillippo et al., 2022), emphasize preventative multi-tiered frameworks (Avant, 2016), care for youth mental health needs (Kelly et al., 2023), employ equity, justice, and structural support (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022; Richard et al., 2019), boost frameworks of restorative justice (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022), attend to intersectional, trauma and culturally informed frameworks (Joseph et al., 2021), as well as working in leadership and administrative roles (Lige, 2021; Teasley & Richard, 2017). The impact of education censorship on SSW is unknown.

### **Literature Review Conclusion and Conceptual Model of Education Censorship**

Figure 4 highlights the complexity of relationships that are fundamental to creating and sustaining forces undergirding the education censorship movement. An example of economic imperialism is manifest in the presence of the corporate-conservative political-media networks – where corporations, think-tanks, and neo-philanthropic organizations create policy agendas and establish a vast network of relationships toward action and implementation (Joyce, 2022a). As the elite networks set a policy agenda – in this case censorship – the media is influenced (a) by mechanisms of

elite capture as a byproduct of economic imperialism, and (b) mechanisms of high conflict that are intertwined with elite capture. For example, network influences aided in the development of education censorship bill in Idaho HB 377 which spurred “local movements” (e.g., Moms for Liberty) and attacks on school boards. Local organizations and advocacy may be funded by dark money operatives, used to engineer a “local movement” and mask the dominant conservative agenda (Cunningham, 2022). Concurrently, the media and conservative discourse perpetuates and sustains fear (Ravitch, 2021). The media’s role is critical for providing a platform for oppressive discourse, igniting sensationalized narratives, and sustaining the movement (Yourish et al., 2022). Once forms of education censorship infiltrate the school system, school social workers are often reinforcing mechanisms of the status quo, rather than advocates or sources of resistance to the ensuing policies. Collectively, education censorship may be mechanized through five levels: (1) networks, (2) politics, (3) local organizations, (4) media, and (5) school boards. Schools experience the output of all five levels, impacting youth and the potential for justice-oriented SSW practice (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). Once schools are impacted, they may be overloaded by the depth and scope of this influence of the corporate-conservative political-media network (see Figure 4).

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to gain a deep understanding of the macro to micro level influences of education censorship, including the relationships across enacted policies, media discourse, school board public comments, and school social work practice. This domains of exploration are operationalized by the following aims: (1) examine the scope and prevalence of the education censorship legislation, (2) analyze the

media influence amid the paradigm of education censorship, (3) illuminate the relationship between school board public comments, education censorship and media influence, and (4) understand the impact on schools and school social worker practice in order to re-imagine mechanisms of support, advocacy, and healing. These aims are explicated in Table 1 alongside the research questions for each study.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### METHODOLOGY

To fulfill the aims of this dissertation, a mixed method design is leveraged across four distinct studies operationalized by critical discourse techniques. **Study 1** is a two-phase study, including *phase one*: review of state level education censorship policies enacted between 2021-2022, and *phase two*: juxtaposed analysis with media discourse on the political Right. **Study 2** includes a national study of news media discourse across politically divergent newspaper outlets to examine how narratives of education censorship are represented. **Study 3** includes a two-phase study with *phase one*: an analysis of public comments at school board in Michigan and *phase two*: juxtaposed analysis with discourse on the political Right guiding advocacy and resistance against critical race theory and school board contention. **Study 4** examines the impact on schools through interviews with school social workers. Although each study is guided by unique methodology, Fairclough's (2013) exploratory critique is the overarching method to unify all four studies. Collectively, this dissertation moves from macro to micro levels to understand the predominance of network influences, scope of education censorship policies, influence and divergence of media narratives, and the impact on school board sessions, and school practices, including the potential of justice-oriented practice of SSWs. Herein, all four studies are described at length.

## **Study 1: A Review of Education Censorship in 2021-22: State Level Policies and Media Discourse on the Political Right**

The purpose of this study was threefold: (1) document the nature of the education censorship legislations, (2) examine commonalities in language and discourse between the legislation and key leaders on the political Right (i.e., Christopher Rufo), and (3) analyze the terms and ideas common to the legislation and talking points on the political Right. First, in *phase one*, all fifty U.S. states were reviewed to examine education censorship, policies enacted between 2020 and 2021 across all fifty U.S. states. Second, in *phase two*, I analyzed education censorship discourse on the political Right associated with Christopher Rufo spanning one year prior to the first state level policy passed (Idaho HB 377; April 2021). Findings are theoretically contextualized to assess any overlap congruence of legislative content with discourse on the political Right.

### **Study 1 Methodology**

Building upon the background literature and theoretical framework detailed above, critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 2013) was operationalized to understand: (a) the landscape of state level education censorship policies, (b) the origins of media discourse on the political Right, and the discursive relationship with education censorship legislation, and (c) the analytical relationship with mechanisms of elite capture. The analytical focus on both education censorship policies and media discourse helped attend to a dialectical-relational approach with an emphasis on language and meaning-making (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). As Stuart Hall (1992) stated: “discourse may act as a system or regime of representation.” That said, all regimes of representation have a place in origin, where networks move outward from and transpire through influential

nodes (Ball et al., 2017). CDA helps to understand discursive meaning-making by relating language to a range of important contextual, historical, social, and cultural factors (Dunn & Neumann, 2017). Through the identification of the complete discursive picture, proposed avenues of resistance, advocacy, and support (e.g., school social work) can be developed to address education censorship (Leotti et al., 2021). Resistance discourse is built upon the analysis that attends to language and power that is socially shaped and socially shaping discourse, and relational contexts (Fairclough, 1995).

### **Empirical Materials and Selection**

This study was operationalized by two phases of analysis. *Phase one* includes an analysis of state level education censorship policies enacted in 2021 and 2022 across all fifty U.S. states. LegiScan was utilized to gather state legislation, ALEC Exposed was used to assess affiliations of legislators with the lobbying group ALEC, and MaxQDA to complete the stages of analysis. Both LegiScan and ALEC Exposed are independent, non-profit organizations with the former focused on providing legislative updates and the latter covering government corruption. *Phase two* – to inform and contextualize the analysis of state education censorship policies – included a subsequent analysis of media discourse on the political Right to understand the developing critiques and map the relationships between education censorship legislation and media discourse. The inclusion criteria – April 2020 - December 2022 – predated the first state level education censorship legislation passed (Idaho HB 377) by one year and runs through 2022.

Additional support for the selection of empirical materials was justified by the following criteria. First, the origins of education censorship are linked to republican politicians, thus making the case for the influence and analysis of media discourse on the

political-Right (Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Second, the anti-CRT movement which evolved into education censorship discourse was most prominently linked to the conservative think tank the Manhattan Institute and more specifically, fellow Christopher Rufo. Third, as noted in the introduction, former President Trump was directly influenced by Rufo, leading to the enactment of Executive Order 13950 and the foundation for future state level censorship policies. Fourth, given the stated influences of Rufo (Joyce, 2022a), analysis in phase two attended to the articles published on his personal website (Rufo, 2023). Finally, given the notable media presence of Rufo on television (e.g., Fox News) and widespread circulation of articles (e.g., Wall Street Journal; City Journal; NY Post) – his personal website was used to gather articles prior to the circulation and distribution in the mainstream media. The empirical materials selected for education policy related to censorship and media discourse (see Table 7) associated with Christopher Rufo articles on his website. The media analysis included ( $n = 24$ ) articles written by Rufo spanning from July 8, 2020 - to April 27, 2021. Herein, the steps of the analytical process are outlined amid the model of explanatory critique (Fairclough, 2013).

### **Explanatory Critique**

Fairclough (2013) outlined four stages of explanatory critique: (a) focus on the social wrong, (b) identify obstacles to addressing social wrong, (c) consider whether the social order needs the social wrong, and (d) identify possible ways past the obstacles. All four stages were adapted for this study and are described at length below, including stage one – research design, stage two – analysis, stage three – theory, and stage four – interpretive summary (Figure 5).

### ***Stage 1: Focus upon a social wrong***

As reviewed in the introduction and theoretical sections, education censorship was posited as having a wide range of effects on youth and educators in school systems and society (Kelly et al., 2023). Censorship can be usefully understood as a social wrong (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) where analysis and proposed rectification are needed (Leotti et al., 2021). Education censorship appears but a manifestation of a deeper social wrong that relates to the increasing power and control of network influences (Ball et al., 2017), media conglomerates (Giroux, 2022; Wallace, 1993), and dominant systems of oppression (Collins, 2019). Therefore, analysis aimed to contextualize education censorship policies by the emerging network and media influences.

### ***Stage 2: Identify obstacles to addressing social wrong***

Stage 2 began with an in-depth analysis to understand the developing obstacles of censorship. Thus, the literature review was useful to contextualize the influencers and networks related to education censorship, as well as the preexisting, cultural, social, and educational inequities that preclude the recent oppressive trends (Irby, 2021). Although this study focuses on state level policies and media discourse, the context extends well-beyond merely an analysis of legislation, to consider the dialectical-relational aspects to educational pre-conditions (Rogers, 2017). For example, school-based challenges and longstanding inequities include resource disparities (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), over-reliance on exclusionary discipline (Skiba et al., 2016), training and pedagogical norms and biases (Matias, 2016), curriculum contention (Ross, 2017), and experiences of alienation that youth may endure (Allen, 2017; Love & Beneke, 2021; Neal-Jackson, 2020). As the background literature alludes to, the predominance of network influence

(Joyce, 2022a) may be a major factor in overcoming education censorship. Thus, to attend to education censorship and network influences, both policies and media discourse was included in the phases of analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with the critical discourse standard of double reading – all legislative documents and Rufo articles were read on four occasions. In the first reading, line-by-line coding combined with a detailed process of notes and memos. After a basic understanding of the texts and documentation of legislative findings, a second reading was undertaken. Moving from initial codes to emergent and thematic categorization, the second reading helped to move to hierarchical and deconstructive analysis (Dunn & Neuman, 2016) to assess relationships and connections across texts (intertextuality) and ongoing coding consolidation. After two readings, the analysis of legislation and Rufo articles were juxtaposed for a third analytical pass to explore intertextual relationships (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) across policy and Rufo discourse. Finally, a fourth reading was used to gather a summative and composite intertextual understanding across texts.

### ***Stage 3: Consider whether the social order needs the social wrong***

After a detailed analysis of education censorship policies as contextualized by media discourse, stage three moved to theoretical explanations for the existence of education censorship. In other words, what actors, elites, organizations, and schools benefit from such initiatives of censorship? Stage three was useful to explicate power orientations in schools such as high-stakes testing, corporate reform efforts, and trends in business-based education (Lipman, 2013) to assess how censorship ultimately works to maintain the status quo. As public schools are potentially undermined by the discourse

and implications of education censorship, stage three helped to underscore how eroding trust in public schools may both literally and metaphorically illuminate pathways to increased corporate power and charter school privatization (Giroux, 2022).

***Stage 4: Identity possible ways past the obstacles***

After an extended analysis and contextual examination, stage four helped to shift toward imagining and proposing avenues of reform, resistance, and advocacy, such as federal policy interventions or SSW reform. Stage four helped to orient and articulate the concluding aspects of the paper, including the results, discussion, and implications sections. Furthermore, stages three and four are also foregrounded throughout the previous stage of analysis. In other words, considering obstacles to reform and proposing alternatives was constantly reflected upon, whereby motives for inclusive social change drove all stages of the research and analysis.

**Study 2: Education Censorship: An Analysis of Mainstream News Discourse**

As important as it to understand the mechanisms of oppression embedded in the education censorship movement, we must also examine how social divides are maintained through mechanisms of othering (Ferris & Robbins, 2023) and culture war narratives (Zimmerman, 2022), to design solutions and inform coalition building frameworks (Ginwright, 2022; Táíwò, 2022). The purpose of this study was to explore the media influence amid the paradigm of education censorship. To do this, mainstream newspaper articles are examined to illuminate actors, organizations, discursive tactics, to help understand varied arguments and perspectives.

## **Study 2 Methodology**

As guided by the literature base and theoretical framework, critical discourse techniques are used for the methodological inquiry of this study (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Analysis was pursued in alignment with media analysis frameworks (Fairclough, 1995).

### **Empirical Materials and Selection**

Data was collected through several databases, including Nexi Uni, Newspaper Source, and search inquiries directly from two websites: the Wall Street Journal and New York Times. The inclusion criteria spanned August 2020 - December 2022 determined by two factors: (a) Christopher Rufo's first appearance on Fox News (August 2020) and (b) adherence with previous research on education censorship policies to utilize the same inclusion criteria that guided the analysis in study one. Data selection targeted mainstream newspaper articles with high readership (Statista, 2023), with search terms used to collect articles of relevance to the education censorship movement, including: "education" and "critical race theory." The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) and New York Times (NYT) – although both facing declining readership – are the most circulated and most read newspapers in the U.S. Further, the focus on national news was also intended to indirectly consider a shift in the diminishing local media presence and rise of corporatized news sources (Giroux, 2022). With the diminishing availability of local news, mainstream news conglomerates may become more powerful, leading to a likelihood that more readers may peruse or receive news from national newspapers sources such as the WSJ and NYT.

Initially, 279 articles were selected that met substantive content criteria – more than one paragraph in the article related to the research inquiry – with 177 articles

excluded that failed to meet the substantive content requirement. The total sample of newspaper articles ( $n = 102$ ) included 58 (57%) from the NYT and 42 (43%) from the WSJ (see Figure 7). See Appendix C for all articles included in the analysis.

First, all 102 articles were read in line with stage one analytical inquiry to determine whether additional articles should be gathered to achieve data saturation. Data saturation techniques were utilized in this study, defined by Strauss & Corbin as a state of analysis where: “no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is, when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). Data saturation criteria was determined based upon previous analysis, with the intent of CDA in this study to pursue aspects related to education censorship networks (e.g., actors, organizations) involved, divergent portrayal, perspectives, and interpretations of education censorship policies and discourse. After the completion of stage one analysis, data saturation metrics were not achieved, therefore an additional sample of articles was sought.

To obtain a more balanced political sample, a second search was conducted to garner additional newspapers with high readership and additional articles. Data on high readership provided through Statista (2023). This resulted in a final sample of ( $N = 170$ ) across four papers: the New York Times (NYT) 54 articles (32%), the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) 44 articles (26%), Tampa Bay Times (TBT) 40 articles (23%), and USA Today (UST) 33 articles (19%; see Figure 8).

### **Data Analysis**

To prioritize a double reading standard consistent with critical discourse techniques, textual analysis and deconstructing efforts were used during multiple stages

of reading and analysis. To achieve a close and deconstructive reading and analysis Dunn & Neumann (2016) suggest multiple stages of reading and analysis to move from descriptive reading to hierarchical organization (p. 110). In this study, data analysis consisted of three steps of both emergent and iterative design. Stage one included a thorough reading of all articles, including detailed line by line in vivo coding techniques, alongside memoing. Stage two was useful for revisiting all articles, reviewing initial codes, building thematic codes, illuminating connections, consolidating codes, and contextualizing findings. Stage three coding was useful for moving toward complexity, nuance, and supported by theoretical considerations. Collectively, this approach helped to gather intertextual representations or linkages and relationships across texts (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) – in adherence to a more plastic approach to “understand connections of texts and organizing discourses (Dunn & Neumann, 2016).

### **Study 3: Critical Discourse Analysis of Education Censorship, Media Discourse and School Board Public Comments**

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersection of school board public comments and discourse on the political Right during school board meetings. Early in 2021, an array of literature on the political Right was released, offering guidance for challenging school board meetings and for supporting the anti-CRT movement. Some of these documents are used to build a deductive coding schematic to help understand school board public comments in combination with an inductive analysis. Analysis spans public comments in response to an equity-resolution across six school board meetings.

### **Study 3 Methodology**

Study 3 moves from state level education censorship policies enacted, discursive explanations of Christopher Rufo, and news media discourse – to understand the potential impact on school boards. To do this, critical discourse techniques are used to examine one school board in Michigan across six meetings with regard to the public’s response to an equity resolution policy. First, to contextualize the relationship of media discourse with school board public comments two phases of analysis were pursued. Phase one – deductive approach – was developed and informed by media discourse on the political Right, analyzed and compiled into a deductive coding schematic. The coding schematic helped to assess the qualitative impact of media narratives on school board public comments. Phase two – inductive approach – was used to analyze the remaining codes that do not adhere to elements of media influence captured within the deductive coding schematic. The sample, justification, and school board public setting are described below.

#### **Empirical Materials and Selection**

Critical discourse techniques were leveraged for a deductive and inductive analysis of public school board comments across six sessions in the Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPs) in Michigan. Michigan was chosen to examine the discursive impact of censorship in a region without state level policies enacted. In April 2021, news coverage in a small Northern Michigan town revealed high school students engaging in a racist social media group on Snapchat. White students conducted a mock “slave trade” placing hypothetical bids on their classmates of color. Students made calls for genocide, including statements of: “let’s have another holocaust” and “all blacks should die” (Gilbert, 2021; Nimmo, 2021). In response, the Traverse City Area Public Schools

(TCAPs) in conjunction with the local nonprofit Northern Michigan E3 partnered with the school board to develop an equity-based resolution. The data in this study includes analysis of all public comments.

The location of the Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPs) in Traverse City, Michigan encompasses a mix of rural and city living, and is also known as an affluent vacation city in Northern Michigan. It bridges a mix of political perspectives, but has leaned republican in every major election dating back to 2000 with over 15,000 residents. In a recent study, Dell’Omo and colleagues (2022) identified several forms of previous county conflict that may have influenced or played a role in the current political conflict in schools, highlighting: (a) rejection of the 2020 election, (b) debates over the Second Amendment Sanctuary City movement, (c) tensions related the COVID-19 pandemic, and the researchers also highlighted the school board conflict analyzed in this study.

## **Data Analysis**

### ***Phase One***

To begin, publications on the political Right were gathered. The inclusion criteria spanned September 2020 to June 2021 as informed by the enactment of Executive Order 13950 (September 2020) and the first school board session included in the study (June 2021). The sample of documents was built upon previous analysis. That is, prominent organizations involved in promoting education censorship discourse included the Heritage Foundation, and the Manhattan Institute. As noted in the introduction, the relationship between early lobbying trends of education censorship, included the ALEC led anti-CRT workshop on YouTube with support from Heritage Foundation and Manhattan Institute. Additionally, Christopher Rufo (Manhattan Institute fellow) has

been an outspoken advocate in the censorship arena, beginning narratives on Fox News' Tucker Carlson Tonight, influencing the enactment of Executive Order 13950 and maintaining vocal advocacy for education censorship (Garcia, 2020).

I focused searches on these influential sources to procure documents that sought to persuade, influence, and help resist CRT. Second, additional sources were procured through references cited in the initial documents analyzed. The non-exhaustive sample ( $n = 11$ ) was intended to get a sense of discursive influence on the general public and to build a deductive coding schematic. These documents represent a form of data triangulation to further inform the discourse through attention to influential documents (Heap & Wolverson, 2020). See Table 2 for the list of included documents and see Table 3 for the deductive coding schematic.

### ***Phase Two***

Phase two included the transcription and analysis of school board public comments across six meetings. First, all comments were coded while listening, viewing the audio/visual recordings, and reading the converted transcripts of school board meetings. This data triangulation was utilized to ensure consistency between transcribed documents and audio/video data, and, at times, used to assess the emotional valence of participants. Consistent with double reading standards of critical discourse analysis, phase two included three stages of coding (Dunn & Neumann, 2016). The first stage was useful in getting acquainted with the public comment positions and the scope of all sessions. In the second stage, I contextualized codes amid the deductive coding schematic (Table 2). The third stage included inductive line by line coding contextualized by common pro-resolution and anti-resolution discourse. All stages of analysis were useful

in understanding the data, including convergence with the deductive coding schematic and divergence with inductive codes, contextualized by geographical, cultural, social, and educational factors consistent with CDA methodology (Wodak & Meyer, 2012).

Data analysis included seven steps consistent with Dianna Mullet's (2018) analytical framework for CDA, including (1) select the discourse, (2) locate and prepare the data sources, (3) explore the background of each text, (4) code texts and identify overarching themes, (5) analyze external relations and interdiscursivity, (6) analyze internal relations and intertextuality, and (7) interpret the data. The first three (1-3) steps are operationalized in the scope of the study, research questions, literature review, and guided by theory to foreground and inform all stages of analysis. Step four (4) consists of the double reading standard of CDA operationalized in both phases of analysis described above (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The final three stages (5-7) are described in additional detail herein. First, intertextual relationships (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) were examined across both school board public comments and media discourse, as well as to the findings previously illuminated in study 1 and study 2 – for a full conglomerate representation of discourse. Second, analysis was aimed at interdiscursivity (Mullet, 2018) and assessing the external relationships juxtaposed by the deductive coding schematic. Third, intertextual analysis was pursued (Fairclough, 1995) to position orders of discourse and aspects of meaning-making. Fourth, a final interpretation of the data led to the collection of major themes to combine both external and internal relationships across discourse (Mullet, 2018). Finally, attending to the media influence on school board public comments was intended to add depth to our understanding of education censorship discourse, and to separate the elite representations that are, at times, influencing public

perspectives, in order to re-imagine mechanisms of hope, and re envision solutions and strategies of possibility (Rogers, 2016).

#### **Study 4: School Social Worker Advocacy and Resistance in the Context of Education Censorship**

Utilizing critical discourse techniques (Leotti et al., 2022) in congruence with the previous three studies that examined: (a) state education censorship policies, (b) news media discourse, and (c) school board public comments – this study considered the role of the school social worker (SSW) amid the shifting landscape of education censorship. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with SSWs and demographic data collected to allow for comparative qualitative analysis. The following aims operationalized this research: (1) to understand SSW’s views of education censorship policies and the impact on their role and practice, and (2) to inform the evolving practice of SSWs amid rapidly changing environments caused by education censorship.

#### **Study 4 Methodology**

Recruitment progressed with support from both state and national SSW associations. Interested participants were invited to complete a brief demographic survey and asked to identify their preference of either an: (a) an individual qualitative interview or (b) a focus group session. Both interview options were semi-structured by the same interview questions (see Table 4). Interviews were designed to assess three components: (1) knowledge and awareness related to education censorship, (2) discuss the impact of education censorship, if any, on SSW practice, and (3) explore current or future options for advocacy, resistance, and justice-oriented practice of SSWs. In completion of these

domains, participants were provided an opportunity to provide concluding remarks. Interviews and focus groups lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

### **Sample & Inclusion Criteria**

SSW practitioners active in schools across the US were invited to participate. All state SSW associations were contacted, as well as three national associations, the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA), the National Association of Social Workers, including their practice specialty section in school social work, and the American Council for School Social Work. Four state associations responded to requests to help recruit participants, including the Michigan Association of School Social Workers (MASSW), the Iowa School Social Workers Association (ISSWA), the Illinois Association of School Social Workers Association (IASSW), the Georgia Association of School Social Workers (SSWAG), as well as SSWAA. The responding associations helped to support the recruitment phase by posting the study recruitment in state and national SSW newsletters.

Utilizing critical discourse techniques (Leotti et al., 2022) and building upon the previous analysis of education censorship to contextualize findings, focus groups and interviews were conducted, with basic descriptive demographic information collected and analyzed. The primary inclusion criteria entailed that participants were SSWs and actively employed in a US school. Participants received an unsigned informed consent that provided study details, voluntary participation requirements, and principal and co-investigators information.

## **Survey**

Interested SSW participants were instructed to complete a brief demographic survey. The survey began with a declaration of the voluntary participation, informed consent procedures, and the study details. Survey items consisted of the *demographic, school and role characteristics*. Demographic items included name, interview, day and time preference, age, race/ethnicity, gender, education, and politics. *School and role characteristics* include type of school, state of practice, geographic region, length of employment, and type of role (see Table 8).

Participants spanned 8 states – de-identified to protect anonymity. Participants identified as white (79%), Black (14%), and Indigenous (7%), and woman (100%). The majority of participants' had experience in schools for more than 20 years (42%). Participants identified politically as Liberal (28%), Democrat (35%), Independent (7%), Moderate (7%), and Preferred Not to Say (21%). SSW practitioners in the sample practiced in Rural (43%), Suburban (29%), Urban/Suburban (21%), and Urban (7%) schools. Roles spanned micro (37%), micro-macro (35%), micro/mezzo (7%), micro/school mental health (7%), mezzo/crisis intervention (7%), and macro (7%) practice (Table 8).

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews and focus groups were completed virtually, and after obtaining informed consent, the interviews were recorded, with participants offered an opportunity to be de-identified through pseudonyms. Basic demographic information was collected, including race/ethnicity, gender, age, political ideology, practice experience length, and type of school/location. Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed

verbatim – stored securely in a private cloud-based drive. Interviews and focus group data were transcribed via Descript, with analysis conducted in MaxQDA using critical discourse techniques (Leotti et al., 2022).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) entails the analysis of both visual and textual discourse contextualized by historical and contemporary contexts. Although the guidance for CDA allows researchers flexibility in their methodological and data analysis techniques, this study followed in line with the structural signposts of CDA (Jen et al., 2021), including (a) multiple readings of the text, (b) interrogation through re-reading, (c) state one coding techniques, including line by line notes and organization, (d) uniting individualized codes into groups, themes and clusters, and (e) organization into discourse in relation to previous data collected across the earlier studies (Klevan et al., 2016).

Throughout stages of re-reading and moving from initial codes to cluster coding, CDA techniques and intertextuality were assessed to reflect upon previous discourses, context, and the relationship of textual analysis with historical, geographical, political, and school-based factors. Intertextuality entails the influence of texts on other texts – or in this case the influence of other focus group participants on each other (Heap & Wolverson, 2020). Researchers also suggest a triangulation of data for CDA analysis of focus groups and interviews. This technique leverages alternative sources, such as conducting data analysis through a combination of reflection on the written transcript, video data, and reactions. Scholars also suggest triangulating data with pre-existing literature on the topic, as well as paying attention to an array of factors during focus group interviews. Onwuegbuzie (2018) suggested utilizing micro-interlocutor analysis to assess “which participant responds to each question, the order in which each participant

responds to each question, response characteristics, and most importantly, the nonverbal communication used by each participant.” In the case of education censorship, CDA can bring forward individual perspectives which can then be located amid geographical, political, cultural, and social conditions both inside where the SSWs being interviewed practice in schools and the greater society. As the study reached theoretical saturation regarding the developing themes, the impact of censorship – recruitment and analysis moved to the completion phase (Hennik & Kaiser, 2022). See Table 4 for the semi-structured interview guide used for interviews and focus groups.

### **Researcher Positionality**

To foreground my ontological and epistemological assumptions (Anderson & Holloway, 2020) my researcher positionality is outlined. This research is operationalized by my identities as a white, cisgender, doctoral candidate in social work, and my research interests in promoting mechanisms of school support and educational justice. Although my assumptions of education censorship include concerns of elites on the political Right and potentially bad faith actors, the complexities and nuance of anti-CRT discourse have engendered values on the Right, including school choice, parents’ rights, and curricula transparency, and criticism of progressive education reform. For these reasons, I believe it is important to consider in what ways we can hear, listen, and move discourse toward unity rather than divisions and culture war narratives.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### RESULTS

In this section, the results from all four studies are distinctly delineated in the order the research progressed. Findings from each study will be individually represented, prior to moving to a discussion and conclusion in chapter four.

#### **Results Study 1: A Review of Education Censorship in 2021-22: State Level Policies and Media Discourse on the Political Right**

Study 1 results are presented distinctly within two phases of analysis. Findings in *phase one* include the result of an examination of the extent and nature of education censorship legislation. Findings in *phase two* include a comparison of education censorship legislation with the media discourse of Christopher Rufo.

#### **Phase One Findings: The Extent to Which Education Censorship Legislation Was Enacted in the U.S. Between 2021 and 2022.**

Twenty-five policies were enacted between 2021-22 across 19 states, consisting of 19 state level policies, 3 state board of education policies, 2 executive orders, and 1 attorney general public opinion (Table 6). Of these (n = 25) policies, the level implicated includes 22 (88%) public schools, 8 (33%) charters, 6 (25%) higher education, and 7 (29%) state agencies, with four states enacting more than one act (Arizona 2; Florida 4; South Dakota 2; Tennessee 2). Fourteen policies were codified in 2021 and 11 in 2022, beginning with Idaho HB 377 (4/28/21) and ending with Florida's 6A-1.094124 (11/23/22). All but 7 U.S. states (California, Delaware, Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont) proposed education censorship legislation (see Figure 9).

Demographic information of legislators (n = 16) was collected for state level policies, with the exclusion of 9 articles of legislation due to committee introduced bills (3 states), executive order (3 states), and state board of education administrative code (3 states). For the remaining 16 laws, demographic information was collected relating to political orientation, race/ethnicity, sex, and affiliations with the lobbying group, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). The 16 laws, included 272 legislators, with demographic information entailing: 272 (100%) Republican, 261 (96%) white, 229 (84%) Male, and 102 (37%) with affiliations to ALEC. Overwhelmingly, the legislative demographics of those constructed education censorship legislation consisted of white republican men.

### **Legislative Bans on “Divisive Concepts”**

The most prominent throughline in education censorship policies related to bans on ideas labeled as “divisive concepts.” There were seven “divisive concepts” that appeared often in legislative curricula bans. Divisive Concept 1 is: “One race, ethnic group or sex is inherently morally or intellectually superior to another race, ethnic group or sex.” Divisive Concept 2: “An individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” Divisive Concept 3 states: “An individual should be invidiously discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex.” Divisive Concept 4: “An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race, ethnicity or sex.” Divisive Concept 5: “An individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed by other members of the same race, ethnic group or sex.” Divisive Concept 6 is “an individual

should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex.” Finally, Divisive Concept 7: “Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race, ethnic group or sex to oppress members of another race, ethnic group or sex.”

Overall, what the divisive concepts allude to is (a) the purported relationship with CRT and (b) the need to minimize oppressive and stigmatizing labels of youth, to uphold meritocracy, and to protect youth from variations of psychological discomfort. Given the longitudinal prevalence of inequities that disproportionately affect minoritized youth – it appears these divisive concept bans do more to protect white educators and youth. For instance, these bans may divert attention from the structural inequities that plague school systems, including systematic disinvestment in schools and communities and the lack of cultural relevance, including barriers to historical accuracy, honesty, and diversity (Saltman, 2023). Due to these systemic shortcomings, the opportunities of youth, particularly Black and Brown youth, are both oppressed by the disparate community and school-based conditions (Lewis & Diamond, 2015), then strategically portrayed as being on an equal playing field within these legislative bans on divisive concepts. In other words, the divisions created and imposed are often derived from state and federal inequities, and subsequently, these policies work to circumvent this acknowledgment by reaffirming equality of opportunity, meritocracy, and the ensuing protection of white youth. A geographic representation of education censorship legislation is provided in Figure 9, divisive concepts banned are outlined in Table 5– to be discussed in full detail in phase two, and a detailed legislative analysis is provided in Table 6.

## **Legislative Analysis**

In this section, each policy enacted (Table 6) is analyzed alongside the implications. In conclusion of this section, a conglomerate analysis is provided, including intertextuality – relationships of text and discourses across policies – and a conclusionary and theoretical summary of the phase one findings.

### **Idaho HB 377**

HB 377 was the first race and diversity curricula ban to be passed in April 2021. The bill stated: “to establish prohibitions regarding certain topics,” adding:

It is the intent of the legislature that administrators, faculty members, other employees, and students at public schools, including public charter schools and institutions of higher education, respect the dignity of others, acknowledge the right of others to express differing opinions, and foster and defend intellectual honesty, freedom of inquiry and instruction, and freedom of speech and association.

HB 377 includes public schools, charters, and higher education, outlined bans on concepts “often found in critical race theory,” including bans on three divisive concepts (1; 3; 5; Table 5). The bill prohibits “distinction or classification of students shall be made on account of race or color.” Finally, the bill outlines the “prohibition on the expenditure of moneys for certain purposes,” adding: “No moneys shall be expended by the state board of education, any entity under the state board of education's jurisdiction, or any school district, public charter school, or public institution of higher education for 18 any purpose prohibited in section 33-138.”

In summary, this bill is the first state level policy to begin the prohibition of several “divisive concepts” – concepts that originally appeared in Executive Order 13950 (Alexander et al., 2023) – that was importantly brought forward by Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo. Beyond the challenges imposed by HB 377, there are additional discursive challenges that emerged, including (a) the conflation of critical race theory with the articulated divisive concepts and (b) the need to “defend intellectual honesty.” This strategic discursive positioning may undermine critical race theory through the conflation and association with an array of concepts framed as “divisive.” Additionally, it is intellectual honesty that is defended, not the rights of youth who are disproportionately impacted by the longitudinal inequities that circumscribe the school system and youth development. The bill went into effect upon enactment on April 28, 2021.

### **Arkansas SB 627**

In March 2021 Arkansas enacted SB 627, backed by the subtitle: “To prohibit the propagation of divisive concepts; and to review state entity training materials.” SB 627 prohibits divisive concepts (1-9). In addition to banning the prominent divisive concepts (1-7) this bill includes 8 and 9, adding prohibitions on: “The state of Arkansas or the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist” and “Race or sex stereotyping” means ascribing character traits, values, moral and ethical codes, privileges, status, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of his or her race or sex.” SB 627 bans these concepts from use in “state entities” – including state departments, schools, charters, and higher education, noting that: “state entity employees do not teach, advocate, act upon, or promote in any training to state entity employees any of the divisive concepts.” SB 627 mandates that administrators review training and grant programs to “certify that it will

not use state funds or assets to promote a divisive concept.” SB 627 outlines limitations on diversity and inclusion efforts, noting that: “state entity diversity and inclusion efforts shall encourage state entity employees not to judge each other by their color, race, ethnicity, sex, or any other characteristic protected by federal or state law.”

SB 627 targets the prohibition of nine “divisive concepts” while outlining discourse to uphold a colorblind worldview. The timing of the bill is also juxtaposed by the national trends, and pre-dates the reversal of affirmative action, but this cannot be precluded from influencing this Supreme Court decision. The introduction of the discourse that employees shall not “judge each other by their color...” may represent fundamental differences between the political Right and Political Left. It may highlight the shifting trends of progressives – whereby in the not-too-distant past, the most progressive and inclusive framework on the Left emphasized a colorblind worldview. As the times have changed, progressives have underscored the racist associations of a colorblind worldview – while many on the Right still subscribe to color blindness as an inclusive and necessary staple toward diversity and progress. Coleman Hughes (2024) highlighted these shifts in his recent book, *Toward a Colorblind America*. Although this may not be a complete explanation of the enacted legislation, it may offer important analytical context. The bill went into effect on January 1, 2022.

### **Oklahoma HB 1775**

In May 2021, Oklahoma enacted HB 1775 – “prohibiting certain students within certain institutions from being required to engage in certain training or counseling, allowing for voluntary counseling.” HB 1775 targets public and charter schools, and higher education related to the teaching and training of certain concepts. This bill is

consistent with previous legislation, although differs discursively in that the conceptual bans are not framed as “divisive.” Nevertheless, HB 1775 outlines that: “No teacher, administrator or other employee of a school district, charter school or virtual charter school shall require or make part of a course the following concepts” (1-7; 11). The addition of concept 11, prohibits: “members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex.” HB 1775 upholds the protection of Oklahoma Academic Standards – whereby concepts that align with these standards may not be prohibited.

Although HB 1775 bans concepts (1-9) – positioned previously in legislation, concept 11 is difficult to interpret. In other words, it appears discursively opposite to Arkansas SB 627 – upholding a colorblind worldview – meanwhile HB 1775 prohibits attempting “to treat others without respect to race or sex.” The bill went into effect on July 1, 2021.

### **Tennessee SB 623**

Also in May 2021, Tennessee passed SB 623, “relative to education.” Although a general education bill, SB 623 mandates that any local education authority or public school charter:

Shall not include or promote the following concepts as part of a course of instruction or in a curriculum or instructional program or allow teachers or other employees of the LEA or public charter school to use supplemental instructional materials that include or promote the following concepts: (1-7; 9; 12- 15; Table 6).

New to the analysis are five concepts, including concept 9, which prohibits: “Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government, concept 12: “The rule of law does not exist, but instead is a series of power,” concept 13, “The rule of law does not exist, but instead is a series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups,” concept 14, “All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness relationships and struggles among racial or other groups,” and concept 15, “Governments should deny to any person within the government's jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.”

The act upholds the protection of (a) the history of ethnic groups, (b) impartial discussion of controversial aspects of history, (c) impartial instruction on historical oppression of a particular group of people based on race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, or geographic region, and (d) historical documents relevant to the previously outlined components. The bill is in effect during “the 2021-22 school year and subsequent school years.”

### **Montana Attorney General Opinion**

Also in May 2021, the publicly binding statement of Montana Attorney General (AG) Austin Knudsen went into effect. The statement is a response to the inquiry of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Elsie Arntzen, summarized by the AG: “Whether the teaching of Critical Race Theory or so-called ‘antiracism’ in Montana schools violates the U.S. Constitution.” In a curiously analyzed and honest statement on the “legalities of critical race theory and antiracism” – throughout 25 pages, he discussed the

responsibility of schools, administrators, and educators about teaching these concepts.

The AG began his opinion by stating:

In many instances, the use of ‘Critical Race Theory’ and ‘antiracism’ programming discriminates on the basis of race, color, or national origin in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Article II, Section 4 of the Montana Constitution, and the Montana Human Rights Act.

In a sprawling document, the AG discusses the constitution, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Montana constitution, and the relationship with CRT and antiracism. The AG declares that: “Eradicating race discrimination is a legitimate and worthy goal,” yet quickly shifts tone, stating that: “Committing racial discrimination in the name of ending racial discrimination is both illogical and illegal.” Additionally, he adds: “It should be no surprise therefore that these legal safeguards (e.g., Title VI; Montana Constitution) cannot allow race-based discrimination, even when it comes disguised as antiracist remedial measures. He continued by both conflating anti-racism with racism and undermining the work of Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo. Particularly noteworthy, is the positioning of Kendi’s quote that: “The only remedy for past discrimination is present discrimination... The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.” Knudsen concluded: that Kendi is correct, “antiracism demands race-based discrimination.”

The resulting prohibitions on schools and governmental entities are summarized into three categories, racial segregation, race stereotyping, and race scapegoating: “These concepts violate civil rights laws.” The AG adds: “The law will not tolerate

schools, other government entities, or employers implementing CRT and antiracist programming in a way that treats individuals differently on the basis of race or that creates a hostile environment.” Additionally banned are “safe spaces that admit or exclude individuals on the basis of race,” and “counseling, mentoring, liaisons, or networking that favors or excludes individuals on the basis of race.” “Schools may not discipline students differently on the basis of race” nor “use race when administering academic programs.” These are curious objections when you consider the longitudinal prevalence of exclusionary discipline that both disproportionately punishes and excludes Black and Brown youth (Mitchell & Greer, 2024), especially alongside evidence that shows these youth are more punitively reprimanded (Skiba et al., 2016).

Overall, the Montana AG outlined discourse in close proximity to previous legislation, including the Executive Order 13950, and divisive concepts. For example, the AG discourse overlaps with divisive concept 1, by stating: “Schools, other government, entities, and employers may not use materials that assert that one race is inherently superior or inferior to another.” Race scapegoating is defined in a way that encompasses divisive concept 2, stated as: “This encompasses any claim that, consciously or unconsciously, and by virtue of his or her race, members of any race are inherently racist or are inherently inclined to oppress others, including separating students into ‘oppressors’ and ‘oppressed’ based on race. The prohibitions listed around race-based discrimination encompass divisive concept 3. Divisive concept 4 is outlined in relation to the AGs discussion of moral character: “To assist schools and other governmental entities with compliance, what follows is a list of widely reported

‘antiracist’ and CRT-related activities that I conclude violate federal and state law.

Additional discourse encompasses divisive concept 6:

A school that permits, promotes, or endorses curricula or pedagogical methods that tell an individual that he or she should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race, almost certainly creates a racially hostile environment.

In summary, we find a continued focus on the need to promote a colorblind society, emphasized by the relationship between American values upheld as important, including “individualism,” “decision-making,” “hard work,” objectivity,” “progress,” “politeness,” “decision-making,” and “delayed-gratification” as the hallmarks of white culture. The attorney general concluded:

“I would like to note that all of these traits identified above, far from being hallmarks of merely “white culture,” are in fact important hallmarks of a virtuous and productive colorblind society. One of them, however, have any connection to “whiteness” or “white identity.” They are self-evident virtues—universally applicable to and shared by people of all races, colors, creeds, and national origins. Because men and women are created equal, they can all equally appreciate and adopt those values.

He continued by discussing the “popular trope” that “all white people are inherently racist” as put forward by Robin DiAngelo in her book, *White Fragility*. Through the reinvigorated effort to promote and ensure a colorblind society, an array of previously articulated divisive concepts were outlined in the AG’s dissent, denoting a continued

effort to undermine progressive frameworks such as antiracism, CRT, white fragility, and white privilege, while reaffirming academic meritocracy and the psychological protection of youth. The statement is legally binding at the time of public dissent, May 27, 2021.

### **Utah R277-328**

In June 2021, Utah enacted R277-328 – related to education, administration, and educational equity in schools. The bill begins with a definition of educational equity as: “acknowledging that all students are capable of learning and distributing resources to provide equal opportunities based upon the needs of each individual student.” The bill then includes a discussion of supporting learning environments and inclusivity, privileging statements such as: “acknowledging that all students are capable of learning and distributing resources to provide equal opportunities based upon the needs of each individual student” and “cultivating supportive conditions that focus on learning and remove barriers to allow students to have accessible pathways to resources and opportunities” – serving to implicitly hold up meritocracy. The bill then progresses to prohibit LEA instruction that “promotes” or “endorses” several concepts previously underscored as divisive in previous legislation (1; 3-5). Utah R277 mandates: curriculum and classroom instruction “adhere to age-appropriate content for the developmental age of the student.”

In summary, Utah takes a slightly nuanced approach to imposing bans on concepts (1; 3-5) doing so within the context of education equity and inclusion. This tactic serves to further undermine progressive efforts toward educational equity while propagating the mischaracterization that censorship supports equity and inclusion. The bill took effect on August 9, 2021.

## **Iowa HF 802**

Later in June, Iowa passed HF 802, “an act providing requirements related to racism or sexism training, and diversity and inclusion efforts by governmental agencies and entities, school districts, and public post-secondary educational institutions.” HF 802 states “race and sex stereotyping–training prohibited by state and local governments,” defined as:

Assigning fault, blame, or bias to a race or sex, or to members of a race or sex because of their race or sex, or claiming that, consciously or unconsciously, and by virtue of persons’ race or sex, members of any race are inherently racist or are inherently inclined to oppress others, or that members of a sex are inherently sexist or inclined to oppress others.

HF 802 outlines prohibitions on divisive concepts 1-11 – although defined amid the components of race and sex stereotyping (See Table 5). HF 802 states that institutional diversity and inclusion efforts shall discourage students of a public institution of higher education from discriminating against another by political ideology or any characteristic protected under the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964. HF 802 is not intended to “prohibit the use of curriculum that teachings the topics of sexism, slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, or racial discrimination...”

In summary, HF 802 outlined curriculum and training bans relative to concepts (1-11; Table 5) targeting state agencies, higher education, and public schools. Institutions of diversity and inclusion are conflated with the banned concepts which may insinuate a responsibility or relationship with the banned concepts. Finally, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is upheld, again symbolizing the mischaracterization that diversity and inclusion

efforts undermine American civil right liberties. This tactic was also used in Montana amid the attorney general’s dissenting opinion.

### **Arizona HB 2898**

At the end of June 2021, Arizona enacted HB 2898 – prohibiting instruction, and if needed, imposing disciplinary, legal, and civil action. HB 2898 targets preschool through twelfth grade, including schools, charters and state agencies to “prohibit public monies for instruction that presents any form of blame or judgment on the basis of race, ethnicity or sex,” prohibiting concepts (1-7; Table 5). A note on disciplinary action includes: “A teacher who violates this section shall be subject to disciplinary action, including the suspension or revocation of the teacher’s certificate, as the state board deems appropriate,” with “the civil penalty does not exceed 5,000 per violation.” The law “does not impact training on sexual harassment or lessons on recognizing and reporting abuse.”

In summary, the concepts banned are in relation to potential blame or judgment on the basis of race, ethnicity or sex – whereby in other contexts was referred to as “divisive concepts.” This is the first state legislation to outline the potential for disciplinary, civil and legal action for violation of prohibited instruction guidelines.

### **South Carolina H4100**

The last bill enacted in June 2021 came out of South Carolina with H4100 prohibiting partisanship curriculum and instructional aspects related to several concepts. H4100 is a general appropriations bill for the 2021-22 fiscal year, where the prohibited concepts were snuck in at the end of the bill. H4100 section 1.105 relates to the “partisanship curriculum” whereby:

“no monies shall be used by any school district or school to provide instruction in, to teach, instruct, or train any administrator, teacher, staff member, or employee to adopt or believe, or to approve for use, make use of, or carry out standards, curricula, lesson plans, textbooks, instructional materials, or instructional practices that serve to inculcate any of the following concepts (1-9; Table 5).

H4100 outlines that this should not impose limitations on professional development, for example in relation to unconscious bias and past discriminatory policies.

In summary, consistent with previous bills, concepts 1-9 are prohibited, with minimal discourse illuminating reasons beyond “partisanship curriculum” – implying that progressive and Left-leaning schools are responsible for these divisive concepts, especially as the H4100 is enrolled with 100% backing from republican legislators.

### **New Hampshire HB 2**

In July 2021, New Hampshire enacted HB 2 – the state budget bill – with section 354-A:29 of particular relevance for this study, titled “Right to Freedom from Discrimination in Public Workplaces and Education.” HB 2 states: “The practices of discrimination against any New Hampshire inhabitants...are a matter of state concern.” Three sections outline bans on concepts 1-3; 11; Table 5 – to include (a) “prohibitions on public employers” (b) “prohibitions on the content of government programs and speech” and (c) “prohibitions on teaching discrimination. Additionally, section 354-A:33 offers protection for public employees to prevent adverse consequences from refusing to participate in training in the concepts outlined above.

## **Arizona HB 2906**

Also in July, Arizona enacted HB 2906 related to the revision of state statute 41-1494, adding: “This state, a state agency or a city, town, county or political subdivision of this state may not require an employee to engage in training, orientation or therapy that presents any form of blame or judgment on the basis of race, ethnicity, or sex.” This statement is expounded to include prohibitions for public monies for the aforementioned purposes, with “blame and judgment” defined as conceptual bans (1-7; 16; Table 5). In summary and in similar consistency with legislation enacted in other states, consistent concepts were banned and framed within the context of characteristics related to blame and judgment amid training, orientation of therapy across state agencies.

## **Alabama State Board of Education Administrative Code**

In August, the Alabama State Board of Education (ASBOE) enacted administrative code a “Resolution declaring the preservation of intellectual freedom and non-discrimination in Alabama’s Public Schools.” The statement begins by noting: “...all individuals are endowed with equal inalienable rights, without respect to race or sex,” adding that:

Concepts that impute fault, blame, a tendency to oppress others, or the need to feel guilt or anguish to persons solely because of their race or sex violate the premises of individual rights, equal opportunity, and individual merit, and therefore have no place in professional development for teachers, administrators, or other employees of the public educational system.

This statement is expanded to prohibit the teaching of these concepts in the Alabama public educational system, with the ABSOE adding that: “we will not support, or impart,

any K-12 public education resources or standards intended to indoctrinate students in social or political ideologies that promote one race or sex above another.” They continue by noting that the ABSOE:

...recognizes that slavery and racism are betrayals of the founding principles of the United States, including freedom, equality, justice, and humanity, and that individuals living today should not be punished or discriminated against because of past actions committed by members of the same race or sex, but that we should move forward to create a better future together.

Specific prohibitions limit local boards of education from offering K-12 instruction intended to indoctrinate students in social and political ideologies that promote one race or sex above another. The document adds discourse to include bans on concepts (1-3; 16; Table 5). In summary, the ASBOE offered a vague and broad statement on the protection of intellectual freedoms, the prohibition on indoctrination, and moves to include several conceptual bans – providing no justification or contextual necessity for these forms of education censorship.

### **Texas SB 3979**

In September, Texas passed SB 3979 relating to civics instruction, social studies curriculum, political activism, lobbying, and funding restrictions. SB 3979 begins by mandating the adoption of social studies skills, including the “fundamental moral, political, and intellectual foundations of the American experiment in self-government, as well as the history, qualities, traditions, and features of civic engagement in the United States.” The document goes on to mandate educational components relative to foundational American documents and the structure of government.

The second component of SB 3979 states: “no teacher shall be compelled by a policy of any state agency, school district, campus, open-enrollment charter school, or school administration to discuss current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs.” Adding that teachers need to provide diverse and contending perspectives relative to current events and controversial topics. Prohibitions additional relate to class service learning activities and lobbying, and similar to ABSOE, prohibitions on teaching topics to promote blame or judgment on the basis of race or sex, adding bans on concepts (1 - 7; 9; 11) to include public and charter schools, higher education, and state agencies.

In summary, SB 3979 provided discourse that implicitly connects the need for moral and intellectual content of American history alongside the censoring of certain concepts. It would be surprising that these concepts and components of American history and governmental structure are not already taught in Texas schools, thus serving to conflate the relationship between education censorship and American history.

### **North Dakota HB 1508**

In November North Dakota enacted HB 1508 outlining prohibitions on critical race theory. In a one paragraph dissent, HB 1508 states:

“Each school district and public school shall ensure instruction of its curriculum is factual, objective, and aligned to the kindergarten through grade twelve state content standards. A school district or public school may not include instruction relating to critical race theory in any portion of the district's required curriculum.

HB 1508 adds a definition of critical race theory as “the theory that racism is not merely the product of learned individual bias or prejudice, but that racism is systemically

embedded in American society and the American legal system to facilitate racial inequality.” In summary, it is unclear how schools would monitor this ban on critical race theory, how school districts may interpret this policy, and the direction of state guidance on policy adoption.

### **Virginia Executive Order Number One**

Education censorship continued into 2022, with Virginia enacting executive order one in January to: “end the use of inherently divisive concepts, including critical race theory, and restoring excellence in K-12 public education in the commonwealth.” The document begins with a statement on the “importance of the initiative” noting that “political indoctrination has no place in our classrooms,” adding “the foundation of our educational system should be built on teaching our students *how to think* for themselves.” The section concludes with: “Critical race theory and related concepts are teaching our children to engage in the very behavior the Constitution prohibits.”

The document then moves on to policy directives, underscoring how the “Superintendent of Public Instruction shall review all policies within the Department of Education to identify those that promote inherently divisive concepts.” Next, the document outlines prohibitions for executive employees in directing students to adopt “inherently divisive concepts,” not yet defined. To “raise academic standards” the document outlines requirements of increasing transparency of performance measures, prioritizing educational attainment, ensure proficiency standards, and empower parents with open access information. The order concludes by outlining “inherently divisive concepts” amid the following censored concepts (1-5; 7; 11; 18; Table 5).

In summary, the executive order included divisive framings, similar to those they claim to prohibit in Virginia, such as imposing the relationship between CRT and constitutional violations, without evidence and without context explaining the need, utility, and use of CRT. Next, the document outlined strategies to raise academic standards, implicitly associating academic achievement with the needs to censor and ban certain concepts deemed in association with CRT. Collectively, this leads to (a) policy impact, (b) the imposed relationship to academic achievement, and (c) a continued discursive impact through negative associations of CRT and the “inherently divisive concepts outlined in the executive order. The order took effect on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### **Mississippi SB 2113**

In March 2022, Mississippi enacted SB 2113, imposing restrictions on the teaching of divisive concepts and critical race theory. SB 2113 targets higher education, community colleges, public, and charter schools, outlining bans on concepts (1; 3; Table 5). Additionally, restrictions on school classification by race, and course instruction, and funding is prohibited with regard to the censored concepts outlined above. In summary and consistent with previous legislation, although CRT is not explicitly banned, the divisive concepts prohibited are discursively associated with CRT, although no evidence of this relationship is articulated. The bill took effect on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### **Florida HB 1467**

At the end of March 2022, Florida enacted HB 1467 – “an act relating to parental rights in education.” HB 1467 mandates school boards to comply with parent notification regarding certain circumstances. Specifically, parents should be notified regarding any change in the student’s services related to “mental, emotional, or physical

health or well-being and the school’s ability to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for the student.” Further HB 1467 prohibits districts from adopting new parent contact procedures related to the previously outlined services. Next, the bill prohibits instruction related to sexual orientation or gender identity during grades K-3. In summary, HB 1467 entails parent rights and notification procedures, and censorship of any instruction of sexual orientation or gender identity between grades K-3. The bill took effect on July 1, 2022.

### **South Dakota HB 1012**

Also in March, South Dakota passed HB 1012 – “An act to protect students and employees at institutions of higher education.” HB 1012 targets the “Board of Regents, Board of Technical Education, or any institution under their control may not require their students or employees to attend or participate in any training or orientation that teaches, advocates, acts upon, or promotes divisive concepts.” HB 1012 prevents mandatory training, relates to academic instruction, and is stated not to interfere with the first amendment rights of students. Divisive concepts that are prohibited are (1-7; Table 5). There was no concluding statement on the bill’s effective date.

### **South Dakota Executive Order**

The second law enacted on March 28 was executive order 2022-2. The order begins by declaring that: “The education of our children is of paramount importance to the future of South Dakota and to the United States of America,” adding that:

Critical Race Theory is a political and divisive ideology that teaches a distorted view of the United States of America and its institutions. Critical Race Theory compels students to view the world through a purely racial lens and to judge

others based on the color or their skin rather than the content of their character.

The inherently divisive concepts that underlay Critical Race Theory have no place in our classrooms.

With that in mind, by executive order South Dakota prohibits all K-12 instruction related to inherently divisive concepts (1-7; Table 5). In summary, the connection again was made between “inherently divisive concepts” and forms of censorship outlined above. Additionally, the introduction of the executive order took a very declarative tone, to undermine CRT without clear explanation, and proclaimed it as divisive and political. The order took effect on April 5, 2022.

### **Tennessee HB 2670**

In April 2022, Tennessee enacted HB 2670 relative to higher education and the prohibition of divisive concepts. The act begins with section 2 declaring:

The general assembly finds that the divisive concepts described in Section 3 of this act exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, and other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the United States of America and the well-being of this state and its citizens.

HB 2670 moves to a definition of divisive concepts which includes bans on (1-10; 12-15; 17; Table 5). The targeted impact is institutions of higher education, including trainings, seminars, workshops, and orientations. HB 2670 also attempts to (a) prevent discrimination, best on the refusal to embrace divisive concepts, and limits the impact of student and employee adhere to ideology or political viewpoint in relation to hiring, tenure, promotion, and graduation – limiting questions of political ideology or viewpoint.

HB 2670 also adds a note on diversity, whereby any efforts to increase diversity must include efforts to increase “intellectual diversity.” The bill took effect upon approval on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### **Kentucky SB 1**

April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022 Kentucky passed SB 1 – a lengthy bill spanning a range of topics, including social studies standards, standards and assessment, and aspects related to accelerated learning. SB 1 was outlined to impact public and charter schools. For the purposes of this study, the most relevant portions of SB 1 include section 4 and the limitations on instruction and social studies academic standards to maintain consistency an array of outlined concepts, including (a) all individuals are created equal, (b) equal protection under the law, (c) individual deserves to be treated on the basis of the individual’s character, (d) divisive concept 5; Table 5. Additionally, SB 1 outlines that

Slavery and post-Civil War laws enforcing racial segregation and discrimination were contrary to the fundamental American promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, but that defining racial disparities solely on the legacy of this institution is destructive to the unification of our nation.

SB 1 does not impose restrictions on history, or the teaching of controversial aspects of history. The bill goes on to outline 24 concepts requiring the incorporation into state to social studies standards, teaching and assessment, ranging from the Mayflower Compact to a speech by Ronald Regan.

In summary, SB 1 does not list divisive concepts and essentially only censors one topic, “an individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, bears

responsibility for actions committed by other members of the same race, ethnic group or sex” (5; Table 5), but also mandates the incorporation of 24 new topics including state social studies academic standards and assessments. SB 1 also focuses on components of accelerated learning and the promotion of academic achievement. The act took effect upon its passage and approval by the Governor, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

### **Florida HB 7**

Florida continued the education censorship legislation, enacting HB 7 on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022, related to “individual freedom.” Section 1 outlines prohibitions on conceptual discrimination that encompasses the following concepts (1-7; 11; Table 5). Additionally, section 2 outlines that students may be separated by sex for a single gender program, such as a course on human reproduction, or bodily contact sports, including wrestling, boxing, rugby, ice hockey, football, and basketball. Provisions are also provided for public schools and the Florida College System to allow “separate toilet, locker room, shower facilities on the basis of gender. In summary, HB 7 is a restrictive legislation, imposing conceptual bans on several divisive concepts – outlined in association with discriminatory practices – and approving the separation by sex during bodily contact sports. The bill took effect on July 1, 2022.

### **Georgia HB 1084**

On April 22, 2022 Georgia enacted HB 1084 – an act of education, curriculum, relative to public and charter schools. The act to be known as the “Protect Students First Act” outlines definitions of divisive concepts (1-10; Table 5). Next, limitations are outlined to prevent “espousing personal political beliefs within the scope and parameters of school employment. HB 1084 goes on to conclude: “Each local board of education,

local school superintendent, and the governing body of each charter school shall ensure that curricula and training programs encourage employees and students to practice tolerance and mutual respect and to refrain from judging others based on race.” Finally, HB 1084 outlines the prohibition of teaching, curriculum, instruction, or advocacy in the school system related to the divisive concepts (1-10; Table 5).

**Florida 6A- 1.094124**

The Florida State Board of Education (FSBOE) enacted 6A- 1.094124 in November 2022 relative to factual and objective historical curricula. FSBOE outlines components of resiliency education, civic and character education, and benchmark academic standards for excellence, outlining:

Instruction on the required topics must be factual and objective, and may not suppress or distort significant historical events, such as the Holocaust, slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, the civil rights movement and the contributions of women, African American and Hispanic people to our country.

CRT is defined by the FSBOE as: “the theory that racism is not merely the product of prejudice, but that racism is embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons.” Also banned includes the 1619 Project, and reaffirmed efforts to ensure the teaching of the US constitution, the bill of Rights, and subsequent amendments. This is the second bill to censor topics deemed “divisive” while mandating curriculum entail foundational American documents. This relationship is noteworthy given the attempt to undermine CRT, the intent to uphold foundational American history implicitly notes the concern that American history needs to be

reinvigorated to protect democratic school trends and academic rigor in schools.

December 1 of each year, an implementation plan is required for each school district.

### **Phase One: Conclusion**

The most prominent throughline in education censorship policies related to the bans on “divisive concepts.” For example, divisive concept number one outlined that:

*“one race, ethnic group or sex is inherently morally or intellectually superior to another race, ethnic group or sex.”* Although a number of concepts were censored across states, there were also a few states to outline academic components such increased assessments, and new requirements on education, curriculum, social studies and civics education.

Collectively, the legislation serves to (a) impose censorship, (b) undermine CRT through conflation with discriminatory and divisive practices, and (c) re-ensure an academic focus takes precedence.

### **Phase One: A Theoretical Summary**

Phase one illuminated a number of state curricula legislation imposing restrictions on divisive concepts and CRT, yet limited explanation was offered. Aspects of economic imperialism bring forward the relationship between censored concepts and several states’ re-affirmation of academic rigidity. Meanwhile the discourse of legislative bans positions deficit-based narratives of progressive frameworks and implicitly portrays censorship as a needed remedy for the shortcomings of progressive educational components, trainings, and curricula. These implicit positions which justify censorship and pose concerns of progressive frameworks also simultaneously undermine public education through legislation and discursive fear. The policy implications and discursive fear-based influence may lead to elite capture – reifying social and political divides to sustain

corporate hegemony. Future mechanisms of high conflict may also occur once the political-Left finds its necessary to (a) respond to the policy impact, and (b) respond to conservative rhetoric. Independent analysis of state legislation is limited by the lack of contextual information, therefore, to fully understand the divisive concepts censored, findings are juxtaposed with discourse on the political-Right written by Christopher Rufo.

### **Phase Two Findings**

Of the 25 state policies enacted between 2021-2022 a range of concepts were banned (see Tables 5 & 6). To add contextual depth to the scope and prevalence of education censorship legislation – consistent with CDA methodology – discourse on the political Right was juxtaposed by the most prominent conceptual bans outlined in state legislation. The most prominently banned concepts mirror much of the conceptual bans outlined in President Trump’s Executive Order (2020). To follow, the discourse of Rufo’s self-declared “one-man war against Critical Race Theory” (Garcia, 2020) was systematically mapped to the content outlined in education censorship legislation in three steps: (1) listing the divisive concept most commonly delineated in state legislation, (2) juxtaposing the censored concept with discourse from Rufo, and (3) contextualizing the legislation and Rufo discourse within the academic literature.

In this section, the most legislated concepts (phase one) – often outlined as “divisive concepts” – are contextualized by the discourse of Christopher Rufo to understand the purported censorship put forward by the political Right. Figure 6 entails the most prominently banned concepts (1-7) alongside emblematic quotes pulled from Rufo articles to underscore the relationship between enacted legislative discourse and the

purported need for censorship as understood on the political Right. To follow, each divisive concept is explored at length for a deeper understanding.

**Divisive Concept 1: “one race, ethnic group or sex is inherently morally or intellectually superior to another race, ethnic group or sex”**

Twenty policies across 19 states (76%) codified censorship related to identity-based superiority outlined above (Table 1). For example, Idaho HB 377 stated:

No public institution of higher education, school district, or public school, including a public charter school shall direct or otherwise compel students to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere to any of the following tenets: (i) That any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior...

After item (i) is listed, an additional six concepts are cited (see Table 1). As is illuminated through the analysis of Rufo discourse, his concerns aligned with concept 1 bans (Table 7).

***Divisive Concept One: Media Discourse***

A Rufo whistleblower underscored concerns related to concept one and the conceptualization of white privilege. For example, in a 3rd grade elementary classroom where children were taught about privilege and identity where Rufo (2021d) discussed: “The teacher explained that the students live in a dominant culture of white, middle class, cisgender, educated, able-bodied, Christian, English speaker[s], who, according to the lesson, created and maintained this culture in order “to hold power and stay in power.” Second, Rufo’s criticism extended to Tiffany Jewell’s (2020) *This Book is Anti-Racist*, where aspects of superiority and privilege are discussed. Rufo (2021d) pointed out that

classroom conversations were pulled directly from the book, including: “those with privilege have power over others” and “a white, cisgender man, who is able-bodied, heterosexual, considered handsome and speaks English has more privilege than a Black transgender woman.” Rufo (2021p) elaborated:

However, with the rise of the academic movement known as critical race theory (CRT), progressives in academia and the bureaucracy have revived the ugly concepts of race essentialism and race-based guilt, arguing that white Americans can be reduced to the quality of “whiteness” and must undergo rigorous reeducation to atone for their inborn “white privilege,” “white fragility,” and “internalized racial superiority.”

In summary of divisive concept one and Rufo discourse, the idea of potential harm caused by highlighting the concept of white privilege and its ascribed attributes such as white privilege is essential and immutable, as decried by Rufo, appeared in several education censorship pieces of legislation.

**Divisive Concept 2: “an individual should be invidiously discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex”**

Nineteen states (79%) outlined censorship to prevent identity-based discrimination or adverse treatment (Table 1). For example, Arkansas SB 627 stated:

Subchapter 6 – Propagation of Divisive Concepts Prohibited. 25-1-601.

Definitions. As used in this subchapter: (1) “Divisive concept” means the concept that: ... (D) An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of the individual's race or sex...

### ***Divisive Concept 2: Media Discourse***

Divisive concept two appears to overlap with criticism on the political Right (Table 7). For instance, Rufo (2021o) highlighted a lesson plan for kindergarteners that he perceived to be a weaponization of tragedy as a political tool, stating: “Teachers are asked to discuss the “Pyramid of Hate” with the children as young as four years old, teaching that our society is built on biased attitudes, systemic discrimination, and bias-motivated violence, which can lead to genocide.”

Rufo (2020b) discussed white fragility and concern regarding training sessions at a host of federal agencies, including the Treasury Department and Department of Homeland Security. Rufo highlighted how session trainers: “demanded that white staff members struggle to own their racism and accept their unconscious bias, white privilege, and white fragility.” In a subsequent article, Rufo (2020d) abstractly conflated white fragility with CRT, noting that Seattle is home to founding CRT scholars. He goes on to discuss problems with race-segregated training sessions in the Seattle government: “white leaders must shield minority employees from open dialogue—is deeply patronizing and can cause racial division in the workplace” (Rufo 2020d). Next, in the San Diego Unified School District, Rufo (2020f) examined how teachers were instructed of their individual racism: “They must confront and examine white privilege, acknowledge when they feel white fragility, and teach others to see their privilege. They must turn their schools into activist organizations.”

In conclusion of divisive concept two and corollary media discourse, this censored concept – as articulated by Rufo – was needed to protect youth from hate, victimization, and discrimination that are, for example, perceived to be associated in progressive literature and research, such as white fragility.

**Divisive Concept 3: “an individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed by other members of the same race, ethnic group or sex”**

Seventeen states (70%) moved to bar responsibility from individuals based on actions committed by those of the same identity (Table 1). For example, Oklahoma HB 1775 stated:

The provisions of this subsection shall not prohibit the teaching of concepts that align with the Oklahoma Academic Standards. 1. No teacher, administrator or other employee of a school district, charter school or virtual charter school shall require or make part of a course the following concepts... c. an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.

***Divisive Concept 3: Media Discourse***

On several instances, Rufo critiqued antiracism in ways that overlapped with the bans outlined in concept three, and narratives of assumed responsibility. Rufo (2021d) discussed transgressions at the United Nations International School noting how teachers may self-censor their perspectives during antiracism training sessions stating: “to disagree with any part of their agenda is an admission of racism, and an invitation for reputational harm.” On several occasions, critique of anti-racism was associated with a

perceived responsibility of educators. For example, Rufo (2020c) stated: “For years, Americans have watched as educators have pushed deeply divisive antiracism programs in coastal cities such as Berkeley, Portland, and Seattle. Now antiracism has come to the heartland.” Rufo (2021d) quoted a whistleblower: This employee said, ‘there are a small number of employees that see this antiracist training as pure indoctrination, but do not know what to do’. Like Brenner and the school administrators, they are afraid of being labeled racist and being denounced on social media.” This comment speaks to the assumed responsibility that may be demanded of educators to promote antiracism, whereby any resistance or opposition is feared to be interpreted as racist.

Similar concern was outlined by Rufo, where he underscored the problematic aspects of diversity training sessions where they emphasized white silence and colorblindness as socially acceptable forms of white supremacy. Although Rufo (2020c) conflated antiracism with a diversity training session, he also conveyed a reasonable concern regarding the conflation of actual white supremacy (e.g., KKK, hate crimes) with, for instance, the wearing of a MAGA (Make America Great Again) Trump hat (Rufo 2021c). Further, he criticized the notion of affirmative consent at the training sessions: “This means that teachers must not only accept the tenets of the training—in some cases even condemning themselves as white supremacists or oppressors—but also actively vocalize that acceptance. Similar discourse has been promulgated by Tucker Carlson during his time on Fox News (Yourish et al., 2022).

In conclusion of divisive concept three and corollary media discourse, this censored concept – as articulated by Rufo – was necessary to protect youth and reduce the implicit responsibility imposed by, for example, research and workshops related to

anti-racism. Thus, divisive concept three may aim to protect youth from blame and reduce culpability, and insulate youth from the historical ramifications and current structure of social and educational inequities.

**Divisive Concept 4: “an individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously”**

Sixteen states (66%) outlined legislative bans on the concepts related to inherent racism, sexism, or oppression based on one’s identity (Table 1). For example, Tennessee SB 623 stated:

Section 51. Tennessee Code Annotated, Title 49, Chapter 6, Part 10, is amended by adding the following as a new section: (a) an LEA or public charter school shall not include or promote the following concepts as part of a course of instruction or in a curriculum or instructional program, or allow teachers or other employees of the LEA or public charter school to use supplemental instructional materials that include or promote the following concepts: (2) an individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity, or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.

***Divisive Concept 4: Media Discourse***

Discourse on the Political Right written by Christopher Rufo tied together several progressive frameworks that may be helpful to understanding state bans on concept four. In Buffalo, Rufo (2021g) discussed curriculum revisions, including strategies and discussions to dismantle cisgender privilege, confront whiteness in the classroom, ask teachers to atone for their white privilege, and to use their voices toward antiracism.

Taken directly from Buffalo Schools’ Emancipation Curriculum – highlighted by Rufo –

they state: “All white people play a part in perpetuating systemic racism.” Rufo (2021k) underscored similar concern at an educational training session in North Carolina where documents stating that (white) cultural values include denial, fear, blame, control, punishment, scarcity, and one-dimensional thinking – concepts that align with the highly distributed white supremacist cultural values (see Okun & Jones, 2000). Rufo tied in documents that discussed how “whiteness perpetuates the system of injustice,” with links drawn between white cultural values and the perception that white people are inherently racist.

In conclusion of divisive concept four and the corollary media discourse, this censored concept – as articulated by Rufo – may be designed to reduce the potential identity-based damages imposed by concepts such as white privilege and systemic racism. Thus, divisive concept four may serve to protect youth – specifically white youth – and simultaneously impose resistance to progressive efforts to address systemic racism.

**Divisive Concept 5: “an individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race, ethnicity or sex”**

Fourteen states (58%) sought to limit the connections between moral character and individual identities (Table 1). For example, Tennessee HB 2670 stated:

SECTION 2. The General Assembly finds that the divisive concepts described in Section 3 of this act exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, and other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the United States of America and the well-being of this state and its citizens...(D) An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race or sex.

### ***Divisive Concept 5: Media Discourse***

White fragility may help to contextualize the concept five bans. For example, in a critique of an educational toolkit provided Arizona Department of Education in what appears to correspond to DiAngelo's (2016) framework of white fragility – Rufo (2021i) highlighted a portion of the document that stated: “white people deny their own racism to alleviate some of their white fragility.” Rufo (2020a) discussed aspects of a training session that may have a perceived impact on white moral character by putting forward the quote: “white people complicitly reinforce racist systems” and the increased conflation of white identity for any individuals that appear white, such as those of Jewish, Armenian, Arab, and Irish descent.

In conclusion of divisive concept five and the corollary media discourse, this censored concept – as articulated by Rufo – builds upon item four by adding protections on moral character to supplement identity-based protection for white youth. In other words, divisive concept five prohibits the negative associations between identity and moral character that are perceived to be associated with progressive concepts such as white fragility and white privilege.

**Divisive Concept 6: “meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race, ethnic group or sex to oppress members of another race, ethnic group or sex”**

Fourteen states (56%) aimed to prevent the conflation of meritocracy or related concepts with racist or sexist conceptualizations (Table 1). Florida HB 7 stated:

The Legislature acknowledges the fundamental truth 503 that all persons are equal before the law and have inalienable 504 rights. Accordingly, instruction and

supporting materials on the 505 topics enumerated in this section must be consistent with the 506 following principles of individual freedom...(d) Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are 515 not racist but fundamental to the right to pursue happiness and 516 be rewarded for industry.

***Divisive Concept 6: Media Discourse***

Rufo’s (2020a) critiqued the City of Seattle’s training session, titled Interrupting Internalized Racial Superiority and Whiteness: “the trainers identified problematic terminology that should be abandon for social justice principles, including: “individualism,” “perfectionism,” “intellectualization,” and “objectivity” as vestiges of this internalized racial oppression. As Rufo critiqued progressive trends he often utilized narratives of failing school systems – a common neoliberal trope (Baldrige, 2020). For example, Rufo (2020f) added:

Here’s the problem: only 47% of San Diego Unified students reach proficiency in reading and math. Teaching “white fragility” will do nothing to help students improve their academic abilities—it will only serve activist teachers who want to shift the blame to systemic racism. Parents should be up in arms: public schools should be designed to serve the public good, not the private ideological fantasies of far-left activists. We need to teach students basic reading, writing, and arithmetic—not white fragility, intersectionality, and antiracism.

A month later, Rufo added to his outrage at the San Diego Unified School District – when he attacked their efforts to abolish their school-wide homework deadline, a clear

threat to meritocracy and individual hard work (Rufo, 2021a). Rufo (2021e) moved his critique to Philadelphia schools and their efforts to address systemic inequities:

The solution, according to the union, is to overthrow the racist structure of capitalism, provide reparations for Black and Indigenous people, and uproot white supremacy and plant the seeds for a new world... In practical terms, it is unclear how these antiracist programs will translate into academic outcomes.

In conclusion of divisive concept six and the corollary media discourse, this censored concept – as articulated by Rufo – associated dwindling academic achievement with progressive reform. Thus, divisive concept six may be designed to sustain academic focus and rigidity in schools, ultimately reifying the notion of meritocracy – whereby achievement can be purely understood as a product of individual merit and hard work. Thus, concept six may stymie progressive efforts of equity by re-aligning a myopic focus on academic and individualized achievement.

**Divisive Concept 7: “an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex”**

Thirteen states (52%) moved to prevent psychological discomfort based on one’s identity (Table 5). For example, South Dakota HB 1012 outlined:

ENTITLED An Act to protect students and employees at institutions of higher education from divisive concepts. Section 1. That chapter 13-1 be amended with a NEW SECTION: For the purposes of this Act, the term, divisive concepts, means:.. (6) An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other

form of psychological distress on account of the individual's race, color, religion, ethnicity, or national origin

***Divisive Concept 7: Media Discourse***

In Rufo's (2020j) appraisal of the newly developed Ethnic Studies Curriculum in California, he emphasized the relationship between upholding psychological comfort (for white youth; educators) and white privilege, where he stated:

The document claims that whites began grabbing the land, hatching hierarchies, and developing for Europe/whiteness, which created excess wealth that became the basis for the capitalist economy. Whites established a hegemony that continues to the present day, in which minorities are subjected to socialization, domestication, and zombification.

In this instance, Rufo was concerned over the perceived attacks on capitalism and white Americans. Rufo continued with concern by citing curriculum elements that teach of the "double-edged sword of meritocracy":

In addition to teaching more about the history of migration from these various perspectives, teachers can help facilitate discussions on xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, while emphasizing the nation's history of being a home for immigrants, the merit-based promises offered by a capitalist economy, and the value of having a diverse citizenry (California State Board of Education, 2021)

In Missouri, Rufo (2021c) highlighted concern of a whistleblower, noting: "the trainers then forced the teachers to watch a nine-minute video of George Floyd's last words." Clearly, a video that could cause psychological discomfort, nevertheless ignoring

any potential benefits, including awareness and critical thinking that may occur from watching the video.

In conclusion of divisive concept seven and the corollary media discourse, this censored concept – as articulated by Rufo – is yet another effort to protect youth from potentially harmful or stigmatizing discourse and content, whereby psychological protection of youth is upheld as a mechanism to ensure a limited focus on progressive terms such as systemic racism. Protecting youth could mean the elimination of certain concepts, curricula, and activities that challenge and develop critical thinking.

### **Study 1 Conclusion**

States across the country enacted curriculum legislation that prohibited an array of divisive concepts and Critical Race Theory. The explanation of this censored action – as explained by Christopher Rufo – upheld the protection of youth from harm, including the potential for psychological and moral character damage. Privileging the protection of challenging narratives in schools, specifically the protection of white youth (Irby, 2021) may also serve to limit progressive education, training, workshops, content and curricula related to systemic racism, anti-racism, white privilege and white fragility. Notions of individual responsibility, merit-based achievement, and discourse to reify academic rigidity in schools were simultaneously upheld, while progressive frameworks were framed as antithetical to overarching trends of individual achievement and academic success. What is consistent throughout the education censorship policies enacted and the discourse of Rufo are several significant mischaracterizations.

According to state legislation and Rufo discourse, the need for censorship was justified to limit progressive frameworks (e.g., privilege; fragility; CRT; antiracism) from

causing psychological damage and harm to youth. At the same time, the explanations of (a) why progressive frameworks were developed to address longitudinal inequities, and efforts to (b) improve cultural responsiveness for youth disproportionately harmed by these inequities were absent from both state legislation and the discourse of Rufo. Amid the censorship movement were subtle, but explicit and reinvigorated calls for academic focus – implicitly positioning the connection of progressive frameworks such as CRT as supplanting academic achievement in schools. Discourse outlined a push for back-to-basics curricula, that focuses on the reification of “equal opportunity,” while circumventing and slandering equity-oriented efforts, and challenging any progressive trends to upend inequities and provide more historically accurate understanding of our current social picture. Legislators and Rufo privileged education censorship to control curricula standards, while mischaracterizing and conflating CRT as a “divisive concept.” This agenda works to undermine public education, minimize historical honesty, impose fear on educators, and create numerous forms of fear imposed on the school system, educators, and youth. For state legislators and Rufo, it is not about accuracy or clarity of censorship, but rather, fear, dishonesty, and misrepresentation, to create a hostile portrayal of public education, higher education, and progressive scholarly frameworks.

### **Study 1 Conclusion: A Theoretical Summary**

The utility of Fairclough’s (2013) exploratory critique of critical discourse analysis provides both an analytical picture and theoretical explanations to (a) focus on the social wrong, (b) identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong, (c) consider whether the social order needs the social wrong, and (b) identify ways past the obstacles – all of which is further reinforced and understood amid the theoretical framework.

Through a detailed focus on the social wrong (i.e., education censorship) – obstacles to addressing the social wrong were identified in (1) the impact of policy, (2) confounding media influence, (3) attacks on progressive frameworks, and (4) the conglomerate impact on public education, schools, and youth development. Theory is especially useful for understanding whether the social order needs the social wrong. In this study, consistent with Amanda Ripley’s (2021) understanding of *high conflict* – the discursive explanations of Rufo are rife with mischaracterizations of progressive frameworks which may serve to engineer social and political divides, while developing fear of public education. As fear persists, the opportunity for elite capture Táíwò (2022) of the public educational system increases by undermining public education both in policy, media discourse, and the multi-level impact of fear. For example, the discourse of parents’ rights (Florida HB 1467) is positioned as a necessary solution to the manufactured crisis of education censorship, where these narratives facilitate a movement to charter and for-profit education, thus reifying economic imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022). Thus, those in power maintain control and power over inequitable systems and financial hegemony through fear which pulls students from public schools and drives increases in private, charter, parochial, and for-profit schools. Additionally, this opens the door to alternative privatization such as new conservative curricula (Langreo, 2022).

### **Results Study 2: Education Censorship: An Analysis of Mainstream News Discourse**

To build an understanding of how the policy implications of censorship may be reinforced or exacerbated by divergent media narratives, in study two I explored the discursive representations of education censorship in the mainstream news media. The discursive portrayals of education censorship reveal an oppressive attack on K-12

schools, higher education, and corporate America. Largely consistent with state level censorship policies, those on the political Right (e.g., republicans and conservatives) have manufactured the censorship movement, leveraged local level advocacy and resistance, and engendered culture war narratives. At the same time, Left-leaning publications (e.g., New York Times) were quick to dismiss concerns on the political Right, insisting, for example, that “CRT is not taught in K-12 education.” A deeper analysis reveals that several ongoing and evolving arguments (e.g., academic focus) of the Right are wrapped up in education censorship discourse. Although network influences and potentially bad faith actors on the political Right have, at times, manufactured education censorship and divisive narratives, the crux and sustainment of movement may hinge on realities, perceptions, and values that encapsulate concern of progressive education. In reliance on surface level depictions (i.e., culture wars; political divisions) articles largely under-acknowledged the actual divides that exist beneath the surface. To follow, news article references will be provided with the corresponding newspaper (i.e., New York Times (NYT); USA Today (UST); Tampa Bay Times (TBT); Wall Street Journal (WSJ)). A full list of articles is provided in Appendix D.

The results are organized into five primary themes (a) summary of networks, (b) leveraging pandemic challenges, (c) faces of the movement, (d) discourse of the political Right, and (e) discourse of the political Left. In the first section, networks will be delineated to understand the breadth of implicated and associated actors and organizations. Leveraging pandemic challenges shows the influence of social and political turmoil prior to the censorship movement, including mask mandates, learning loss, and academic concerns. The discourse of the political Right entails arguments and

justifications for censorship, to explain the current trends that are driven by arguments related to efficacy, content, and concerns regarding the perceived attacks on white Americans. Finally, discourse of the political Left, shows the opposition to censorship, the justification of CRT, and the potential conflict that may emerge from politically divisive discourse such as culture war explanations of censorship.

## **Networks**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to document all the network forces of education censorship; however, three points are necessary to outline. First, the substantial amount of network influences calls for future in-depth research to examine and understand. Second, as the network influences undergird education censorship, there are a few that represent the face of the movement and may mask the paradigm of network influences. Third, network influences may be, at times, financially motivated, whereby fear and culture war narratives are intentionally harnessed to sell the narrative on the political Right, nevertheless local level movements and concerns on behalf of parents have been leveraged. Now that a movement on the local level has tapped directly into parents' concerns, these aspects must be considered.

The scope and prevalence of education censorship has slowly gained steam over the last couple of years, with most states being caught up in the predominance of education censorship trends. Although articles allude to many influences related to the enforcement and sustainment of education censorship, there exists a vast array of network influences that extends well beyond the narratives illuminated in news articles. Most predominantly mentioned, include the Manhattan Institute fellow, Christopher Rufo, and Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis. Article 153 (TBT) links the origins of education

ensorship to a model bill designed by James Copland and supported by Rufo and the Manhattan Institute (see Copland, 2021). Additionally, influence on the macro level noted in three NYT articles, includes Leonard A. Leo (2; 4; 10) and his network.

Network influences were most notably by the extent of the groups and organizations involved, including corporations (e.g., Patriot Mobile), corporate foundations (e.g., Koch Industries), trusts (e.g., Marble Freedom Trust), think-tanks (e.g., Cato Institute), advocacy organizations (e.g., Concord Fund), public policy groups (e.g., American Enterprise Institute) law firms (e.g., Public Interest Law Firm), political action committees (e.g., Get Our Kids Back), colleges (e.g., Hillsdale College), consulting groups (e.g., Bill of Rights Institute), related media sources and circulation (e.g., books, podcasts, Twitter; Facebook; TikTok; YouTube), school board advocacy groups (e.g., Moms for Liberty), social media groups (e.g., Kent Island Patriots Facebook Group), local associations (e.g., Association for Christian Schools), non-profits (e.g., Parents Defending Education), advocacy groups (e.g., Citizens Defending Freedom), and a wide array of circulating actors, politicians, and conservative and liberal activists. The presence of network influences laid the foundation for influential education censorship discourse that built upon the hostility and discontent of caregivers during the pandemic.

### **Leveraging Pandemic Challenges**

The discontent of caregiver concerns related mask mandates (1 & 21 NYT; 164 TBT), school closings, and real and perceived academic inequities (i.e., learning loss; 108 UST) was transitioned into anti-CRT discourse, united by a vast network of influences (Mitchell & Greer, 2022). The NYT Article 28 captured the pandemic hostility that was ripe for opportunity:

Rufo readily admits that school closures prepared the ground for the drive against critical race theory. You have a multiracial group of parents that felt like the public school bureaucracies were putting their children through a policy regime of chaos, with Covid and shutdowns, and then pumping them full of left-wing racialist ideologies.

Florida offers several examples to illustrate how debates transitioned from pandemic concerns into anti-CRT discourse (150, 158, 164, 58 TBT). Tampa Bay Times Article 133 noted: “For months during the pandemic, Pinellas County residents filled school board chambers to argue about topics such as critical race theory and masking.” Article 134 in the TBT added: “With the debate over school masks waning in much of Florida, conservative activists have again turned their attention to rooting out critical race theory in classrooms.” TBT Article 139 noted:

Still, its recent emergence as a political issue has made Hernando County a case study in how issues like critical race theory, mask mandates and vaccinations have driven a wedge in many communities over the past year, at times becoming a platform for political candidates.

Articles cited the existence of pandemic policies, brewing school board contention, as directly corollary to education censorship trends. Gillespie & DeAngelis (2022) noted that the presence of online education also spurred caregiver awareness (89 WSJ; 95, 104, 106, 116, 126 UST; 166 TBT) to see pandemic education amid progressive trends after the racial reckoning in post-George Floyd schools (65 WSJ; 100, 122 UST) and calls for increased curricula transparency (66 WSJ). Meanwhile, a push for “back to

normal” (28 NYT) was weaponized by the Left as a perceived racist stance given the longstanding trends of academic inequities. That is, any perceived back-to-normal stance would be largely inequitable given the educational preconditions. This argument provides a classic example of how culture war divides are leveraged. Specifically, as caregivers encountered elevated economic challenges, and concerns of online schooling, the trends of progressive education continued although caregivers emphasized their concern with getting youth educated once again. Yet, those on the Right often felt they were not heard amid pandemic challenges and policies outside of their control (21 NYT; 121 UST). Furthermore, while the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were leveraged into parents’ rights and school choice movements, the energy was perpetuated by a vast network of influences (Mitchell, 2023). Although many of these organizations were illuminated above, most were masked by the prominent faces of the movement.

### **Faces of the Movement**

The most well-known and publicized face of the anti-CRT movement and education censorship trends was Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo (13 NYT; 95 UST). Also prominently featured was Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (22 NYT; 150, 151, 152 TBT). As Rufo maintained the face of education censorship, the systemic elements related to a vast array of networks are systematically downplayed, overlooked, and difficult to notice. The discursive attention of Rufo and DeSantis may be intended to galvanize the political base, promote fear, and, at times, leverage racist dog whistles (19 NYT). TBT Article 150 underscored the convergence of these two dominant political forces: “He [DeSantis] will push legislation next year that will protect kids and workers against very pernicious ideologies, and enlisted Christopher Rufo, who spurred the

national conservative movement against the theory, to fire up the crowd.” The dominance of what appears to be largely two forces on the Right, one political (DeSantis) and the other supported by the Manhattan Institute (Rufo) may procure dismissiveness by the political Left due to bad faith perceptions.

### **Discourse of the Political Right**

The concerns on the Right – and not only the Right – comprise several factors. First, questions have been brought forward about the efficacy of certain progressive trends. For example, credentials, trustworthiness, and professional development training have been questioned. Second, content has been questioned, including oppressor vs. oppressed dialogues, intersectionality, equity vs. equality debates, perceived over-emphasis of race over class-based narratives, and perceived political orientation. Third, and an extension of the previous point, the increasing focus on whiteness, white privilege, white fragility, and systemic racism has been, at times, perceived as attacks on white Americans, and at the perceived expense of an academic focus in schools.

### ***Progressive Education Reform: Concerns of Efficacy***

To begin, TBT Article 134 linked the trends of anti-bias training to CRT: “Among their [political Right] targets are programs that encourage equity and anti-racism, and work to reduce unconscious bias in the classroom.” Similar concern over educational consulting training was highlighted in WSJ Article 129:

... A Pennsylvania father's battle with a school district demonstrates that public-school teachers are being trained in the deeply divisive racial ideology -- and defensive administrators are playing semantic games to allay parental concerns. In

2018 the Tredyffrin-Easttown School District near Philadelphia signed a contract with Pacific Educational Group, a California-based consulting firm.

WSJ Article 88 connected the links between anti-CRT discourse and increases in DEI initiatives:

The anger about critical race theory in schools reflects a larger frustration. In the past two years, the diversity regime has hardened. Its proponents have adopted more-strident rhetoric. Some speak openly of quotas. The range of permitted opinion has narrowed. Anyone who works in a large bureaucracy knows that DEI has become a powerful tool for cultural radicals. In the hiring process, DEI statements serve as ideological litmus tests.

NYT Article 40 acknowledged the complexity CRT debates, stating:

The problem seems to be that some small portion of what's produced in the name of equity in schools is pretty embarrassing. That stuff, which mostly can be found in diversity trainings, then gets blasted out to the world as proof that the race hucksters are taking over the schools.

Article 40 continued by pointing to the nuance and shortcomings of, for example, diversity training sessions and how the commonplace response of those on the Left who argue CRT was not in schools may inflame social divides and under-acknowledge the increasing concern regarding progressive education reform in schools. WSJ Article 89 concluded with a similar dialogue:

The new trinity of Virginia progressives seems to be diversity, equity and inclusion. These have replaced science, logic and debate. Voting for people who believe in these new gods ends up decreasing diversity of thought, excluding (or firing) anyone who doesn't line up, and denying fairness to many who refuse to back down. These fashionable words sound good initially, but the results are tragically incompatible with our Constitution and our precious and fragile liberal democracy.

The rise of progressive consulting influences was notable in the quote in TBT Article 150: "Now, the governor wants to expand the reach of the culture war issue by targeting a whole cottage industry of consultants who are paid to inject critical race theory into classroom lessons and workplace training." One recurring concern played out in Florida, where an education consulting training bifurcated DEI training groups (i.e., white and Black; WSJ 65) for school staff at a Duval County school. TBT 150 also highlighted these trends:

The idea, according to the news report, angered some parents, and the school principal explained in an email that the meetings were planned separately to 'help address concerns and ensure all voices are heard.' After facing push back, the principal said they were 'revisiting our approach with our consultants' and canceled the event, according to the news report.

As the Right voiced concern over the purveyors of education reform, including consulting groups at the behest of progressive ideology, additional concerns related to content emerged.

### ***Progressive Education Reform: Concerns of Content***

Concern on the political Right related to the content of progressive education reform comprised several factors, including historical accuracy (e.g., 1619 project), deficit-based portrayals of white Americans, perceived divisiveness and decreasing academic focus stemming from progressive trends. TBT 138 encapsulated this debate:

The curriculum was released by the college in July 2021 amid growing partisan battles in school districts over issues like critical race theory and The New York Times' "The 1619 Project," which re-centered the focus on the nation's history on the year the first enslaved Africans arrived.

Articles (76 WSJ; 120, 126 UST; 167 TBT) continued the concern of CRT, 1619 Project, and the focus on systemic racism, whereby Article 96 (UST) illuminated some weaknesses of the 1619 Project that made it more exposed to conservative criticism. Article 125 (UST) reiterated some of these shortcomings: "The 1619 Project, for example, while a noble and ambitious effort to illustrate the centrality of slavery in U.S. history, oversold its premise to the point of committing historical interpretive error that editors first denied and then seemed to only partially concede?" WSJ 76 added a personal narrative to encapsulate the discourse of the 1619 Project:

That's when I noticed how illiberal my liberal high school had become. I once expressed disagreement with the narrative of the 1619 Project, and that same social studies teacher snapped that I was opposed to hearing other perspectives. I had signed up for her class because it was described as discussion-based, but certain discussion seemed forbidden.

Examining the concerns of progressive curricula trends can help illuminate the links to education censorship. For example, Article 96 (UST) showcased how the perspectives on the Right may have led directly to the adoption of education censorship policies: “Some conservatives believe teaching the founding of America *has become too negative* and focused on slavery. Many say *history lessons make white children feel guilty* about their ancestors enslaving people.” One of the most common conceptual bans outlined in education censorship legislation was the component related to: “An individual should feel *discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress* because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex” – banned in 13 states (54%) of state policies.

Article 139 (TBT) noted concern regarding the shift to equity: “He called the Equity in Education training program used twice by the school a Marxist attempt to create a rift for revolution and a scenario of oppressors versus oppressed.” Concerns related curricula content was also highlighted by the push to represent multiple perspectives, Article 166 (TBT) discussed:

In Miami, some took issue with not teaching about the pluses and minuses of communism and socialism. For instance, one standard says teachers must explain the advantages of capitalism and a free-market system over government-controlled economic systems (e.g., socialism and communism) in generating economic prosperity for all citizens.”

The argument for multiple perspectives may have been a push for more conservative leaning curriculum content, however Article 14 (WSJ) encouraged a call for a diversity of content:

Teaching multiple perspectives and the 1619 and 1776 versions of American history would be the best way to encourage open inquiry. Students could read Ibram X. Kendi's bestseller "How to Be an Antiracist" alongside one of the many articles or books by writers like Messrs, Loury, McWhorter and Patterson. Kids would hear theories about systems of oppression, but they would also hear about the role that class and cultural differences play in disparity. In short, they would receive multiple narratives and explanations about why America is the way it is today and decide for themselves what to think and do about it.

UST Article 101 illuminated the complexity of parent concerns, citing polls that showed:

Most parents believe children should learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in U.S. society, but slightly less than half support the teaching of critical race theory...parents were most likely to say children should start learning about racism in kindergarten - the youngest age group they could select.

A push for multiple perspectives was abstractly linked to criticism of progressive education, including specific linguistic trends and changes. For some, terms such as "minoritized" (Article 139) are perceived to carry a negative valence which may stigmatize and harness deficit-based or victimhood conceptualizations (Friedersdorf, 2015). In a similar valence, concerns over progressive trends related to privilege, and fragility have also been pointed out by scholars on the Left and Right to impose all-encompassing perspectives of whites that are deficit-driven and based on notions of assumed inferiority (Lensmire et al., 2013; Church, 2020). With these examples, we can consider the overlap in these narratives, and how censorship can be linked to these

considerations, whereby the protection of youth surrounds the push to protect their development and provide holistic forms of education that are beyond the innate stigmatizing characteristics. On the same level, curricula trends that appear to center race have also wrought developing forms of concern – this consideration was informed by the work of Ian Haney-López.

Article 33 (NYT) privileged a quote from Robert Pondiscio, an “education expert” from the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute: “The controversy over critical race theory serves a purpose in warning educators to tread carefully on a divisive subject. People have strong feelings about the degree to which race should be central to a kid's educational experience.” Article 166 (TBT) added: “DeSantis, meanwhile, says teaching concepts that center on race is a non-starter for him, in part, because it could lead **white kids in particular** to see themselves in a ‘negative light.’” Ian Haney-López (2019) has worked with a team of scholars working to listen, hear, and re-articulate narratives in ways where Americans are more responsive, receptive, and considerate to discourse. These findings underscore the need to move beyond deficit-based depictions, moving toward a balance of race-class narratives. In this sense, race-class narratives may help to unite populations through similar experiences such as economic insecurity. As the curricula concerns are brought to the surface, we can begin to see how perceptions (real and perceived) of those on the Right regarding progressive educational trends may lead to stigmatizing and alienating experiences for youth.

### ***Progressive Education Reform: At the Expense of Academics***

One important connection between education censorship, progressive education criticism, and the reified focus toward conservative values is emphasized with concerns

about academic inequities, low test scores and failing school narratives. Article 139 (TBT) discussed: “Then she criticized the school district's effort to address achievement gaps among identity groups by including more students in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses who might typically be considered unqualified.” WSJ Article 86 stated:

The cynic in me says the teacher unions’ push for critical race theory is an attempt to redirect blame for the failure of our public-education system, particularly for minorities and in disadvantaged communities, onto a bogeyman: an invisible form of racism. It’s a neat and clean way to explain why kids are not getting educated and advancing—not because of the teachers, but because of systemic discrimination and a lack of privilege.

Author Jonah Goldberg (136 TBT) discussed his recent tour of grade schools for his daughter, noting the “obsession” with DEI and the prioritization of social justice:

The headmaster of one prestigious school even advised a group of parents to look at the mission statements of other schools. ‘You’ll see a lot of buzzwords like academic rigor and scholarship’, he warned, making scare quotes with his fingers. ‘Well, we want you to know that **we consider our social justice mission more important than academics.**’

Goldberg added that given the pervasiveness of wokeism; solutions related to school choice will be nullified by the prevalence of progressive trends. Additionally, he concluded:

Proponents of “critical race theory” and “antiracism” (the idea that being “nonracist” isn't good enough; you have to embrace an antiracist agenda) as an approach to classroom instruction **believe America is shot through with structural racism and white supremacy** – and that white people must atone for their “privilege” somehow.

Article 164 (TBT) linked the pandemic challenges to the current academic concerns amid progressive reform: “People can fight about masks, vaccines, equity, critical race theory or any other issues that seem to concern adults more than the children in the classroom. **But are people directing that same energy to simply making sure that those third-graders can read?**” In a similar concern linking progressive reform to anxiety over waning academic focus, Article 63 (WSJ) discussed the antiquated and lackluster pre-service education of teachers:

What teachers-to-be aren't being taught is perhaps even more concerning. The National Council on Teacher Quality reviewed how many schools of education taught prospective elementary-school teachers the “science of reading”—decades-old research that confirms the necessity of phonics, spelling and vocabulary instruction. Only 15% of schools emphasized these elements in 2006, which increased to 22%.

Additionally, Article 83 (WSJ) pointed to the need to address: “falling test scores and rising behavior problems.” Article 90 (WSJ) added: “The national debate over racial propaganda and sex education in elementary schools is important, but it's almost certainly **less consequential than the continuing inability of our K-12 schools to teach**

**basic reading and math.”** TBT Article 164 continued with a quote calling for sustained academic focus:

The pandemic will eventually pass, and the current hot issues in education will cool down, and something else will take their place. But the need to be able to read is constant, and decades after the pandemic has faded away, the student who didn't read proficiently in third grade could still be suffering from that deficit. That fact should be front and center in discussions about education in Florida.

### **Discourse of the Political Left**

Confounding the narratives of those on the Right are an array of discursive arguments of the political Left. To begin, the concerns put forward by the Right – regardless of bad faith intentionality – are often under-acknowledged, vilified, or altogether dismissed by narratives on the Left. Although it should be noted, the Left's engagement in dismissing the Right may amount to overall divergent definitions of CRT and assumptions of bad faith. In other words, although the Left may, at times, dismiss arguments on the Right, the dismissal may be a product of a poorly articulated and expanded argument on the Right (Allen, 2022). For example, the phrase: “CRT is not in schools” was outlined in at least 21 occasions (12% of articles) and may be intended to reduce the concerns of the Right to only one concept. The ongoing tension was also notable in the prevalence of culture war narratives, noted in at least 19 articles (11% of articles). Although the accuracy of this claim can at times be proven in K-12 schools, there was much more complexity and nuance in the argument on the Right that ends up lost. Importantly, much of the conversation or criticism that emerged on the Right (e.g., anti-CRT) rapidly evolved to encompass a wide range of increasing terminology (see

Allen, 2022). In addition, challenges emerged as deep-rooted political concerns of the Right became wrapped in the movement, as noted in the previous section and related to progressive trends and perceived diminishment of academic rigidity. In this section, the responses of the Left and explanations of those concerns of the Right and ongoing education censorship are outlined.

TBT Article 134 education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings discussed CRT in schools:

It's important to recognize that the people complaining to school boards about what they're calling CRT are not talking about the field of study that district leaders refer to. They're following a national political playbook that can conflate everything that everyone is afraid of, creating a type of hysteria the nation saw during 1950s McCarthyism.

Article 97 (UST) responded to the mass murder at a Buffalo grocery store, where 10 people were killed. The author elaborates on the stance that teaching more racially inclusive and historically honest curricula could help quell the increasing social tension. Meanwhile, arguments for progressive education reform were, at times, wrapped up in the assumed social and educational need of these initiatives, which may hinder inquisition and critical reflection, and result in dismissive attitudes to criticism of the Right. For example, Article 165 (TBT) stated:

*Not that critical race theory is taught in K-12 public schools in Florida, mind you. It is not.* But it is one of those **right-wing bogeymen like sanctuary cities**

that **do not exist** and *riots that have not happened* that we in Florida must nonetheless stamp out, a straw man that no effort should be spared to destroy.

TBT Article 169 continued with responses that dismissed social progress – a common concern of the Right – where the focus on, for example, systemic racism may overshadow our awareness of progress that has been made (Rowe, 2022). In addition, the dismissal of the Right was, at times associated with republican campaign efforts, for example, Article 103 (UST):

Youngkin’s hope for victory Tuesday lies in angering parents about the radicalization of education in Virginia. His hope is that critical race theory - which isn't even being taught in public schools - can anger enough white parents and encourage them to turn out for Republicans and MAGAism.

Even in the case that CRT does not exist in practice in public schools, the dismissiveness of the Right argument shifts the concern toward an invisible force, even though the argument was more nuanced than merely to CRT. At the same time, efforts to hear youth or caregiver perspectives are largely absent across articles. NYT Article 19 alluded to the Left’s messaging problem:

The clearest example is in Virginia, where the Democratic candidate for governor, Terry McAuliffe, lost his election after spending weeks trying to minimize and discredit his opponent’s criticisms of public-school education, particularly the way that racism is talked about. Mr. McAuliffe accused the Republican, Glenn Youngkin, of campaigning on a made-up issue and of blowing a racist dog whistle.

The dismissal of the Right was also driven by national governing bodies, NYT Article 21 noted: “Education leaders, including the National School Boards Association, *deny* that there is any critical race theory being taught in K-12 schools.” Understood another way, the denial of CRT in schools may stem from the divergent conceptualizations of CRT, where the Right sees CRT in equity reform and teacher training, meanwhile, the Left interprets CRT in schools on par with the origins of legal theory, and therefore clearly was not in schools. Alongside the dismissal of the Right was a growing portrayal of the Right under attack (93 WSJ). NYT Article 26 noted conservatives being silenced at school board meetings. WSJ Article 85 added:

Or look at critical race theory. How much easier it is to treat those who express doubts as bigots and racists than engage on the merits. So pronounced is this reluctance to debate honestly that Mr. McAuliffe and the press pretended that because CRT isn’t taught in its most formal academic version, it’s not in the schools. Who’s the real culture warrior here, when any mom or dad can search the state’s education website and find many mentions of critical race theory—including a 2019 memo from the superintendent of public instruction recommending the book *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* for school and division leaders.

Although it is likely that most U.S. schools may not have direct links to CRT, what can be seen above was that the dismissal of the Right may have spurred increased divisions, especially in the cases where connections to CRT are illuminated and the disregard of parent concerns ensued. NYT Article 53 captured the politically divergent conceptualizations of CRT:

The debate about critical race theory has become circular and maddening because the phrase itself has been unmoored from any fixed meaning. Progressives argue, correctly, that teachers aren't instructing young kids in law school scholarship about structural racism. But even some people who oppose bans on critical race theory insist that this misses the point.

Article 14 (WSJ) underscored the reactionary trends and reductive narratives:

Conventional wisdom has it that there are *only two sides in the culture war* over kids' instruction on race and racism in America. Those on the right want to impose state-level bans on teaching critical race theory in public schools. Some also want to remove particular books from libraries and curriculums. On the left, people want to teach about America's history of racism and contemporary systemic racism but from only one perspective, with little if any room for debate. They deny CRT is being taught. **I don't believe these are really the only options.** Schools can and should teach about race and racism while upholding this nation's liberal values of free inquiry.

### **Study 2 Conclusion**

Building upon the discursive foundation of education censorship policies and the Right-wing political discourse of Christopher Rufo – the mainstream media narratives of censorship add complexity to understanding the impact and overcoming the imposed obstacles. Although education censorship was supported by elite structures on the political-Right, the media works to serve multiple functions, including (a) reifying social and political divides, (b) maintaining corporate wealth acquisition through polarizing and

sensationalized discourse, and (c) serving to build public buy-in, either in support, or against censorship.

### **Study 2 Conclusion: A Theoretical Summary**

As the methodological focus on the social wrong (i.e., education censorship; Fairclough, 2013) continued in study two the dimensions of education censorship now appear in both policy and varied media discourse. The first two studies were helpful for understanding the discursive spread and the influence on society relative to censorship. Next in Fairclough's (2013) exploratory framework is to identify obstacles to addressing the social wrong. Building upon the obstacles uncovered in study one, policies, discourse on the political-Right, and the conglomerate impact on undermining public education, study two brings forward the confounding influence of mainstream news media. News discourse helped to show how the current debates of censorship are part and parcel of a longer trend of educational debates, the corollary influence of the pandemic fear, and interpretative differences of censorship. For example, debates of parents' rights, equity and equality, and the parameters of colorblind racism were prominently illuminated in discourse. Additionally, across political spectrums, culture wars, identity politics, and debates of CRT in schools consumed articles – as the elite structures that created censorship – were masked by discourse that used political divides as an explanation of censorship. Further, there appeared a deep concern on the political Right with the purported idea of dwindling academic focus that clearly built upon pandemic fears and deficit-based narratives of learning loss (Mitchell, 2023).

Although several debates emerged within news articles, the opportunity for actual debate was supplanted by culture war narratives that positioned the need for readers to

take a political side – resulting in mechanisms of high conflict (Ripley, 2021). Even though elites on the Right engineered and justified censorship – mainstream news articles – reified political divides through sensational and fear-based narratives that positioned Americans against one another – thus optimizing elite capture (Táíwò, 2022). As Fairclough brings attention to whether the social order needs the social wrong – elites can capitalize through tactics of economic imperialism that began by imposing policy, undermining public education – solidifying these efforts through media discourse that manufactures consent and reifies political divides (Herman & Chomsky, 1998) which may shape new mechanisms of oppression and censorship on the local level. Therefore, sensational news discourse procures financial sustainability for elite media conglomerates and supports the policy agenda to undermine public education through sustained narratives of fear and political divisions. Finally, Fairclough (2013) asks researchers to identify ways past the obstacles. Policy may be an integral point of intervention, as well as the narratives in the mainstream media – as support and consent is manufactured through divisive media discourse. Thus, positioning discourse to overcome social and political divides, find commonality, and understand how elites create and sustain these divides may be crucial to overcoming the developing trends of oppression and elite capture (de Boer, 2023).

### **Results Study 3: Critical Discourse Analysis of Education Censorship, Media Discourse and School Board Public Comments**

The analysis of six school board meetings in Traverse City amounted to a total of ( $N = 207$ ) public comments. Most comments were limited to a 3-minute time frame imposed by the school board, amounting to 118 pro-resolution and 89 anti-resolution

statements. School board meetings ranged from 1.5 hours to 7 hours in length. Findings in this section were developed by both deductive and inductive analytical techniques and informed by the previous findings of Christopher Rufo discourse (study 1 phase 2), prominent media discourse (study 2) and school board advocacy guidance from conservative publications (study 3 deductive framework). The results were categorized into three overarching themes, (1) Concerns of Content, (2) Concerns of Transparency, and (3) Perceived Attacks on white Americans (see Figure 10). It is important to underscore the overlap and interrelated components of each thematic category. For example, concerns of transparency and the perceived attacks on white Americans exist within the context of pre-existing concerns of content. For research purposes, all comments were anonymized to protect the identity of public commenters.

### **Concerns of Content**

What began in the Right-wing media as concerns of efficacy (see study 2) largely evolved into concerns of content. More elaborate discourse related to the efficacy of DEI, bias training, progressive trends aimed at equity were reduced by public commenters in a way where anti-CRT discourse was a sufficient explanation of anti-resolution discourse. Two sub-themes conjoin this section, including the sufficiency of pre-existing policies and perceived academic expense. Anti-resolution comments were consistent across school board sessions, including outlined concern of: “identity politics,” “diversity weaponization,” “indoctrination,” “teaching hate,” “Marxism,” the “hallmarks of critical race theory,” the perceived attacks on “fundamental American values,” “the sufficiency of pre-existing anti-discrimination policies,” and concern of deficit-based narratives regarding youth. For example, one individual stated: *“I find this resolution pessimistic,*

*negative, and imposes toxic assumptions about our children; this resolution is **creating racism, discrimination, and hate**. I encourage the board to stop buying into this negative rhetoric.”*

Anti-resolution comments were, at times, positioned under the guise of concern for youth well-being. These narratives were also consistent with longstanding conservative tropes about how systemic racism teaches learned victimhood (Armaly & Enders, 2021). For example, one public commenter voiced:

What we are teaching is victims, victimhood. We need to teach that we can all be victors, no matter what your background is. A lot of the comments I was hearing, we all really want the same goal. It’s just getting there differently and learning different truths.

Additional dialogue pointed to misunderstandings over wording and verbiage: *“I think everybody wants the same thing. We all want our kids to feel safe and to feel loved and to feel included.”* One individual alluded to the divisions imposed by the policy: *“We don't need a resolution that keeps getting re-written and rewritten with essentially the same goal, same language, same meeting, using different verbiage... This is our community divided.”* Another individual added: *“Discrimination is not about race, it’s actually about class, money, power, the elites, the deep state, all these people are programming people as they’re programming us to wear masks.”* In similar sentiment, one commenter stated:

There is a lot of conversation about the need to address the ugly. Yeah, that too but there is also a lot of beauty that has been left out of our curriculum. That

enforces love and acceptance and understanding of other people. Let's not be afraid of embracing the beauty too, it's there as well.

Public comments appear to have been influenced by talking points on the political Right, however one individual pulled a direct quote from Christopher Rufo's (2021b) lecture at Hillsdale College:

Critical Race Theory is an academic discipline formulated in the 1990s, built on the intellectual framework of identity based Marxism relegated for many years in universities and obscure academic journals over the past decade is increasingly becoming the default ideology in our public institutions. It has been injected into our public school systems, teacher training programs and school curriculum. There are words that are deployed by its supporters to describe critical race theory including equity, social justice, diversity and inclusion and culturally responsive teacher, that sound familiar.

A student commented about the resolution, stating:

The idea that CRT itself is an ideology that is too complex or inappropriate for younger audiences to understand is not only blatantly incorrect, it is also a dog whistle for extremist right-wing principles. I am a part of that K-12 group. And I am fully capable of learning and understanding the ideas of acceptance and systemic change that are within CRT.

Another person commented, *"I found that the original resolution was a blueprint to implement concepts of equity, often associated with books like white fragility and*

*academic teachings like critical race theory.*” One community member added a range of content related concerns: *“Topics being promoted include anti-racism, white fragility, white privilege, systemic oppression, managing resistance to the opposition, implicit bias, and microaggression.”* Additional anti-resolution discourse was voiced by a community member:

Whatever wording you choose for your resolution is irrelevant. If controversial ideas are still being pushed by the social equity task force and recommended teacher training by justice leaders collaborative. The overall theme of the recommended teacher training is that it isn't good enough to be a non-racist, **you have to be an anti-racist**. Meaning you have to be an activist, agitator, and make others aware of racial inequity in all things.

At times, pro-resolution commenters offered contemptuous discourse toward those opposed to the resolution. For example, the assumed obligation and progressive stance was noted: *“These angry parents were opposed to DEI education never referred to this incident or indicated any remorse for the recent events like this.”* Although the individual poses reasonable concerns, the exclusionary discourse may impede dialogue and conversation toward positive change.

### ***Sufficiency of Pre-existing Anti-Discrimination Policies***

Several individuals called for anti-discrimination efforts but opposed the policy resolution, noting the sufficiency of pre-existing school policies. For example, one individual stated: *“We already have policies in place.”* Another added:

I am absolutely opposed to all discrimination, racism and all hatred. I am opposed to anyone who is judged by their skin color and I am opposed to this resolution. It appears in language very much on that it is on the road to CRT, even if you don't want to call it that at this point. We already have policies, policies that would address those concerns that brought us to this point.

Similar points about pre-existing policies were made including: *“If the policies are enforced, if our kids don't have a voice, then what makes you think that some new labeled resolution will fix anything.”* Consistent with and building on the concerns of content, community members posed questions about the impact of pre-existing policies to undermine the development of a new equity resolution policy.

### ***Perceived Academic Expense***

A final sub-theme related to concerns of content, including discourse related to the perceived expense of academics. Discursive concerns built off the thematic areas to culminate with perceptions that equity-oriented trends and progressive reform came at the expense of an academic focus. Community members pointed to pre-existing education inequities and school system failure, including “kids can't read” and “at-risk” – consistent with the deductive coding schematic where academic outcomes were portrayed as in jeopardy amid progressive education efforts such as DEI and CRT. Discourse in this area may have built on previous academic concerns transpiring during the pandemic, including learning loss narratives, mask mandates, and school closures (Mitchell, 2023). For example, a community member commented: *“I'm not going anywhere that has vaccines required, that has masks required, and no CRT.”*

### **Concerns of Transparency**

Guidance for conservative resistance at school board meetings often included a lack of transparency as a guise for progressive or CRT agenda. In this section, theme two includes public comments regarding the lack of transparency, including unclear terminology, transparency regarding the equity task force, and clarity regarding the associations with local non-profit organizations aimed at racial justice. For example, one individual stated: “*Was the task-force hand-picked to promote your agenda?*” Collectively, there was substantial fear amid anti-resolution comments, including points about “white delusion fragility,” “finding racism in everything,” and apparent concerns of white society *all* being depicted as racist.

Calls for transparency were consistent with anti-resolution comments that sought clarity for the equity resolution as if to say the incident of racism was insufficient. For example, an individual commented: “*It looks like there is an alternative ulterior motive behind this. So please share with us publicly why this resolution is needed in addition to our handbook policies.*” While some individuals saw public comments as an opportunity to point out the moral deficits of some students as indication of a lack of religiosity in schools. This statement adheres with the work of (Seidel, 2022; Ferris & Robbins, 2023) where they point out that education censorship may function in ways to re-align toward conservative and religious underpinnings.

Concerns of transparency were also juxtaposed by concerns of the recognition or support by local community partners. For example, multiple individuals posed concern about the associations with local nonprofits (i.e., E3), including one statement:

I just wanted to reiterate that I am opposed to the DEI resolution. I've already submitted suggestions for the new version without verbiage that can be

misconstrued as critical race theory. I want the task force absolved. All of these folks that make up the task force are not educators for TCAPS and have no authority to critique TCAPS curriculum. This issue has done nothing but create division rather than creating unity. The school has already begun introducing critical race theory into our classrooms and teaching and training teachers on CRT.

Similar to previous sessions, concerns of CRT, and local associations with nonprofits suggested a lack of transparency, one community member voiced concern:

A school system should not be allowed to recruit activists to potentially change any part of our school district. Members of the taskforce clearly have an agenda to push, even if just pieces of CRT ideals. The schools are already sending teachers to training, but it is laced with critical race theory. TCAPs has no intention of teaching critical race theory in K-12 schools, so why are teachers being trained in it?

### **Perceived Attacks on white Americans**

Concerns of content were consistent across school board sessions, much of which intertwined with and was rooted by theme three – the perceived attacks on white Americans. Narratives in this theme are often not explicitly tied to the perceived attacks on white Americans, however these findings are informed from previous research, to note several subthemes, including (a) repositioning blame, (b) equity versus equality, and (c) color-evasive strategies. For example, one student commented about the difficulties of maintaining a republican perspective in the classroom:

In our classrooms. We are all arguing against each other. Like my history class was a complete mess. Last year, because we're arguing with each other about who did this, who did what. We have we're shaming each other for having different opinions. My ex friend, she didn't want to be friends with me because I'm a Republican.

### ***Repositioning Blame***

Speaking to the repositioning of perceived blame, one individual commented: *“If all of these students are so screwed up that they're racist. What have you guys been doing up to now?”* Another individual opposed to the resolution stated:

I would say go fire some teachers. If you've got that big of a problem. You've got the wrong teachers in there, but teachers are the ones that are going to fix this problem. Not a taskforce that's got a bunch of lefties on it.

One community member underscored the perceived stigmatization and repositioned blame at CRT:

We want to challenge the thought that's trending today. That critical race theory should be taught as fact, as theory. Some time now, one of the most effective ways to **stigmatize someone like me**, especially because I'm a conservative is to label them a racist. I'm not a racist. I don't have a racist bone in my body. And I'm pretty sure that a hundred percent of the people here tonight are not racist.

One individual commented about the perceived attacks on conservatism and religiosity, serving to reposition blame on progressive trends, asking, *“Will the final*

*resolution propose a curriculum that crosses families' deeply held religious convictions on the topic of sexual morality? Will it require teachers to teach a Marxist racial class struggle of critical race theory in the name of anti-racism?"*

Perceptions of blame imposed by the resolution also led community members to reposition the blame consistent with conservative talking points, including victim mentalities, Marxism, and the divides imposed by CRT. For example, one community member voiced:

Blaming one race or another is also not unifying. It makes one race hate another, and one race gets a victim mentality. It is also very Marxist. They divide people along the lines of race and class and more, they do not bring people together.

Finally, repositioning blame also led to calls for unity, serving to both undermine progressive trends and deflect from moral responsibility. Some community members outlined calls for unity: *"You will not encourage students to unite by calling attention to their differences. This is very simple, you have it in your hearts. Race matters only to racists. The rest of us care about character. So did Martin Luther King."* Similarly, another person stated: *"This is not you against us. Us against them. And when we really look at things. We're all, really, a lot more alike and we are different."* Calls for unity were followed up by concerns over the fear of labeling and mistreating youth:

I am concerned about a culture of fear that I think already exists, in fact I know it exists in TCAPS. I have been a pastor in Traverse City for a better part of 40 years. I've been around a long time so I know a lot of people in many of your own teachers have come to me privately and told me about how afraid they are because

they are very much against the very direction that this board is headed, but they're scared to death to speak out.

The fear was palpable and likely driven by media distortion and sensationalization, one individual added: *“If you would actually promote the principles of CRT and the LGBTQIA+ principles and agenda I believe that you will see a rise of anxiety, depression, and teenage suicide that will make the days of COVID look like nothing.”*

### ***Equity vs. Equality***

Subtheme two amid the perceived attacks on white Americans included discourse that reified longstanding debates of equity versus equality. One individual emphasized conservative talking points related to equity and the perceived associations with CRT:

It seems to me that what this is, is critical race theory under another name. Critical race theory does nothing, but promote discrimination against different groups. Discrimination based on your skin color. Equity versus equality. We can certainly have equality in education. Can we have equity? Can you control everything about someone's education so that they all come out equitable? I think the variables are just too big. Quality is what we strive for, equity we hope for.

Another community member posed a similar sentiment: *“If you truly believe in equality, then use that word equality without fear. Using the word equity implies that you are encouraging the opposite of equal opportunity in which this country has built upon.”* This comment concluded with a loud applause from the crowd at the school board meeting.

Another individual voiced: *“I’m in favor of not being a racist. I’m in favor of equality of opportunity.”* An individual in opposition to the resolution concluded: *“Equality is great,*

*equality of opportunity. Equity. That means the government decides who does what, it's a bad idea.*” Another community member concluded: *“This is totally causing division. The word equity actually means division.”* Building on the discursive concerns over racial divisions, a student added:

Today's kids are heading into a world full of racial tension. We need to understand it and where it comes from. We want to discuss racism and discrimination in class. We need our teachers to help us express our feelings and fears. To the school board, please know that my friends and I are grateful that you are hearing our voices as students, please do not deny us the education that we deserve.

### ***Color-Evasive Strategies***

The perceived attacks on white Americans were coupled with narratives that privileged color-evasive mentalities. Consistent with conservative discourse, commenters underscored fear about the dichotomy imposed by oppressor versus oppressed categorizations that were intertwined with calls for color-evasiveness. For example:

Calling all white people oppressors and black people, or people of color oppressed will create more division, not less. To teach our children that they are less because of their color to teach them discrimination is a disgusting measure I never even thought we'd have to entertain.

Consistent with discourse on the Political Right and derived from Trump's Executive Order 13950, one commenter proposed changes to the resolution, including additions to note that one race/identity is not morally superior, inherently racist, and argued to prevent

discrimination and adverse treatment based upon one's identity. They concluded by stating: *"Our opinions and views are not hateful or ill informed. We love, respect, and support all members of our community."* One commenter underscored their concern for anti-discrimination efforts, but prioritized a color-evasive strategy:

Another story, I've heard many, like this. A student being bullied because of their skin color. This has been talked about again. No discrimination. I don't care about color. Anything, all people should be loved. Many attempts were made to address this issue with teachers or principle, but nothing was done. This is the problem. Let's focus on the root here. Not apply a band-aid.

Although the resolution largely sidestepped specific conceptualizations of youth, the media influence was apparent in the fear outlined about how youth may be perceived amid changing progressive narratives:

Each and every one of you should be proud of your skin color and your background where you come from. You should not be ashamed and you should not have to carry the burden of your grandfather, even if they had slaves. That had absolutely nothing to do with you.

One commenter declared the need for history curriculum but rejected the route of antiracism and the 1619 Project, providing the following statement: *"I don't disagree that we need to teach racism to our children. The history of it. What it's done and that it still exists. However I do reject teachers teaching students to be racist."* Similar concern of antiracism was noted: *"They reported that one of the steps towards becoming anti-racist included the idea: I feel bad for being white and it's apparently not okay to think it's not*

*my fault for being white. Whose fault is it?"* Another disclosed anti-resolution sentiment, declaring a rewording. Finally, another pointed to concerns of CRT: *"In my mind, the CRT thing and this gender junk is a way to kill kids from the inside."*

### **Study 3 Conclusion**

The localized view of school board public comments in response to an equity resolution policy offers several important implications. The focus on a Michigan school district was useful for examining a geographic region *without* state level censorship legislation enacted. The intent here was to assess the discursive impact of censorship that may have appeared at school board meetings. Although the relationship between media discourse and school board public comments was theorized to have an impact, it was nonetheless surprising to see direct quotes from conservative figures used by the public in opposition to the equity resolution proposal. Thus, the findings illuminated the significant mezzo level influence of school boards to (a) reinforce state level censorship and media discourse, (b) provide an opportunity for new forms of censorship to emerge, and (c) create new emergent discourse in the media to perpetuate influence.

### **Study 3 Conclusion: A Theoretical Summary**

In the continued focus on the social wrong (i.e., education censorship; Fairclough, 2013) the domain of school board public comment influence was analyzed to understand how policy and media discourse collide to impact the discourse at school board meetings. The collective obstacles that have emerged is a complex relationship between policies, media discourse, and school board influence – where the *high conflict* that has a foundation in state policies, developed in mainstream news media and was exacerbated in school board meetings. Specific mechanisms of how high conflict emerged within school

board meetings have to do, in part, with the reduction of conservative talking points. That is, where concerns of efficacy related to, for example, DEI, CRT, and bias training, were reduced to three-minute talking points, where merely alluding to these concepts was sufficient to explain the concern with the equity resolution policy. The media influence is apparent within school board public comments but also altered and interpreted by individual perspectives and public speaking time constraints. Keywords such as “equity” are then outlined as proof of school-based indoctrination. These trends built upon pre-existing concerns, such as learning loss, mask mandates, school closures, and the perception that progressive trends trump an academic focus (Mitchell & Greer, 2022).

Elite capture (Táíwò, 2022) emerged from the mechanisms of high conflict, where control has overtaken policies, media discourse, and now school board meetings – resulting in economic imperialism that maintains social structures, develops financial gains through pervasive media discourse, creates new financial opportunities through school board advocacy groups (e.g., Parents Defending Education; Moms for Liberty), and provides an additional layer of fear of public education institutions, reified through policy, media and school board influences. As stated previously, the social order needs the social wrong of censorship to create new financial opportunities, distract from social instability and economic precarity, while building new opportunities of financial wealth acquisition through for profit education and mechanisms of economic imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022).

## **Results Study 4: School Social Worker Advocacy and Resistance in the Context of Education Censorship**

The results from study 4 are categorized into three discursive themes, (1) Impact of Education Censorship, (2) Pre-existing and General Challenges to Contemporary SSW Practice, and (3) Advocacy and Resistance (see Figure 11). Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms and all identifying information has been deidentified, including states, districts, schools, and curricula components to protect anonymity.

### **Theme 1: Impact of Education Censorship**

Participants discussed various impacts of education censorship which I organized into three sub-themes: (a) Negative impacts of specific changes mandated based on state, school board, and school censorship policies; (b) Culture of fear; and (c) Varied interpretation of censorship.

#### **Negative Impacts of Specific Changes Mandated by Policies**

School Social Workers (SSWs) in this study, were challenged by state-level policy trends related to education censorship as well as interpersonal ramifications impacting the lives of youth and the practice of SSWs in deleterious ways.

##### ***State Policies***

Several participants located in geographic regions where education censorship bills had been introduced, and in some cases enacted into law, spoke to the impact of these policies. That is, regardless of the enactment of state education censorship policies, including anti-CRT curriculum bills, anti-LGBTQ bills (e.g., gender-affirming care; sports and restroom bans), and anti-SEL bills – the legislative impact of education

censorship bills on schools was noticeable. For example, Olivia noted the impact of a proposed anti-gender-affirming care bill:

The student was on hormone [treatment] and they came in sobbing, like scream, crying, full on panic attack, just had gotten the news that this bill was proposed and they thought they were going to have go off hormones and basically were like, our representatives want me dead?

Participants also mentioned the impact of bills targeting higher education. For example, as states impose restrictions on courses in higher education – these policies are also set to impact high school youth who are dually enrolled in college. Aaliyah noted, “*Sociology 101 is no longer listed as filling a requirement, so if they’ll censor what adults can learn in college, they’ll censor anything for the minors.*”

In addition to the damages imposed by the enactment of policies, SSWs commented on the lack of state guidance and support: “*There hasn’t been any clear direction with how and what exactly we should be doing*” [Ava]. This combination of oppressive policies that continue to evolve in scope, in conjunction with a lack of state interpretative or implementation guidance – serves a dual mission of (a) oppress by policy, and (b) create fear and uncertainty.

### ***School Boards***

As state censorship policies often set the tone for impact on schools and SSW, school boards served an intermediary role, both reinforcing oppressive policies and creating new mechanisms of censorship. Ava discussed school board takeovers:

Things have shifted a lot in light of COVID. Post COVID we've gone the way of Moms for Liberty with our school board. Previously, parents could request that a book be removed, then the school board basically said, no, we want to decide if a book gets removed. And so the school board put forward a directive to the superintendent for that to be allowed.

Chloe added:

The censorship policies start intertwining with people's morals and beliefs and if superintendent, administrators, school boards are all on board, then we're scared because even if you think it's in the best interest of the student, it [censorship policies] definitely impacts your practice.

### ***School-Based***

Beyond discussing state and school board policies on their practice, SSWs also illuminated the direct impact of school procedures and mandates on the students they support. For example, Judy commented on the recent banning of 23 books in their district. Olivia discussed the implications of book bans:

I try not to be hyperbolic and make things sound bigger than they are, but the principal directed teachers to get rid of their books with the only use of a classroom. There has been a huge chilling effect on reading and books.

Thinking of how these state level policies affect schools – the repressive impact was sustained through the policing of youth: “Kids have told each other – ‘you're not supposed to have that book’ ” [Judy].

Literally the library and counseling are the two places where you go to feel like a human and they're the two places under attack right now. So, I just try to share anecdotally my experience of, hey, your policies are directly impacting, not just me, but kids [Niesha].

Olivia worked in multiple schools in a rural region reported that:

The biggest issue that I see is race-based. Some books are going to be taken out about racial differences in fear that some students may feel ostracized or disrespecting when that's not the intention. It's to teach and understand, because the more you know the less fear you have.

The chilling effect (Kelly, 2023) on efforts to promote inclusivity extended throughout the school system. Multiple focus group participants noted the impact on SEL curriculum, and a district policy passed to restrict flags, except American flags [Ann; Jane]. In addition to the policy impositions and book bans, Amelia noted "*Individual therapy, psycho education groups, clinical groups, workshops have all been cut.*" Not only are schools and youth impacted, but the viability and professional job security feels threatened, under pressure, with little professional support. These repressive trends are also juxtaposed by several instances of SSWs noting diversity or equity-based committees within the school, underscoring concern for the future viability of these departments and committees.

Rurna discussed at least two districts that they knew about were no longer adhering to SEL curriculum: "*At least one local that I used to work at has basically said we will not do the [SEL program]. We will not assess SEL at all because it's critical race*

*theory.*” The specific SEL program of incidence was de-identified to protect participant anonymity. In a different state, Katie discussed changes to SEL: *“They changed the name of social, emotional learning to Skills for learning and Life (SLL), but just changing the name to appease the parents and they immediately saw through it, you know?”* Although many participants reported forms of pushback to SEL based curriculum, however this was not occurring in all schools. When asked about SEL pushback, one study participant noted: *“Actually no, they love it. They want more of it. There are even ongoing efforts to provide SEL curriculum to parents”* [Neisha].

Even in areas where positive trends were being made in progressive curriculum and minimal ramifications of education censorship were reported, there may still be limitations to overall levels of inclusivity. Neisha commented that: *“We are not that friendly to LGBTQ populations, which I do think is a big issue.”* Many participants elaborated on the concerns related to gender inclusivity, identity awareness, and the lack of inclusive support for transgender, non-binary, and gender expansive youth. Jane added, *“There’s some push back from some staff about gender support plans, pronouns, names, and trying to strike a balance between respecting the high schooler and respecting what the parent is saying.”* Judy discussed the impact on LGBTQ inclusivity:

We had a fifth grader and they wanted to have a different name and pronouns and that was something that I knew I'd meet resistance with, but when I brought it to my principal, and to the parent that this child was severely depressed and that they might commit suicide if they weren't helping with this. This situation I was very, very worried about, and so I was given permission to do that and mom agreed. Then I went and talked to all the fifth grade classrooms and let them know that

was going to happen, that there would be a different name they would be using and the kids were great. We got through that year and they were very happy, their attitude about school changed, they were sitting up in the classroom and not hiding, and was just dramatically different.

This powerful story underscored the impact that school-based advocacy can have, including potentially saving a student's life by listening to their experience and gender identity needs, the direct impact on their mental health, well-being and academic success, and recognizing the need to support them through the difficult transition phase.

States such as Florida have made legislative changes restricting the use of pronouns, however Katie and Ava observed that these restrictions have extended to influence youth with preferred nicknames. These policies discursively privilege parents' rights, adding burden on school-based professionals, as well as parents, which may potentially limit certain curricula opportunities if schools are reluctant to seek parental approval. Adding to the complexity of these challenges, included the lack of professional guidance and advocacy. Chloe stated: *"I definitely struggle when talking about students having gender identity issues. It's such a touchy subject and I think people are just kind of scared to talk about it or scared to do anything."*

### **Culture of Fear**

Beyond the concrete impacts of legislation, school board, and school-based censorship policies, participants described the pervasive ramifications of systemic fear imbued upon society. Olivia commented: *"The thing about the censorship piece and even before the book banning, I remember having this conversation last year at work, even teachers are like, I mean, are we allowed to talk about it?"* Neisha added: *"It's more*

*about the fear of what's next or from those that are different from you. We as social workers can change the narrative around it, even make sure more of our evidenced based practices are relevant to our students and our student's needs.*" Chloe stated: *"A few years ago you would hear all of these big incidents and now it's just kind of like an unspoken thing that you don't talk about anything. You don't talk about politics."* Not all agreed with the general sense of insecurity and fear surrounding the policy changes.

### **Varied Interpretation of Education Censorship**

Although minimally reported – likely due to selection bias – it is important to note that not all participants agreed with the notion of censorship. France stated: *"Censorship is appropriate in terms of sexuality."* France was speaking to the age at which certain concepts related to sexuality are introduced to children – consistent with conservative talking points (Snyder, 2021). They elaborated: *"Education has over the 33 years of my career has increasingly become very political."* Speaking in alignment with parent rights legislation popping up across the country, they added: *"I think parents should have, first and foremost, rights to their kids."* Meanwhile, the notion of parents' rights resonated with participants with varied political ideologies [Amelia; Chloe], underscoring the challenges of maintaining parents' rights and working to advocate for youth inclusion. France added additional points of concern: *"We're worried about what bathrooms kids are using, what pronouns are you using, and our kids can't even pass standardized tests... So in schools is a way to indoctrinate kids. You get them young."* These comments fall in line with Right-wing talking points driven by elites and media moguls, however, I was grateful to hear this perspective that (a) illuminated the potential framing bias of the study (i.e., education censorship) and (b) pointed out the potential selection bias (i.e.,

progressive; liberal). In light of these factors, including the predominance of citizens that fall within the “moderate” political spectrum (Hawkins et al., 2018), it may be that individuals who wanted to speak out or were afraid to speak out may have been hesitant to offer their true perspective within these interviews and focus groups.

## **Theme 2: Pre-Existing and General Challenges of Contemporary SSW Practice**

In addition to the concrete impact of education censorship on the didactic materials, physical space, and interpersonal interactions in schools from a practical standpoint, participants also pointed out how censorship may impede their ability to carry out their professional responsibilities. In this section, I explore the role challenges of SSWs amid two subthemes: (a) Volume of professional responsibilities and (b) Intensified student mental health needs.

### **Volume of Professional Responsibilities**

The majority of SSW practitioners in this study, but not all, worked in multiple schools, navigated extremely large caseloads, maintained varied practice obligations, and were dictated by difficult state, district and school-based challenges related to policies, politics, and religious undertones. These points are crucial to underscore as pre-existing role obligations are confounded by education censorship policies and discourse, in addition to the barriers of advocacy and inclusivity imposed by role ambiguity. Runa noted: *“I was so driven by my caseload. That I really had a hard time doing any type of macro systems.”* It was common for SSWs to discuss having caseloads in the thousands, working in high concentrations of poverty, including a disproportionate number of students on free and reduced lunches, working with increasing amounts of unhoused students, supporting migrant and immigrant students, and working in schools rich in

cultures and diversity. Ava and Chloe discussed their ongoing work with students from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Venezuela. Ava discussed the cultural differences in these students, the diversity in beliefs and experiences, and the need to understand and work inclusively with each population: “*We’ve really had a lot of diversity and we’ve always celebrated it, respected it, and admired it.*” It is important to underscore this recognition and action to facilitate cultural responsiveness carried out by Ava amid the backdrop of censorship.

The concerns and efforts to support youth of varied cultures and identities came up in multiple interviews. Chloe worked in a southern, non-border state, relayed how their school has become a beacon for immigrant students, with minimal school and community resources to offer, limited language support, and high student need, including medical, dental, immigration needs, as well as challenges related to economic, food and housing insecurity. They added that many of these students would only stay within the school for a short time, potentially moving elsewhere or leaving the school due to lack of support. As Chloe provided support for these youth, they were often inextricably enmeshed in traumatic circumstances, including the challenges of having to leave their families to cross the border.

The families pay someone to take their children across the border, without parents, because it’s cheaper. Then the children are getting abused by these men who are bringing them here, but that is what the parents feel is their only option at that time [Chloe].

These stories of immigration are encompassed by strife and turmoil, yet Chloe highlighted their school as a potential transition point, where children would only stay

temporarily, and once they left, they would have no records to follow up to know where they went or if they were okay. The sense was that as the political hostility to immigrant families has increased in Florida – people are navigating further into inland America. These challenges are one of many circumstances impacting the mental health and well-being of youth in schools that are often under-examined and with little research guidance for SSW practitioners (Villareal Sosa et al., 2021).

Role and practice obligations were also shaped by education and training limitations and orientations to micro level practice, and substantial practice differences due to the geographic location (i.e., state) and population characteristics (i.e., rural; suburban; urban). Participants discussed practice barriers: “*Giving the predominance of Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and behavior plans and it was really difficult to try and work on culture, climate and systems change*” [Olivia]. Another added that: “*Rural areas don't really have a school social worker.*” [Olivia]. Gwen stated: “*Somedays you are just chasing your tail responding to crises.*”

### ***Mental Health***

The relationship between censorship and youth mental health was documented at length during interviews – with *all* participants underscoring concerns about youth mental health. “*When policies and things change that are rooted in fear, it also brings about so much fear – the culture is trepidatious*” [Olivia]. Another participant added: “*They [censorship policies] limit the students’ ability to have access to mental health in the rural areas*” [Mala]. Rurna elaborated: “*It's hard for us to get in and do the work that we need to do, for example, MTSS; SEL; whole child. It's really impacted our ability to develop those whole child initiatives.*” Gwen discussed the expanded mental health needs

of youth, including insurance barriers, and at least one student waiting 15 months for an evaluation: “*Neuropsychological evaluations for students is an extremely long wait list.*”

Participants also discussed health challenges, insurance barriers and the time commitment involved in gathering and conveying resources to parents and scheduling appointments.

A few participants discussed the impact of the pandemic on youth mental health needs, juxtaposed with the recent challenges of censorship. For example, one individual noted: “*I’ve had a variety of [student] health issues that have occurred and I think some of them are probably in direct results from COVID*” [Mala]. The effects of education censorship and the continued and varied challenges of SSW practice are inextricably tied to ongoing advocacy and resistance efforts. Chloe noted that: “*All these issues that students are bringing up, it is impacting their mental health.*” Ava discussed their own mental health amid added stress and pressure imposed by state legislators:

It’s been a hot mess with the LGBTQ population for sure, the slate of hate that was passed last year and legislation really took a toll on my mental health. It was in all areas, not just LGBTQ, but against our unions, and everything they passed was just full of hate.

### **Theme 3: Advocacy and Resistance**

Amid a host of challenges due to censorship and pre-existing constraints and demands on SSW practice – school-based practitioners who participated in this study were advocates for youth, and leaders striving for new forms of inclusion. These interviews were often emotional and challenging, yet SSW practitioners demonstrated their dedication to the complex needs and experiences of youth. In this section, I present the perspectives of SSW participants regarding their advocacy efforts, categorized into

three four-themes: (a) Advocacy and Inclusion, (b) Culturally Responsive Advocacy, (c) Advocacy for Youth Rights, and (d) Barriers to Advocacy.

### **Advocacy and Inclusion**

Many SSW participants in this study spoke to the general need for school-based advocacy and inclusion, while discussing specific strategies. SSW practitioner Katie began discussions of advocacy, stating: “*We are the voices for our kids – we have to be the change.*” SSWs spoke to advocacy through collaboration with teachers, where teachers' voices are valued, heard, respected, and included – where SSWs are truly a support-based asset. Gwen underscored the importance of a supportive school environment for advocacy: “*One of the reasons I've been here as long as I have is with both principals, my personal beliefs have aligned with them, when it comes to discipline and supporting students' mental health needs.*” Participants spoke about the need for general conversations with school board members and administrative leadership. For example, Judy discussed a conversation with their principal when someone interrupted and asked: “*That doesn't have to do with critical racism because you know that if we do that, anything in our district that will be like, uh, big thing.*” Because the SSW practitioner was present during this conversation, they were able to advocate and speak up against misinformation, but this will not always be the case in complex school environments with varied political beliefs. Neisha spoke to the importance of SSW and macro-level advocacy, connections with state SSW associations, legislative advocacy committees, and the need to control the narrative around social work: “*Every social worker providing direct services should lobby at the state level. It's critical because I think a lot of people at the table are not in the trenches doing the work.*”

School-based social workers spoke to individualized advocacy and efforts to understand and adapt to new learning styles, such as the varied neurodevelopmental needs in post-pandemic schools [Mala]. Gwen referenced the importance of having a school-based equity team as a point of support and school-wide advocacy. In response to book bans, Olivia suggested increased advocacy and connection with youth through book clubs where they could read young fiction novels so that students could see their identities, experiences, and stories represented in literature and have space to talk. *“I did a book study last school year with a group of high school girls and it's just so cool for them to be like seen in representative literature and it's hard when those books are banned* [Olivia]. Although this is a quote about the impact of education censorship – it also is a point of reflection for future advocacy efforts. If schools are limited in their ability to promote and host book clubs for students – another option may be independently hosted book clubs with community partners.

### ***Culturally Responsive Advocacy***

Participants provided very insightful ideas about contemporary forms of advocacy that lift up youth through inclusive, diverse, and culturally representative curriculum and activities. For example, Mala suggested SSWs should: *“Advocate for the events that do take place in the communities.”* This may include museums, cultural festivals, and working to convey the importance of cultural gatherings and bringing youth to participate and engage diverse and rich learning environments. Olivia added: *“Allowing the students to acknowledge and practice their culture in the schools, or to be out of schools because of that.”*

### ***Advocating for Youth Rights***

School social workers were greatly attuned to the fact that education censorship policies altered the rights of certain students, including Black, Brown, Indigenous, and LGBTQ youth, “*Not all students have rights, or the rights that they do have are blocked and not provided appropriate resources for it*” [Neisha]. Yet, they were not always clear on their rights, role obligations, and ability to advocate in ways without putting their job security into jeopardy – which illuminated barriers to advocacy and inclusion. Finally, in thinking about the ongoing advocacy for youth rights, Gwen discussed how they reach out with active communication to parents to convey the importance of certain lessons such as SEL – to give parents an opportunity to understand and ask questions.

### ***Barriers to Advocacy***

School-based social workers were often active in their engagement, advocacy, and renewed support for youth, but this was consistently juxtaposed with fear, uncertainty, role ambiguity, and multi-level barriers to advocacy. In this section, advocacy barriers include (a) ideological, (b) role ambiguity and uncertainty, (c) organizational, and (d) educational. Speaking to the impact of censorship, Katie commented that: “*It’s harder to do our jobs. It’s not wrong to support them, but as we progress in our profession we will have pushback because we are the boots on the ground.*”

#### **Ideological Barriers**

Participants alluded to the increasing political polarization and the impact on practice and their feelings of job insecurity and uncertainty. For example, Neisha underscored the need for school board advocacy:

I think to really confront and challenge some of the things that were like they're intentionally putting narratives of fear around, that has to come from them, not from me. The impact that's happening is what they want. Our gay kids are not feeling seen or heard. So for me to come and be like, we need our kids to feel seen and heard. Then they're like, okay. We are in this weird time and space, where we're trying to stay under the radar as much as possible because there have been board members who in front of me said things like 'where does school end and the community begin.'

### **Role Ambiguity & Uncertainty**

Participants pointed out how their ability to advocate was hampered by education censorship, working conditions, and fear related to their role within the school system. Rurna noted: "*We as public employees do not necessarily have protected speech. I mean, we do have freedom of speech, but there is a cost to that as a public employee who can censor our speech.*" Thus, the threats against advocacy are produced in the context of education censorship policies, reified in media discourse, and outlined for parent groups to weaponize at their leisure. This concern points to the need to re-imagine advocacy – potentially toward different groups, rather than politically, including parent engagement and voter mobility. Role ambiguity and challenges of advocacy were consistent across interviews, with participants often voicing both their desire and active engagement with advocacy efforts and their limited ability to clearly advocate on certain occasions. Judy discussed these challenges:

I had a young student today suggest that they may be pregnant and I am not permitted to talk about how to prevent that or even talk about how to prevent any

other health ramifications that can come from any [sexual] activity between two partners.

Chloe elaborated on her role ambiguity and uncertainty, stating:

What we're saying here is that students have all these questions that can't be answered. They're confused. They're seeing all this on social media and they're not learning it at school. They're coming to counselors and social workers and we are having these conversations but we are also nervous.

Neisha continued with a similar narrative:

So we know education censorship is happening, but we don't know what our rights are and I feel the same way, in terms of running groups and coming up against anything that has to do with CRT and controversial topics. I get confused regarding our restrictions and our abilities to talk to students.

Participants revealed the need for organizational advocacy and support to reduce role ambiguity, provide guidance, offer continuing education, and enhance conversations about the benefits and viability of social work in schools. SSWs discussed the need for outside support and advocacy for their role to improve practice capacity. For example, Chloe underscored the lack of policy guidance about supporting gender nonconforming youth, stating: *“We don't have anything written in policy regarding gender identity.”* Chloe buttressed this concern by asking whether other states or districts have policies in this arena – speaking to the need for organizational advocacy and support. Additionally, SSWs noted how advocacy was impeded by access barriers, *“I think there needs to be*

*more education at the high school level when it comes to curriculum for students, but there just needs to be access in general” [Olivia].* When considering specific times of advocacy –Social Work Lobby Day comes to mind – as an opportunity to spread and convey (a) the value of social workers, (b) specifically those working in schools, and (c) discussing the impact of education censorship across multiple levels.

### **Educational Barriers to Advocacy**

Participants underscored the need for increased parent engagement and community-based advocacy efforts. For example, one discussed: *“I think that's where we're all lacking is that educational piece to our communities. From the school to the community and engaging parents in networks” [Rurna].* Additionally, participants spoke to the need to emphasize life-long learning and efforts to build community through collaborative learning models in schools. Speaking to the need for cultural humility and responsiveness, participant five suggested: *“An ongoing examination of bias and how we are responding to these things that are happening” [Olivia].* Amelia noted the limitations of continuing education: *“I found most of the training is very clinical, as if you're working in a hospital setting or having your own private practice. That's a very different role than actually working in a school.”* Other participants commented on the need to be supported by schools in their continuing education opportunities, including time off allowance for training [Chloe], and a need for content to broaden at state professional development conferences, toward innovative and nuanced support beyond a one-size-fits-all model of SSW. Participants spoke at length regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, differential needs (e.g., mental health; economic), and varied practice roles in diverse geographic regions including urban versus rural settings. Yet scholars continue to

write about SSW as if only one role exists with minimal variability. For example, participants discussed the lack of applicability of given district variations:

*I meet with all of my foster care children because I have like 30. Some districts have 300 and of course foster care point of contact can't meet with all of them. We just need a standard set of this is what a school social worker can do, or does, or is supposed to do [Chloe].*

#### **Study 4 Conclusion**

In the previous three studies, I presented findings on state policies enacted, mainstream media discourse, and school board public comments. In this study, the impact of education censorship was examined in relation to SSW practice to showcase the macro-to-micro movement of censorship, as well as the multi-level impact on schools, SSW, and youth development. Across all previous levels, the discursive impact of fear was substantially illuminated. SSWs were fearful of state-imposed censorship policies, even in states without these policies enacted. SSW practitioners were concerned about the increasing needs of youth (e.g., pandemic), with fears of censorship exacerbating need and confounding the ability of SSWs to support, for example, the mental health needs of youth. As SSWs advocated and attempted to support youth in more holistic and inclusive ways, fear also undermined their confidence and posed challenges and uncertainty about how to proceed, leading to added challenges of role ambiguity. Finally, SSWs spoke to the fear of other school-based professionals, including the fear of teachers related to parent concerns over certain curricula components. The result of multi-level fear was pervasive and influential on the practice of SSWs across the country, in addition to the substantive policy and education censorship impact.

### **Study 4 Conclusion: A Theoretical Summary**

Detailed often in this study is the developing ramifications of *high conflict* (Ripley, 2021). Although Amanda Ripley speaks to a generalized manifestation of high conflict, the four studies in this dissertation positioned *high conflict* across multiple levels, including policy development, media discourse, school boards, and schools. As high conflict produces and sustains elite capture (Táíwò, 2022) and economic imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022) the most noticeable outcome is the pervasiveness of fear and uncertainty that affects coalitions, justice-oriented practice in schools, and promotes for-profit education. In schools, street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010) helped to explain how the common practices and roles of school social workers **are** consumed by tenuous working conditions, high student needs, and high caseloads, posing barriers to support youth in holistic, equitable, and inclusive ways amid ongoing oppression. That is, structures and inequities are maintained due to the underemployment, crisis-laden working conditions, and bureaucratic barriers to justice-oriented practice. At the same time, the fear of job uncertainty reifies censorship in the schools, where SSWs navigate role ambiguity, and educational and organizational barriers in practice. Fairclough (2013) urged CDA analysts to attend to possible solutions and in the case of censorship, it is apparent that multi-level efforts may be needed to (a) address the policy impactions, (b) reduce social and political divides sustained through sensationalized news media, and (c) overcoming mezzo level divides at school board meetings, and (d) build bridges within schools to advocate for youth in new and inclusive mechanisms of healing.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### CONCLUSION

This chapter presents a unified conclusion across all four studies. Each of the four studies will be briefly summarized before moving into a unified discussion. Figure 12 represents the conglomerate conceptualization of education censorship to showcase the multi-level impact of network policymakers, media influence, and school boards on schools and support-based mechanisms, including the school social worker.

**Study 1** entailed a legislative analysis of enacted policies in 2021-22 related to race/diversity curricula bans and juxtaposed with media discourse ( $n = 24$ ) on the political right written by Christopher Rufo – the most prominent political operative of education censorship. **Study 2** included a national analysis of news articles ( $n = 170$ ) published in two Left-leaning outlets (i.e., New York Times; USA Today) and two Right-leaning outlets (i.e., Wall Street Journal; Tampa Bay Times). **Study 3** entailed examining the overlap in discourse between public comments at ( $n = 6$ ) school board sessions in the Traverse City School District in Michigan and anti-CRT articles ( $n = 11$ ) written by organizations on the political Right. **Study 4** concluded the macro-to-micro level dissertation by analyzing the impact of education censorship on schools through semi-structured interviews ( $n = 11$ ) and ( $n = 1$ ) focus groups with school social workers (SSWs).

Figure 12 was adapted from Figure 4 based on the findings of this dissertation. Beginning in the upper left, the confluence of actors, and organizations, defined as network influences, represents the unity of ideas, discourse, and policy agendas that laid

the foundation for education censorship. As a policy agenda is formulated (i.e., education censorship) institutions and actors converge toward a singular or mutually beneficial mission. Next, laws are enacted through political operatives, and discursive influences are reinforced by the mainstream media. Although the media is a complex space where divergent news and reporting exists, the results of this dissertation reveal how narratives are, at times, contentiously depicted. In turn, political polarization predominates news discourse, leading to aspects of high conflict and elite capture where divides are further inflamed by the inability to hear counter-arguments and listen to opposing sides and ongoing vilification of the other (Ferris & Robins, 2023). Third, school boards are influenced both by network influences and the predominance of actors, organizations, funding, and discourse, and are also influenced by media representations. Therefore, we see public sentiment serve to recapitulate and reproduce dominant narratives originally positioned by network elites. Crucially, the influence outlined above may be cyclical, where, for example, school board contention serves as both an *influencing* and *reinforcing* mechanism of education censorship where hostile and fear-based narratives persist. Finally, schools rest in the valley and face multi-level effects of education censorship which confound pre-existing educational inequities, undermine progressive frameworks of equity-based reform, and perpetuate the status quo (Allen, 2022).

The conglomerate findings of education censorship showcase a unified system of influence that begins as shaped by elite forces, including think-tanks, corporations, and politicians, with ongoing support from the mainstream media. This finding was evidenced by the relationship between media discourse on the political right, from institutions including, but not limited to, the Manhattan Institute and the Heritage

Foundation, and the discursive overlap with education censorship legislation. In other words, the criticism opined by the political Right, including concern about progressive education trends, which began with respect to the *1619 Project* and which evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, both added and inflamed arguments on the Right by leveraging local influence regarding the perceived weaponization of pandemic policies (Mitchell, 2023). Subsequent to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police in their respective cities of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Louisville, Kentucky a moment of racial reckoning, Black Lives Matter protests, and reignited efforts to address systemic racism spread across the globe (Durham, 2022). These shifts sparked social and school-based changes, at times, *symbolic* (e.g., statue removal; building name changes; yard signs; Kovalik, 2021), *figurative* (e.g., discursive: defund the police; systemic racism; Jacobs et al., 2021; Laurencin & Walker, 2021), and *literal* (e.g., systemic racism public health policies; American Public Health Crisis, 2022). Subsequently, schools expedited reform efforts to combat systemic racism, notable in efforts toward antiracism, equity-based reform, restorative justice, cut police funding, policy changes, and curriculum reform (e.g., 1619 Project; Yancey, 2022).

At the same time, we saw Christopher Rufo, as funded by the Manhattan Institute, raise critique of federal DEI training sessions with concerns of privilege, fragility, intersectionality, and critical race theory. These criticisms followed in the wake of pandemic discontent and hostility and coincided with shifts in schools toward systemic reform, including DEI, restorative justice, systemic racism, and professional development and training (e.g., implicit bias). Importantly, the bulk of the criticism from the political Right comprises professional development, education consulting companies, and an

expansive co-optation of social justice – concerns that make sense for the Left to be aware of, if not for the fact that many are seizing the financial opportunity – all in the name of justice (Norwood, 2021). The tactics of shaping and sustaining education censorship are outlined below in five parts.

### **Shaping and Sustaining Education Censorship**

#### **Tactic 1: Network Elites Agenda Setting and Legislative Influence**

The first step in education censorship was underscored by the actions of network influences on the political-Right that were unified by a common policy agenda. The origins of this movement can be linked to think-tanks, corporations, lobbyists, and elite actors on the political-Right, however, the relative success of the movement is a result of multiple reinforcing tactics. Although network elites represent the origins of education censorship, it is necessary to see the coordination that aligns these organizations and actors. Put another way, what does education censorship offer the conservative agenda – and why would so many groups be involved in shaping and sustaining this movement? This is where it is crucial to examine how censorship works to undermine the quality of education, driving parents to remove their children from public schools, through stoking social and political fear. This agenda serves privatization through new curricula measures, reform, and perpetuates the movement to for-profit charters, private and parochial schools (Francisco & Burriss, 2023). To be effective, Tactic 1 must be supported by subsequent tactics, including the role of the media.

#### **Tactic 2: Reinforcing Role of the Media**

After its origination among powerful ideological and political actors, as well as state legislation, education censorship efforts are reinforced by the media, which builds

discourse, specifically, justifying policies or advocating against them depending on the political bias of the publication. Tactic 2 was significant because education censorship policies are enacted by legislatures *without* the consent or support of their constituents. Therefore, the process of censorship entails garnering the consent of individuals (Herman & Chomsky, 2010) and community members *after* censorship has been enacted on the state level. This tactic means, (1) that education censorship can be supported by the media to leverage local level support, and (2) if successful, the movement can co-opt and facilitate additional mechanisms of censorship. These two points lead directly to Tactic 3.

### **Tactic 3: Manufacturing Local Level Sustainment of Education Censorship**

Local level influence and education censorship across the district and school level follow in the wake of Tactics 1 and 2. Importantly, most of the local level influencers, such as non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and local media, were funded by the same network elites (Cunningham, 2022) that shaped the initial mechanisms of censorship across the state levels, and then also funded the national media to reinforce and leverage divisive news. Tactic 3 was most emblematic in the ongoing contention at school boards, where groups, such as Moms for Liberty, fund public resistance to school board policy changes and reform. This tactic may solidify its own forms of censorship, or merely serve to add to the ongoing perception of social turmoil. Tactic 3 is also crucial for reigniting and perpetuating social and political divides in the mainstream media – with divisions leveraged to sustain censorship, as conflict preoccupies attention and distracts from attending to policy concerns and implications.

#### **Tactic 4: Censorship Evolution and Incorporation of New Topics and Tactics**

After the success of the first three tactics, network elites evolve the movement to continue promoting conflict, chaos, and ongoing legislation. This was evidenced by the corollary movements, including anti-trans legislation, sports bans, restroom bans, drag-show bans, social-emotional learning pushback, and more recent efforts that may be aimed at undermining higher education, including legislation to remove or restrict funding for offices of DEI (ACLU, 2023; Burga, 2023; Lu et al., 2023). Additionally relevant, was ongoing legislation driven by the political Right that was aimed more generally at *society* and not schools. In other words, the pervasiveness of oppressively oriented legislation, may be intended to (a) pass new legislation, but more likely to (b) create a sense of constant fear to promote conflict and divisions across political lines (Coleman, 2021). Thus, Tactic 2 *media influence* becomes crucial for analytical comprehension. That is, if those on the political Left can recognize that the larger intent was to continue perpetuating political divides and ongoing conflict, then we can refocus the debates toward *policy* and move away from assumptions of *bad faith*, intentionality, and political divisions. This point will be discussed in further detail in the implications section.

#### **Tactic 5: Impact on Schools**

Interviews with school-based support professionals offered a glimpse into the impact of education censorship on schools and youth well-being. First, education censorship works to increase student need, and often among youth who are most vulnerable and disproportionately burdened by preexisting educational inequities and repressive school climates (Mitchell et al., 2023). As youth need increases and is

confounded by the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell & Greer, 2022) – this simultaneously increases pressure on SSWs to provide added support. Collectively, these factors reify individualized and micro level practice, minimizing the attention to structural mechanisms of oppression and organizational advocacy.

Second, education censorship works to exacerbate role ambiguity due to fear and concerns of job security and individual rights. This was paramount in the already wide range of practice obligations that are confounded by state, district, and school level factors – and varied certification standards and educational preparation of SSW (Mitchell et al., 2021). Role ambiguity is then exacerbated as SSW working conditions are devalued by state legislators and fear works to sow doubts about the viability of social work.

Third, amid all the increases in repressive policies, SSWs were vocal advocates for youth despite their job insecurity and challenged working conditions. They underscored the need for support from state and national associations, including contemporary training and continuing education to improve cultural inclusivity, support for LGTBQ+ youth, and connections with community partners and parents to (a) convey the value of social work in schools, (b) educate on the need of youth and the simultaneous damages of the ensuing oppressive policies, and (c) convey the value and efficacy to administrators, state leaders, and legislators to improve the hiring of SSWs and work to define and standardize the role toward increased efforts of equity and inclusion.

## **Implications**

The findings of the four studies comprising this dissertation reveal a complex picture of education censorship driven by elites on the political Right that continues to evolve, grow, and may be exacerbated by the inability of either political side to listen, hear counter-arguments, or focus on the actual policies being enacted. The education censorship movement catalyzed by network elites has: (a) implemented an array of restrictive curricula policies, (b) undermined public education, (c) exacerbated political and social divides, (d) created local level censorship movements that are ongoing, (e) leveraged the media to sustain and inflame political divides, (f) added to the complexity and challenges for youth and support-based professionals in schools.

### ***Education Censorship Policies and Evolution of the Movement***

Over the last three years, education censorship has evolved in complexity, including an expansive conflation of terminology (Allen, 2022), with new movements related to anti-trans legislation, and new targets of social-emotional learning and DEI (Anderson, 2022; Lu et al., 2023). This evolution and growth of censorship serves to benefit elites shaping censorship by (1) utilizing the evolution and growth of censorship to confound efforts to address and challenge the *initial* developments of censorship, and (2) putting forth an ongoing presence of censorship – both discursive and legislative – to promote social fear, political polarization, and divisive us vs. them mentalities (Caspian King, 2021; Ripley, 2021). We know very little about the actual implications on youth outcomes in schools and the types of support needed to move beyond these complex impositions of policy (Kelly et al., 2023). While it was crucial to understand the impact

of these policies, it may also be useful to theorize on the intended aspects aimed at undermining public education.

### ***Undermining Public Education***

Several aspects of the education censorship movement suggest an ulterior intentionality of undermining public education. Conservative think-tanks have long had a history of promoting school choice, charter schools, and privatized mechanisms, all of which would benefit from dismantling the public education sector (Saltman, 2023). These same think-tanks are primary supporters and financial backers of the movement that stand to benefit from the expansion of privatization, vouchers, and fear-based discourse to undermine public education (Saltman, 2010). Second, the resistance to progressive education trends – the byproduct or justification of education censorship, including critiques of white privilege and fragility, often implemented by consulting groups through professional development, and training related to DEI and implicit bias – may be equally useful in undermining both (a) progressive education trends, (b) corporate based consulting aligned with the political Left (Henry et al., 2023; Yancey, 2022). As legislation and discourse are written to showcase flaws, shortcomings, and limitations of progressive frameworks, education censorship may take the form of banning books and curricula to create more room for Right leaning curricula reform and implementation (e.g., 1776 Project). For example, the Civics Alliance (2022) recently published “*American Birthright. The Civics Alliance's Model K-12 Social Studies Standards*” – intended as a conservative realignment toward American principles and civics education, history, and economics:

The Civics Alliance unites education reformers, policymakers, and every citizen of the United States who wants to preserve civics education that teaches students to take pride in what they share as Americans: (1) an exceptional heritage of freedom, (2) a republic with liberty as a fundamental principle, and (3) the accomplishments of a common national culture.

The publication has already been adopted in several states, including Florida, Indiana, and Massachusetts. At the same time, the ensuing social fear that was recapitulated by the mainstream media through divisive narratives, political polarization, culture war representations, and identity politics may be useful to promote perceptions of turmoil which may inspire parents and caregivers to relocate their children into non-publicly funded educational systems, such as charter, private, magnet and parochial schools. Education Week reported on these trends of shifting enrollment:

Between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, charter school enrollment increased by 7 percent, or nearly 240,000 students nationwide, the report found. Meanwhile, enrollment in public school districts decreased by 3.5 percent, or nearly 1.5 million students—the steepest drop since World War I (Langreo, 2022).

Analysis by the Network for Public Education (2023) revealed the coinciding increase of new charter schools with ongoing mechanisms of education censorship. Their report documented the charter movement that has merged principles of classical, back to basics, with faith-based and Christian nationalist ideology – finding some 273 charter schools falling into this category, 29% run by for-profit corporations, and 47% opened since the

inauguration of President Trump in 2017. Additionally, 66 schools are in the pipeline, set to open in 2023 or 2024 (Francisco & Burris, 2023). Importantly, this appears to be a curricula push to educate or indoctrinate white, affluent youth, with 52% of enrollment being white and only 17% meeting qualifications to receive free/reduced-price lunch. The political weaponization of pandemic policies and ongoing social turmoil likely played a role in the exodus of students from public schools (Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Mitchell, 2023). In effect, the social divides reified in the media may promote the movement to corporate schooling, while, simultaneously, the perceptions of polarization (i.e., culture wars; identity politics) may also work to maintain high conflict (Ripley, 2021).

### ***Exacerbating Political Divisions***

As noted in the introduction, literature review, and theoretical sections, the perception of political divisions remains high, although the reality was one of (a) increasing divides between political elites (Coleman, 2021), and (b) increasing unity, overlap, and commonalities (Hawkins et al., 2022). Importantly, it is disadvantageous for elites and media conglomerates to allude to the commonalities and unity of individuals spanning political parties (Nader, 2012). For example, the media may be contingent on financial incentives which are most adequately operationalized by negative news discourse, which is what sells the best and is most readable. Elites may promote negative discourse to deter us from coalition-building frameworks through narratives of division (Ginwright, 2022). For instance, the military-industrial complex and the ongoing calamitous proxy war with Russia bring in billions for American corporations (Norton, 2023) – and as Americans are divided over, for example, culture wars and education censorship, we are distracted and have more limited capacity to recognize and address

economic imperialism of the American government goes unchallenged (Good, 2023). One can point to similar concerns elsewhere, whether it's economic inequality, the housing crisis and the millions that are unhoused, or the developing climate crisis (Fraser, 2023). None of these issues can be challenged or addressed in any substantive way without social collaboration, cohesion, and bipartisan coalition-building frameworks. Ultimately, economic imperialism (Jabbar & Menashy, 2022) succeeds through elite capture (Táíwò, 2022) and is reinforced by elements of high conflict in the media (Ripley, 2021). To sustain censorship – allegiance from the public must be manufactured (Herman & Chomsky, 2010).

### ***Engendering Local Level Censorship***

In addition to driving censorship through state legislatures, network elites leverage media narratives to sustain efforts, and fund local nonprofits and advocacy groups to create a secondary wave of local level education censorship. We see this in the development of nonprofits, including Moms for Liberty and Parents Defending Education (Joyce, 2022a). The secondary or mezzo level of censorship promoted by elite networks, funding advocacy groups that masquerade as local organizations (Cunningham, 2021), serves two primary purposes. First, it generated and leveraged local political support. Second, local efforts directly targeted progressive educational reform, funded school board elections for Republicans, and intended to constrain curricula through book bans and policy reform. We see evidence of network elite-generated policy resistance and attacks on progressive reform in comments made by local parents and community members at school board meetings. For example, in response to school districts' attempts to implement equity-based reform, antiracism policies, and LGBTQ inclusivity,

significant community backlash occurred. Thus, school boards serve as an influential leverage point to reinforce censorship, enact new forms of censorship, resist progressive trends, and further exacerbate social and political divides – reproducing divisions to be depicted by the mainstream media. Finally, it is important to examine how community resistance began, how network elites manufactured consent, and how the media leveraged hostility.

### ***Leveraging Media Support to Manufacture Consent and Sustain Divides***

Examining events prior to the education censorship movement can illuminate how elites manufactured local support for these policies. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic, and school-based policies, including school closures, online education, and deficit-based narratives of academic “learning loss” offer significant support for understanding the, at times, hostile and alienated perspectives of those on the political Right (Mitchell, 2023). Additionally, one of the intended effects of polarized media narratives was to minimize debate and dislocate a systemic focus. For example, debates about education censorship are largely reduced to whether curricula bans should be supported or objected to. While this may be important, it circumvents the pre-existing educational context that both *led* to the censorship movement but also *influenced* the movement through pre-existing hostility of parents – leveraged by network elites. The pandemic offers a crucial context for understanding education censorship and the success of divisive and neoliberal media narratives.

Only three months into the pandemic, learning loss narratives were leveraged based entirely on statistical projections of academic setbacks (Mitchell & Greer, 2022; Zhao, 2021). These narratives and statistics were constructed by education consulting

groups, with a key stake in privatization, corporate tutoring schemes, and ongoing testing – a billion-dollar testing industry (Au, 2010). Importantly, it is not the legitimacy or the validity of these arguments that are in question – although there is significant reason to be skeptical of the projections of learning loss – it was the *fear* that is generated from these sensationalized narratives of deficit-based learning conceptualizations (Mitchell, 2023). Fear was leveraged at a time of great social unrest, as the virus mutated and spread, killing thousands, infecting thousands more, leading to substantial job loss, and as economic inequality rose at the hand of increasing corporate wealth. As Kennedy (2021) noted: “*In 2020, workers lost \$3.7 trillion while billionaires gained \$3.9 trillion. Some 493 individuals became new billionaires, and an additional 8 million Americans dropped below the poverty line.*” Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that school closure policies would be challenged when parents were overwhelmed by the discourse of academic learning setbacks amid a substantial economic downturn, which was sensationalized for corporate profits and economic imperialism.

As pandemic policies led to school closures and online education, this also offered parents a glimpse into their child’s education for the first time. Crucially, this was a time that coincided with the murder of George Floyd, and the subsequent racial reckoning movement. In classrooms, educators spoke to systemic injustices, moved toward reform, and brought in new curricula and a rapid pace. Importantly the new curriculum was largely liberal-leaning, often circumvented caregiver consent, and offered little declaration nor communication with parents (Snyder, 2021). For instance, as progressive educational trends ramped up, this was perceived by parents as yet another aspect of woke reform, where first pandemic policies were put in place without their

consent, and now progressive content related to whiteness, white fragility, and white privilege was foisted on their children without forewarning (Yancey, 2022). It was not so much that parents rejected these developments, but that they felt uninvited, uninformed – notions emphasized in the Right-wing media. At the same time, the media on the Right capitalized on this lack of communication and elite-driven control of pandemic policies.

### ***School-based Complexities and Challenges for Youth and School-based Professionals***

Although the education censorship movement has been engineered by elite forces on the political Right, the mainstream media plays a role in both perpetuating the movement, sustaining divisive narratives, and promoting multi-level conflict, with schools and youth impacted in a variety of ways. First, consistent with the findings in this dissertation, curricula changes and policy adjustments across state, district, and school levels continue to see constraints, challenges, and resistance – the effects of which remain unknown, but have already been shown to impose mechanisms of teacher self-censorship (Kelly et al., 2023). Second, the social and political conflict that has emerged amid the anti-CRT debates may be recapitulated in schools (Alexander et al., 2023). In other words, youth are observing these divisions, and as we model these political divisions, they may be more likely to be reproduced in schools. Moreover, we must work to envision pathways *beyond conflict*, where we can listen to varied perspectives, and understand where others are coming from, even if we disagree (Ginwright, 2022). Third, education censorship was imposed in states and schools that may already have disproportionate academic and disciplinary outcomes, where minoritized youth face disparate outcomes and experiences, and now are forced to endure curricula changes and school turmoil (Henry et al., 2023). Fourth, the potential for justice-oriented practice of

school social workers (SSWs) was complicated by these trends.

### ***School Social Work***

In Cox and colleagues (2022) book, *The Art of Becoming Indispensable: What School Social Workers Need to Know in Their First Three Years of Practice*, they offered strategies and tips to re-align with equity and antiracist practice. Stalnecker et al. (2022) provide key strategies for becoming indispensable for school administrators, most of which have to do with building relationships, achieving performance metrics, collecting and sharing data, but more prudent to this study, they noted: “SSW often do not take advantage of the valuable opportunity to highlight the role by presenting at school board meetings.” Thus, in a shift toward more effective and equitable practice, they suggest building this connection and showcasing their skills at school board meetings to convey to the community and school board just how important an SSW can be. Scott et al. (2022) extended this conversation by underscoring the importance of cross-system collaboration, building relationships with paraprofessionals, teachers, and building strength-based, trauma informed throughout the school. Even amid all these helpful points of guidance for SSWs, and within the context of the findings of this dissertation, the scope of influence on SSW practice extends well beyond the walls of the school system. Moving forward, preservice education, professional development, training, and certification standards may benefit from a re-alignment toward systemic influences, such as elite networks, media discourse, and school board influences.

Amid the extensive list of negative ramifications of education censorship – the interviews with SSWs provided a point of hope, opportunity, and possibility. During widespread increases in oppressive legislation and education censorship – SSWs around

the country developed new forms of inclusion, and strategically supported youth during uncertain times and ambiguous role orientations in schools. They offer hope to the profession of social work – and show that inclusive treatment and support of youth can continue during polarizing times and political uncertainty. Yet, as they advocate and support youth in more equitable ways, they highlighted the need for support from state and national associations, contemporary training, and continuing education to build their skills of life-long learning and to convey the value of social work in reinvigorated ways.

## **Limitations**

### ***Study 1***

The dissertation should be contextualized by the following limitations. First, the utilization of critical discourse techniques – aiming to contextualize historically, socially, culturally, and politically – may have contributed to an under-examination of education censorship legislation. More research may be needed to gain a state by state understanding of education censorship legislation, including analysis that assesses the overall impact on schools, youth, and mechanisms of support and healing such as school social workers (Crutchfield & Eugene, 2022). A second limitation relates to the reliance on curriculum censorship related to race, diversity, and anti-CRT. That is, an array of corollary movements continues in 2023, including recensions on gender-affirming health care (Human Rights Campaign, 2023), sports bans (Movement Advancement Project, 2023a) and restroom and facility bans (ACLU, 2023) affecting transgender and non-binary youth, efforts to undermine social-emotional learning (Anderson, 2022), and impose restrictions and elimination of DEI institutions in higher education (Lu et al., 2023). Third, the focus on the media discourse of Christopher Rufo represents a fragment

of the full media implications on the education censorship movement. The intent here was to analyze the origins of the discursive movement as promulgated by Rufo's self-declared: "one-man war on critical race theory" (Rufo 2021q).

### ***Study 2***

The first limitation of Study 2 is the focus on newspaper articles, which may under-acknowledge the full range of discourse related to education censorship. Second, similar to Study 1, the focus on race and diversity curricula bans may have unintentionally reduced the debates and ignored important concurrent ramifications related to anti-LGBTQ legislation, and oppressive trends related to youth restroom and sports bans (Movement Advancement Project, 2023a; b). Importantly, these debates are ongoing, fluid, and interconnected, and more research is needed to understand the scope of these trends. Third, the focus on mainstream news articles may have biased the sample and under-acknowledged the prevalence and discourse of local, television, and social media news sources.

### ***Study 3***

The primary limitation in Study 3 included the focus on school board public comments. Specifically, the relationship between public comments and school board action was not examined. Although policy changes were documented, no analysis targeted the school board processes to understand exactly how school board officials decided and acted upon changes. Nevertheless, the intent was to showcase the differences between elite voices engaged in education censorship on the political Right and everyday citizens engaged in school board advocacy. Further, the focus on anti-resolution comments – may have limited the understanding and impact of those in support of the

equity resolution policy – although their influence was limited by anti-resolution commenters.

#### ***Study 4***

Study four was limited by study participants and the data provided. The difficulties of reaching and accessing school social workers was often apparent, with five focus groups and a dozen interviews canceled by participants due to a variety of reasons. Many SSWs who expressed interest by completing the survey but failed to attend an interview followed up by email to explain how their work, family emergencies, and school crises posed barriers to their ability to participate in the study. Low study participation may have also been impacted by the lack of financial compensation for participants. An additional limitation relates to the selection process – as the majority of participants described themselves as either liberal or democrat – with only one participant openly disagreeing with the conceptual notion of censorship. This was an important limitation, as there may be additional Right or moderate-leaning participants that may have offered valuable insight into their ongoing role and relationship with education censorship. This sample was likely under-reached given the political distributions of the country. A final limitation related to the varied practice of SSW practitioners, within different states, varied certification standards and education preparation, geographical population regions, districts, political climates, role orientations, school-based needs, and overarching education policies. Participants spoke to this limitation, noting the need for more nuanced guidance for SSW practice, amid fluctuating roles, for example, the difference between urban and rural needs of students and school-based orientations, size of caseloads, and the length of practice in schools. The data provided represents only a

glimpse of practicing SSWs in the country, and as such should be interpreted with caution.

### **Recommendations and Future Research**

**Study 1** uncovered the beginning stages of education censorship, including the orchestrations of political elites on the Right, including Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo and the immediate connections to race and diversity curricula bans across 19 states. These findings underscored the network influences across organizations, actors, politicians, and their alignment toward education and direct challenges against progressive frameworks such as antiracism, privilege, fragility, CRT, and DEI. **Study 2** illuminated the subsequent stages of education censorship influence, with media narratives used to promulgate divides aiming to engender support. Definitional divergence was present, where political bias led to unique representations of CRT debates, and mainstream articles largely served to maintain political divides and convey themes of culture wars. **Study 3** identified the direct influence of education censorship discourse represented in the mainstream media on school board public comments in resistance to a DEI policy in the Traverse City School District. Importantly, public commenters criticized the policy, pursued calls for colorblind approaches and sought frameworks to move beyond stigmatizing white youth. Although divides were apparent in school board public comments, there was largely civil discourse and calls for *continued* history of systemic racism were made by both sides. **Study 4** concluded the macro-to-micro level dissertation with interviews with school social workers. These conversations spanned the wide impact of education censorship, including policy impact and challenges of pre-existing role obligations. These conversations were rich in advocacy and support

for youth amid ongoing manifestations of repressive policies. The conclusionary study underscored concerns of developing trauma, juxtaposed with rich stories of new forms of advocacy and inclusion. SSW practitioners continue to be leaders amid uncertain times, with role obligations that are entrenched in fear, and political climates that deter their justice-oriented practice. SSW's provided warmth, encouragement and hope about the future – and as the boots on the ground offering support for youth – they provide a reason for continued research needed to support their practice and their ongoing advocacy in schools.

Although these studies bring out the beginning stages of understanding education censorship, there is much to be explored with regard to the impact on schools, curricula, youth outcomes, and school social worker support. This dissertation primarily focused on the mechanisms promulgating censorship, including elite network forces on the political Right, and how the media was leveraged to build political divides and leverage local level support. With these findings in mind, several recommendations are outlined to continue the forward progress with suggestions for research and practice.

### **Recommendations for Research**

1. More research is needed to understand the full scope of networks involved in the education censorship movement. This task can bring forward undergirding agendas, goals, and align forces toward resisting future networks of oppression. For example, the alignment of actors and organizations united in their pursuits of education censorship noted the origins of elite think-tanks such as the Manhattan Institute and the Heritage Foundation, and the ongoing support from the American Legislative Exchange Council – where a legislative blueprint is created and sent

out across republican states for sweeping action in legislatures. David Chen (2024) identified this trend of unified policy action amid the recent immigration laws: “*The flurry of laws and proposals meant to crack down on undocumented migrants entering the country is part of the extraordinary mix of immigration, litigation and politics that is producing legal gridlock in the courts and confusion at the border.*” Understanding the dynamics and organization of elite networks involved in a given policy agenda may be crucial to move from a reactionary and contentious response and toward preventative efforts.

2. Moving forward, we must separate the (a) elites shaping education censorship from (b) local level sentiment of caregivers and parents. In doing so, we can align our efforts toward listening to parents without judgment, as at times, these perspectives have been greatly co-opted and shaped by elite networks and influential media narratives. The work of the non-profit *More in Common* offers a contemporary playbook for analyzing polarizing topics to garner insight, reduce stigma, identifying the overlap and commonality to overcome social and political divides that may be inflamed and exacerbated in the media (see Hawkins et al., 2018; 2022).
3. The effort to understand those with varied perspectives can also be supported by a reinvigorated focus on *policy* rather than focusing on social and political divides. This focus also has implications for advocacy related to policies. As legislators often act without consideration of their constituents, then work to buy-in and manufacture consent and support after the fact through media support – we may need to reconsider the role of political advocacy. Perhaps voters could be targeted

in advocacy efforts, rather than legislators that potentially work on behalf of corporate donors. What we have seen in the case of censorship, as political divides emerge, so does group fighting, us versus them mentalities, and *othering* perspectives of those we disagree with (Ferris & Robbins, 2023). Contemporary research must work to outline where critique should be targeted. In the case of anti-CRT discourse, the result often was a defensive stance of “CRT is not in schools,” meanwhile the actual policies continue to be enacted, with new ones being developed, where we miss our opportunity to challenge and advocate for more inclusive re-vision of holistic schools. Ultimately, we must reposition the debate toward *policy* and not *politics*.

4. In building collaboration and dismantling conflict, we must also do our part in investigating the progressive development in schools. As education consulting groups continue to offer their services, we must be cautiously skeptical to make sure these are inclusive and trustworthy resources, trainings, and professional development. For example, as mandatory trends of implicit bias training expand across states – more research is needed to validate and examine the benefits of these efforts. Just as we would expect that intervention research is based on data-based evidence, we should maintain similar expectations of consulting groups and progressive reform such as DEI. Documenting and conveying the value and efficacy of these programs can help to convey the benefits to schools and youth and potentially offer strategies to reduce stigma.
5. Related to school social work practice, more research is needed to document the viability of the field, articulate role clarity, reduce ambiguity, and procure data-

based evidence to convey the value of role across multiple levels. For example, the attacks on the profession may be reduced through role clarity – where parents, administrators and teachers can locate the value through data and school-wide mental health supports. This work can begin on a qualitative level, to identify the strengths, benefits, and ongoing support of SSWs across multiple levels, including students, teachers, parents and caregivers, administrators, and school-wide. Engaging in research to identify the data-based evidence on SSW, can also help to identify the gaps and limitations of practice, to help examine the education preparation, and the role orientations to addressing inequities and promoting justice-oriented practice.

6. Finally, SSW viability must be supported by advocacy efforts on the state and national level, such as through SSW associations. To support these efforts, a deepened collaboration between national SSW associations and state associations may be useful to identify local needs, and geographic value, amid contextual role variations, and varied practice obligations. Overall, this means building a more nuanced picture of SSW and directing roles toward justice-oriented practice that targets inequities, provides resources, and builds school-wide support based on varied local needs. As the role and value of SSW are clarified, the attacks on the profession and youth development will become more difficult. Recommendations for research can also be buttressed by shifts in SSW practice.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

1. The first recommendation for practice is to build resources and awareness to help SSW practitioners stay abreast to the trends of censorship and the potential impact

on youth. For example, the policy impact is being documented by groups including Pen America, UCLA School of Law, Movement Advancement Project, and the Human Rights Campaign. However, as this dissertation revealed, the impact extends well beyond the impact of policy, whereby media discourse may impact youth in geographic regions without censorship policies enacted.

2. In addition to examining resources and being aware of the ongoing trends of censorship – SSWs should strive to build support for youth in reinvigorated ways to promote healing. This may include, offering office hour sessions to understand the impact of youth, examine pre-existing needs and ongoing inequities in schools. Listening, hearing, and uplifting youth perspectives can go a long way in supporting youth inclusively and understanding their experiences.
3. Moving forward, it is important that schools become healthy epicenters for conversation, discussion – where we can move beyond mechanisms of high conflict, listen to varied perspectives, and model inclusive communication. In doing so, we can align our efforts toward listening to parents without judgment, as at times, these perspectives have been greatly co-opted and shaped by elite networks and influential media narratives. This may be a continual battle, but we can strive to prioritize healthy conversations, hear counter-arguments, consider varied perspectives, and work together to build coalitions and supportive schools.
4. Building on our efforts to model healthy conversations, we can do more to bridge the divides between schools and parents. For example, we can work to convey the value of school social work, progressive efforts such as SEL, DEI – and provide awareness regarding the school initiatives or trends. These conversations may

help to minimize fear that is promulgated by policies and media discourse and help to convey the need and benefits of these frameworks in schools and for positive youth development. This could include reinvigorated efforts to clarify the role of SSW, the benefits of, for example, social-emotional frameworks that are the target of contemporary right-wing censorship.

## **CONCLUSION**

The impact of education censorship was documented in this dissertation across policies, media, school boards, and school social work practice in schools. Policies are proposed and enacted on the state level, then moved into the mainstream through dichotomized narratives in the media which reifies censorship on the local level at school board meetings, creating a multi-dimensional impact on school systems and youth development. Understanding the movement demands that we recognize the cohesiveness of actors and organizations involved (i.e., network influences), see the evolution in censorship topics (i.e., SEL; DEI), and the supportive role of media discourse and school board contention (Mitchell et al., 2023). To reflect on the impact and action of school social workers, it is necessary to consider their pre-existing role obligations and aspects of underemployment, high caseloads, role ambiguity, school system needs (e.g., youth mental health), state certification standards, and educational preparation. As we ask social workers to uphold the ethical foundations of the field – they also need ongoing educational support, contemporary training, and national organizational support and advocacy to reduce role ambiguity, and procure viability for the profession to support their role in policy, leadership, and advocacy in schools. As we strive to procure mechanisms of healing for youth in schools, we must attend to the multi-dimensional

ramifications of education censorship, remove barriers to justice-oriented school social work, and strategize on building community bridges, healthy conversations, and moving beyond social and political divides that are manufactured by elites and media moguls to sustain and perpetuate social and educational inequities. Emphasizing the well-being of youth in schools demands our systemic awareness and reinvigorated focus on justice.

TABLES

Table 1

Dissertation Study Aims and Research Questions

<b>Aim 1-A:</b> To understand the developmental process and networks underlying state education censorship policies.	
RQ 1	What are the processes by which state education censorship laws have been proposed and passed since April 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2021?
RQ 2	What types of corporations and organizations have links to the sponsors of state education censorship laws that have been passed since April 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2021?
<b>Aim 1-B:</b> To examine the discourses of educational censorship laws in the mainstream media.	
RQ 3	How are educational censorship laws described and framed in the media?
RQ 4	How does discourse vary across different types of media outlets?
<b>Aim 2-A:</b> To explore the impact of education censorship and discourse on the political Right at school board public comments in Michigan – a geographic region without state level censorship.	
RQ 5	How does the discourse on the political Right (e.g., newspaper articles video content) align with the discursive narratives of those opposed to an anti-racist policy in Michigan.
<b>Aim 2-B:</b> To understand school social workers' views of education censorship policies on their role and practice in schools.	

RQ7	What are the perspectives, awareness, and knowledge of school social workers regarding education censorship policies and the impact on youth in their schools?
RQ 8	In what ways, if any, do school social workers attempt to reduce harm caused by education censorship policies in their schools?

Table 2

Anti-Critical Race Theory Guidance from the Political Right

<b>Author</b>	<b>Publication</b>	<b>Article Title</b>	<b>Publication Date</b>
Heritage Action for America	Heritage Action for America	Reject Critical Race Theory	n.d.
The Heritage Foundation	The Heritage Foundation	Knowing Critical Race Theory When You See It and Fighting It When You Can	n.d.
The Heritage Foundation	The Heritage Foundation	How to Identify Critical Race Theory	6/14/21
Jonathan Butcher & Mike Gonzalez	The Heritage Foundation	Critical Race Theory, the New Intolerance, and Its Grip on America	12/7/20
Christopher Rufo(b)	Hillsdale College	Critical Race Theory: What It Is and How to Fight It	3/1/21
Christopher Rufo(c)	The Heritage Foundation	Critical Race Theory Would Not Solve Racial	3/23/21

		Inequality: It Would Deepen It	
Christopher Rufo(d)	The Manhattan Institute	Standing Against Critical Race Theory	4/21/21
The Center for Renewing America (a)	Citizens for Renewing America	Ending State-Sanctioned Racism: Banning the Spread of Critical Race Theory in our Institutions	5/5/21
The Center for Renewing America (b)	Citizens for Renewing America	Policy Brief: A Comprehensive Overview of Critical Race Theory in America	5/18/21
Citizens for Renewing America (c)	Citizens for Renewing America	Model School Board Language to Prohibit Critical Race Theory	6/4/21
Citizens for Renewing America (d)	Citizens for Renewing America	Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community	6/8/21

Table 3

Deductive Coding Schematic

Category	Sub-category	Code Description Data Sample
Concerns of Efficacy	Equity replaces Equality  “Marxism”	<p>“CRT proponents use equity to mean the forced equality of outcomes through the transfer of power as opposed to treating people equally or individuals having equality of opportunity” Citizens Renewing America, 2021c)</p> <p>“CRT’s “equity” demands race-based discrimination. Because systemic racism has produced disparities between the races and because the system will only deepen these disparities by rewarding the “wrong” criteria, government must treat individual Americans unequally according to skin color to forcibly produce equal outcomes. Advocating equity over equality is part of CRT.” (Heritage Foundation, n.d., a).</p>
Concerns of content	Systemic Racism  Anti-racism  intersectionality  “Deepening Divisions”	<p>“The tenets outlined in section (1)(B), often found in “critical race theory,” undermine a free society and sound education and otherwise exacerbate and inflame divisions</p>

		<p>on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the nation, the founding principles of the nation, and the well-being of the citizens of [insert local school board jurisdiction]” (Citizens for Renewing America, 2021c).</p> <p>“In reality, the program of “antiracism” would deepen racial divisions, not transcend them; even worse, it would undermine the very institutions that are essential to addressing poverty and inequality in America” (Rufo, 2021A).</p> <p>Heritage Foundation Heritage Action for America“ This proposal [anti-racism] will do no less than convert our schools into centers of indoctrination in an invidious, divisive ideology that is contrary to the American ideal and way of life” Manhattan Institute, 2021a).</p> <p>“Intersectionality: (Citizens Renewing America, 2021b).</p>
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		<p>“Anti-racism” instead is part of a CRT effort to change the definition of racism in order to sanction racism” (Citizens Renewing America, 2021d).</p>
<p>Concerns of content/Perceived Attacks on white Americans</p>	<p>CRT in schools</p> <p>“CRT related terminology”:</p> <p>BLM</p> <p>1619 Project</p> <p>“Divisive curriculum”</p> <p>“Ethnic studies”</p> <p>“Task force”</p> <p>“Social Justice”</p> <p>“Diversity training”</p> <p>“Systemic Racism”</p> <p>“white privilege”</p> <p>“white fragility”</p> <p>“Racial Equity”</p>	<p>Districts around the country have integrated CRT into school curricula. Both of the nation’s largest teacher unions support the Black Lives Matter organization, with the National Education Association specifically calling for the use of Black Lives Matter curricular materials in K–12 schools” (Butcher &amp; Gonzalez, 2020).</p> <p>“Among the most prolific examples is the prominence of the phrase ‘social justice.’” (Citizens Renewing America, 2021b).</p> <p>Heritage Foundation</p>
<p>At the Expense of Academics</p>	<p>American Values</p> <p>Christianity</p> <p>Free Markets</p> <p>Traditional Marriage</p>	<p>“Everything that makes up American society is racist. This includes Christianity, free markets, traditional marriage, rule of law, traditional family structures, and a representative form of government” (Citizens</p>

	<p>Founding Principles</p> <p>“Academic concerns”</p>	<p>Renewing America, 2021d).</p> <p>Contrary to the doctrine of critical race theory, the solution to poverty—for members of all racial groups—is to provide a pathway for stable two-parent households, <i>achievement-based academic success</i>, and full-time work for householders” (Rufo, 2021a)</p> <p>(Butcher &amp; Gonzalez, 2020)</p>
<p>Perceived Attacks on white Americans</p>	<p>Negative white conceptualizations</p> <p>white privilege</p> <p>white fragility</p>	<p>Heritage Foundation</p>
	<p>white supremacy</p>	<p>Heritage Foundation</p>
<p>Perceived Attacks on white Americans</p>	<p>Oppressor vs. Oppressed</p> <p>Marxism</p>	<p>“The Marxist analysis of society made up of categories of oppressors and oppressed” (Butcher &amp; Gonzalez, 2020).</p> <p>“Individuals are either an oppressor or victim. You are predetermined by immutable characteristics such as race to fall into either</p>

		category. Culture is defined by groups exercising power over each other” (Heritage Action For America, n.d.).
Perceived Attacks on white Americans	Identity Politics Critical Social Justice Victimization	<p>“Critical Social Justice says that all society should be looked at and understood through the lens of identity politics” (Citizens Renewing America, n.d., c)</p> <p>“CRT underpins identity politics, which reimagines the U.S. as a nation riven by groups, each with specific claims on victimization” (Butcher &amp; Gonzalez, 2020)</p>
Perceived Attacks on white Americans	Diminishing success; forward progress	<p>“CRT theorists reject the civil rights movement. The civil rights movement wanted to make sure there were equal rights in America for everyone” (Citizens Renewing America, 2021d).</p>
Concerns of Transparency	Curriculum Transparency	<p>“How to Stop CRT in your School District? Transparency is an important tool to holding government accountable—shining a spotlight on CRT curriculum is an effective way to stop it” (Heritage Action For America, n.d.).</p>

		<p>Parents should know what is being taught in their children’s K–12 schools. State policymakers should require that public schools make their curricular resources available to the public. <b>Parents and taxpayers</b> should have access to the material that teachers are using in the classroom. Such transparency will help families as they make decisions about how and where their children learn by evaluating the offerings of different schools and education institutions (Butcher &amp; Gonzalez, 2020).</p>
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Table 4

School Social Worker Focus Group Interview Guide

	<b>Focus Group Interview Guide</b>
	[Begin with a general description of education censorship persisting on state and district levels, including policies, book bans, network and media influences.]
<b>1</b>	<p><b>SSW knowledge and awareness related to education censorship</b></p> <p><b>1.1</b> Please discuss your general knowledge and awareness of education censorship and restrictions on youth rights – whether nationally or locally.</p> <p><i>If necessary, Probe B:</i> What is your opinion of the impact it may have on your school, youth, and or practice as a school social work practitioner?</p>
	<p><b>1.2</b> In what ways have you seen an impact of education censorship in your state, district, or school?</p> <p><i>If necessary, Probe A:</i> For example, social and political turmoil, book bans, school board challenges, curricula bans, or relationship challenges?</p>
<b>2</b>	<p><b>Education censorship and SSW practice obligations</b></p> <p><b>2.1.</b> Please discuss how (e.g., district; state) whether censorship policies have influenced your SSW practice?</p> <p><i>If necessary, Probe A:</i> In what ways, if any, has your district experienced any, for example, school board challenges, book bans, or policy changes?</p> <p><b>2.2</b> How might your role and practice obligations limit your ability to attend to challenges related to education censorship?</p>
<b>3</b>	<p><b>Advocacy, resistance, and justice-oriented practice as related to education censorship</b></p>

	<p><b>3.1.</b> In what ways is the school social worker positioned (or not) to advocate against or resist the oppressive trends of censorship?</p> <p><b>3.2.</b> Please discuss any advocacy or resistance efforts you've undertaken against the trends of education censorship or to help provide support (e.g., families, teachers, administrators, youth).</p> <p><b>3.3.</b> In what ways has your training (pre-service or continuing education) helped in navigating recent school changes associated with education censorship?</p> <p><i>If necessary, Probe A:</i> How could training/continuing education help support your awareness and understanding of censorship in order to evolve support-based mechanisms?</p>
<p><b>4</b></p>	<p><b>Concluding Remarks</b></p> <p><b>4.1.</b> Is there something else you'd like to share related to education censorship and the practice orientation of school social workers?</p>

Table 5

Divisive Concepts

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1	One race, ethnic group or sex is inherently morally or intellectually superior to another race, ethnic group or sex.
2	An individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.
3	An individual should be invidiously discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex.
4	An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race, ethnicity or sex.
5	An individual, by virtue of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed by other members of the same race, ethnic group or sex.
6	An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress because of the individual's race, ethnicity or sex.
7	Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race, ethnic group or sex to oppress members of another race, ethnic group or sex.

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- 8 The [state] or United States of America is fundamentally racist.
- 9 Race or sex stereotyping – means ascribing character traits, values, moral and ethical codes, privileges, status, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of his or her race or sex.
- 10 Race or sex scapegoating – means assigning any claim that, consciously or unconsciously, and by virtue of his or her race or sex, members of any race are inherently racist or are inherently inclined to oppress others, or that members of a sex are inherently sexist or inclined to oppress others.
- 11 That members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex.
- 12 Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people.
- 13 The rule of law does not exist, but instead is a series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups.
- 14 All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
- 15 Governments should deny to any person within the government's jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.
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- 16 Fault, blame, or bias should be assigned to a race or sex, or to members of a race or sex because of their race or sex.
- 17 Promotes or advocates the violent overthrow of the United States government.
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Table 6

Education Censorship Legislation

<b>State</b>	<b>Enacted</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Banned Concepts</b>	<b>Level</b>
Idaho HB 377	4/28/21	To establish prohibitions regarding certain tenets	1; 3; 5	Public schools; charters; higher ed
Arkansas SB 627	5/3/21	to prohibit the propagation of divisive concepts; and to review state entity training materials	1 - 9	State entities
Oklahoma HB 1775	5/7/21	Prohibiting certain training; stereotyping and bias	1 - 7; 11	Public schools; charters; higher ed
Tennessee SB 623	5/25/21	Prohibiting specific curriculum, training, instructional components	1- 7; 9; 12 - 15	Public schools; charters

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Montana Att orney General Opinion	5/27/21	Statement on the legalities of CRT and antiracism; Parameters imposed on school curriculum and government entities	9; 10; 18; 19	Public schools; state agencies
Utah R277- 328	6/2/21	Education, administration; educational equity in schools	1; 3 - 5	Public schools
Iowa HF 802	6/8/21	Prohibits concepts and prevents training related to the defined concepts	1 - 11	Public schools; higher education; state agencies
Arizona HB 2898	6/30/21	Prohibiting instruction; disciplinary action; legal action; civil penalty	1-7	Public schools; charters, state agencies
South Carolina H 4100	6/30/21	Prohibitions on partisanship curriculum and instructional aspects related to outlined concepts	1 - 7; 16	Public schools

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New Hampshire HB 2	7/1/21	Rights to Freedom from Discrimination Public Workplaces and Education; prohibits concepts, government programs, speech, and anti- discrimination	1 - 3; 11	Public schools; higher ed; state agencies
Arizona HB 2906	7/9/21	State entity prohibitions on training, orientation, and therapy related to several concepts	1 - 7; 16	State agencies
Alabama SBOE Administrative Code	8/12/21	Resolution declaring the perseveration of intellectual freedom and non- discrimination	1 - 3; 16	Public schools
Texas SB 3979	9/1/21	Relating to civics instruction	1 - 7; 9; 11	Public schools, charters, higher ed; state agencies

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North Dakota HB 1508	11/12/21	Prohibiting critical race theory	18	Public schools
Virginia Executive Order #1	1/15/22	Ending the use of inherently divisive concepts; raise academic performance standards	1-5; 7; 11; 18	Public schools
Mississippi SB 2113	3/14/22	Prohibitions on divisive concepts outlined	1; 3	Public schools; charters; higher ed
Florida HB 1467	3/28/22	School board term limits; library book reviews; library training; instructional materials open to public review	N/A	Public schools
Florida HB 1557	3/28/22	Parental rights in education; curriculum bans related to sexual orientation or gender identity in K-3	N/A	K-3

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South Dakota HB 1012	3/28/22	An act to protect students and employees at institutions of higher education from divisive concepts	1-7	Higher ed
South Dakota Executive Order 2022- 2	3/28/22	Prohibiting divisive concepts; department of education review of policies, standards; websites; materials, trainings and professional development	1; 3-7	Public schools
Tennessee 2670/SB 2290	4/5/22	Act relative to higher education and divisive concepts prohibitions. Yearly campus climate surveys	1-10; 12- 15; 17	Higher ed
Kentucky SB 1	4/8/22	Social studies standards. Standards and assessment; accelerated learning	5	Public schools; charters

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Florida HB 7	4/13/22	Related to discrimination; African American history revisions; prohibited topics	1-7; 11	Public schools
Georgia HB 1084	4/22/22	Prevent the use of and reliance upon curricula or training programs which advocate for certain concepts	1-10	Public schools; charters
Florida 6A- 1.094124	11/23/22	Required instruction planning and reporting; factual and objective historical curricula;	18; 19	Public schools

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Table 7

Sample of Christopher Rufo Articles

Title	Date
Interrupting Whiteness	July 8, 2020
Summary of Critical Race Theory Investigations	September 5, 2020
Bad Education	September 10, 2020
The New Segregation	October 19, 2020
The Truth about Critical Race Theory	October 5, 2020
The Whitest Privilege	December 3, 2020
Seattle Teaching Hate	December 14, 2020
Radical in the Classroom	January 5, 2021
Woke Elementary	January 13, 2021
Antiracism Comes to the Heartland	January 19, 2021
Spoiled Rotten	January 28, 2021
Bad Education	February 11, 2021

Gone Crazy	February 19, 2021
Failure Factory	February 23, 2021
Racism in the Cradle	March 2, 2021
Critical Race Fragility	March 2, 2021
Revenge of the Gods	March 10, 2021
Subversive Education	March 17, 2021
Senator Cotton's Stand	March 24, 2021
Merchants of Revolution Asylum	April 13, 2021
How to Fight Critical Race Theory	April 19, 2021
Standing Against Critical Race Theory	April 27, 2021

Table 8

## Education Censorship Survey Demographics

#	Gender	Race	Years of Practice	Political Leaning	School	Role
Jane	W	White	20 +	D	Suburban	Micro
Ann	W	White	20 +	I	Rural	Micro/Macro
Judy	W	White	20 +	L	Rural	Micro
France	W	White	20 +	P	Suburban	Micro-Macro
Rurna	W	White	20 +	P	Rural	Micro-Macro
Katie	W	White	11-15	M	Rural	Macro
Aaliyah	W	Black	6-10	D	Suburban	Mezzo/SMH
Olivia	W	White	3-5	P	Rural	Micro/Mezzo
Niesha	W	Black	11-15	D	Urban/Sub	Micro
Mala	W	Indigenous	3-5	D	Urban	Micro
Ava	W	White	20 +	D	Urban/Sub	Micro-Macro
Amelia	W	White	16-20	L	Urban/Sub	Mezzo/Crisis
Chloe	W	White	1-2	I	Suburban	Mezzo/SMH
Gwen	W	White	6-10	L	Suburban	Micro-Macro

Note. Political Leaning = Democrat (D), Independent (I), Liberal (L), Moderate (M),

Prefer not say (P).

# FIGURES

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework

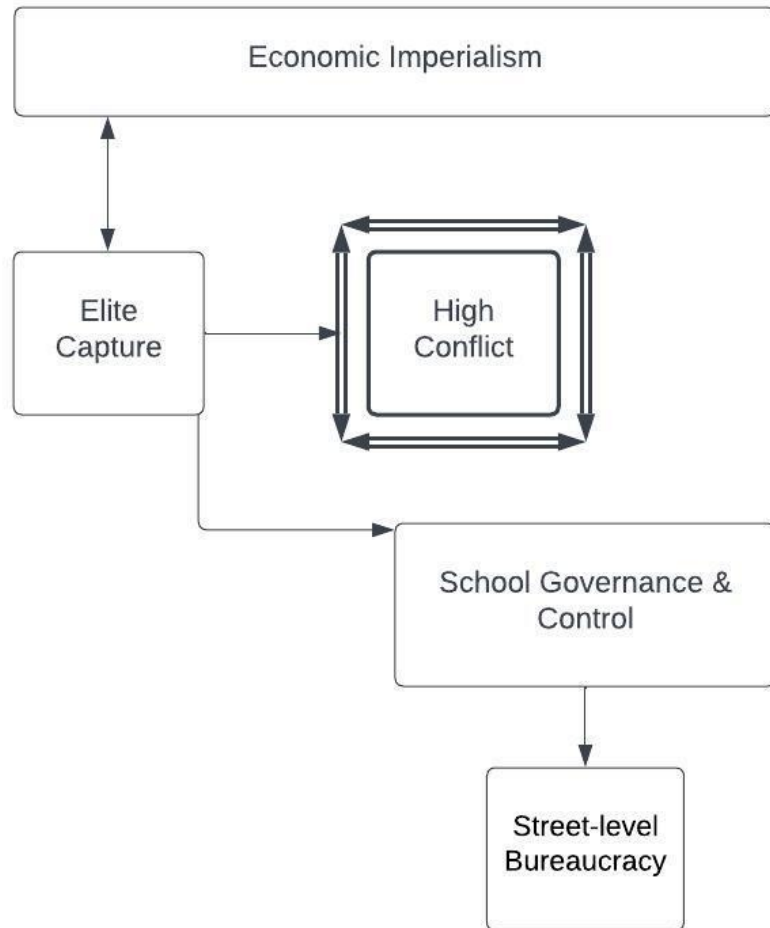


Figure 2

Education Censorship Timeline of Key Events

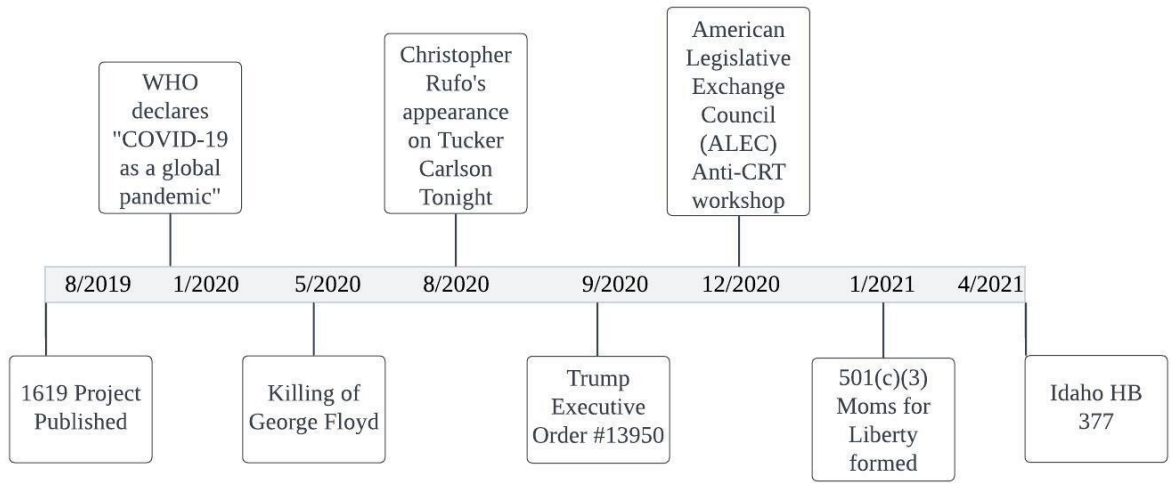


Figure 3

“Parents Defending Education: IndoctriNation Map”



Figure 4

Conceptual Model of Education Censorship

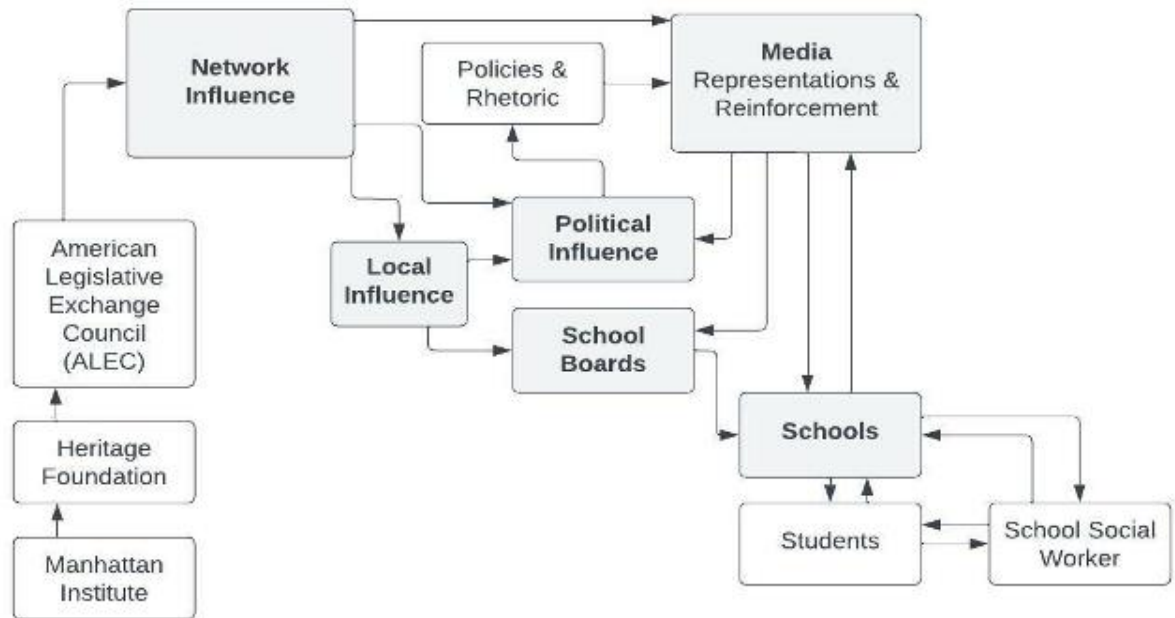


Figure 5

Fairclough's Explanatory Critique Model for CDA Analysis

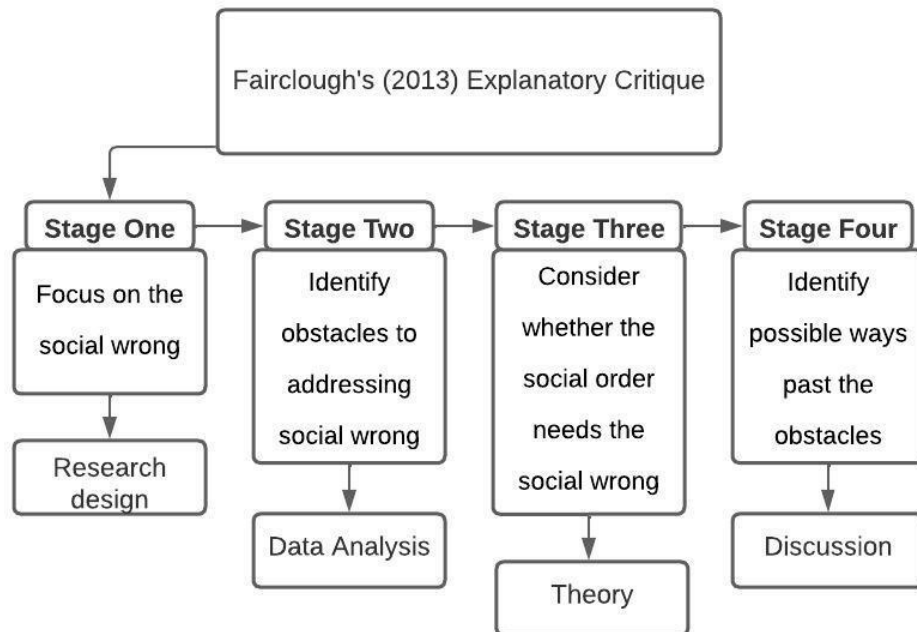


Figure 6

Connections Between Divisive Concepts Enacted and Rufo Discourse

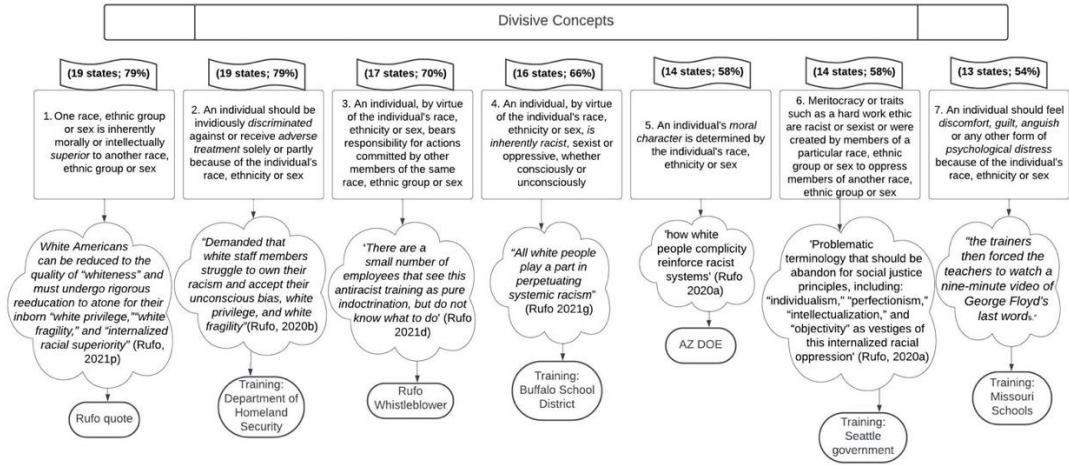


Figure 7

Study 2 Articles Gathered (Search 1)

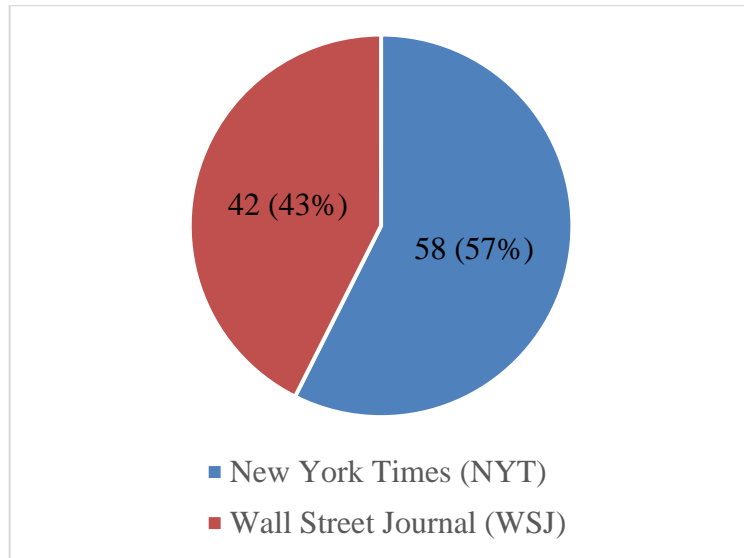


Figure 8

Full Sample of Articles Gathered

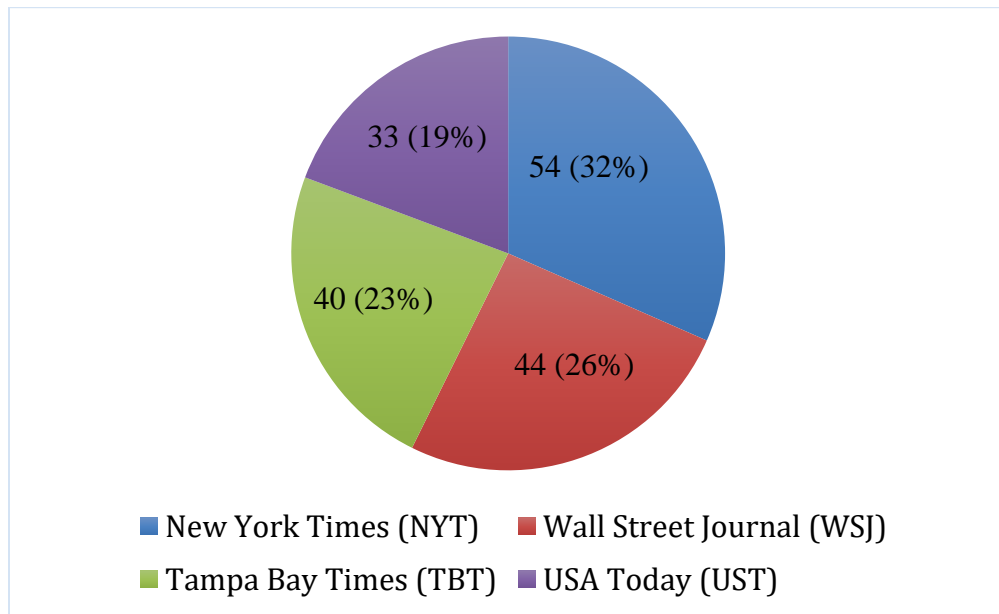


Figure 9

Education Censorship Legislation in the United States

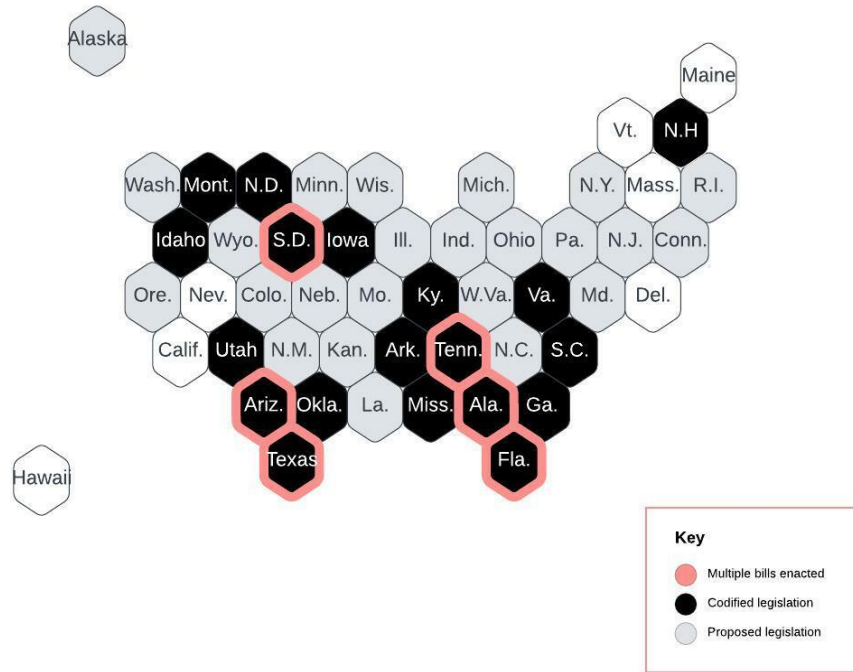


Figure 10

Three Themes of School Board Public Comments

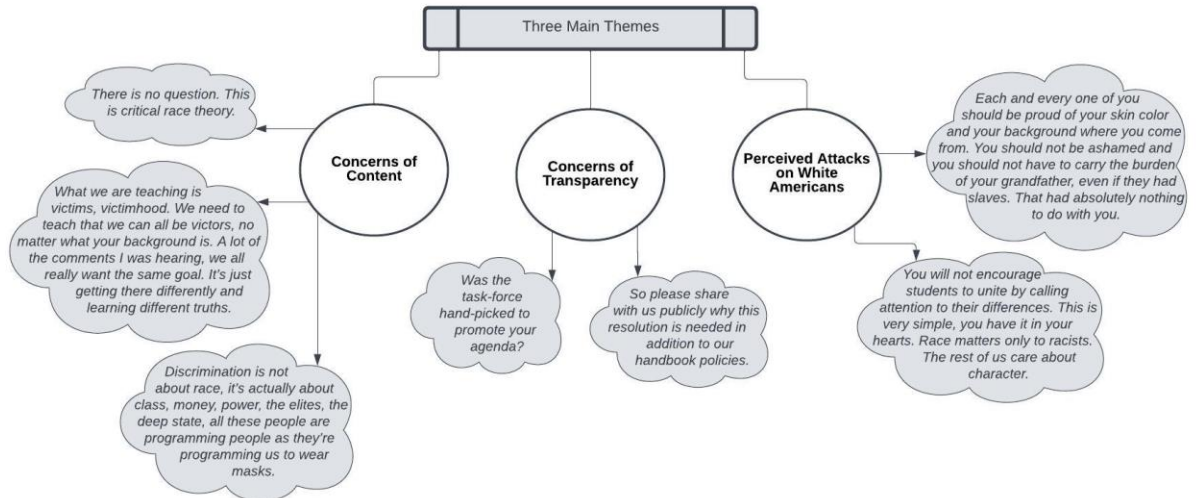


Figure 11

Education Censorship & School Social Work Qualitative Themes

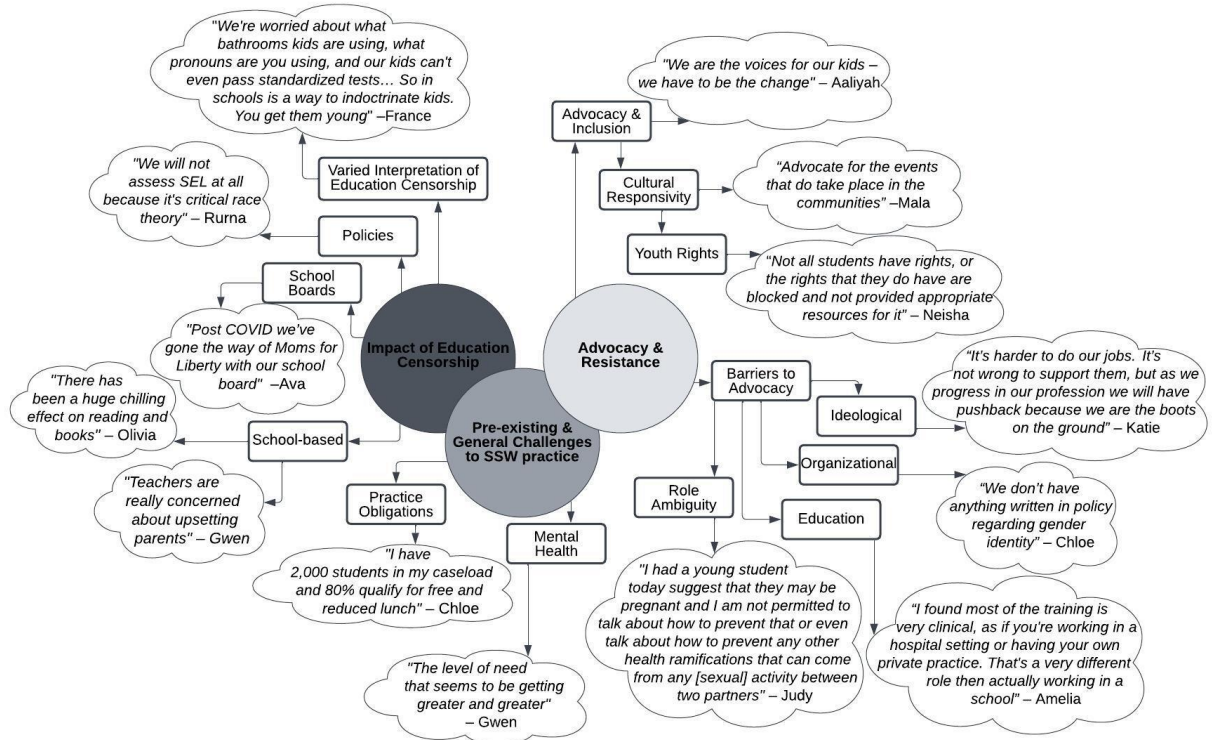
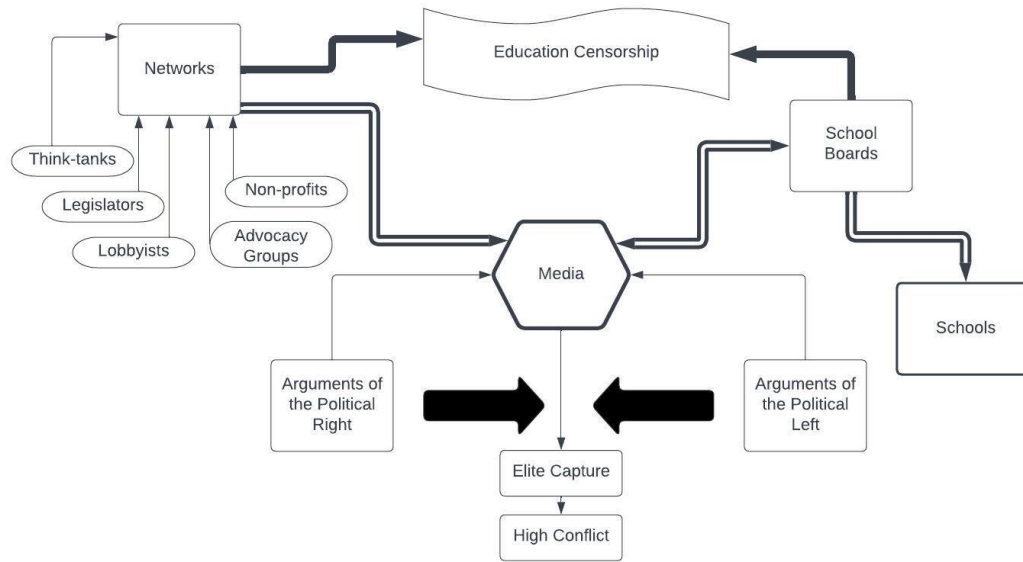


Figure 12

Conceptualization of Education Censorship



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## **Appendix A**

### **Historical and Contemporary Racism in Public Education**

Historical representation in textbooks has not been equally distributed across varied groups (Zimmerman, 2022), with minoritized populations often enduring their cultures, histories, and experiences of oppression contorted into controlled and whitewashed narratives that align with the status quo (McLaren, 2015). There have been some trends in progressive education, evidenced by recent efforts to improve cultural inclusivity and historical accuracy, with some state level support for new curriculum standards aimed at cultural responsiveness and historical reform (Lepore, 2022). For instance, California Assembly Bill 101 provides a framework for the inclusion of lessons related to Black Lives Matter, colonialism, and other important and often neglected topics of American history (Sachs et al., 2021). However, across the U.S., there has been a significant increase in efforts to restrict information and equity over the past two years. In 2022, there was a 250% increase in education censorship legislation introduced in the country compared to 2021. The proposed bills were striking not only because of their increased number, but also because they are more punitive, include a larger number of bills targeting LGBTQ+ identities while continuing to focus on censorship of race/ethnicity discussion, and include more provisions aimed at censorship in higher education (Young & Friedman, 2022). Meanwhile, the oppressive trends of education censorship exist in the context of a tumultuous academic climate leading to disproportionately negative experiences for minoritized youth.

Minoritized youth, including Black, Indigenous, and Latino/a youth face an array of challenges, injustices, and oppression as they are more likely to navigate a school

climate enmeshed with systematic disinvestment (Lipman, 2013) and extreme academic rigidity (Giroux, 2022). Additionally, the punitive and hostile environment of schools (Meiners, 2010) has led to an array of academic inequities for minoritized youth, including elevated rates of dropout, grade retention, absenteeism, and lower academic achievement (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011). These disproportionately negative experiences are exacerbated by a punitive and pathologizing disciplinary system (Annamma, 2017), where minoritized youth experience disparate rates of suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement (Black, 2018). Collectively, the punitive school allegiance has engendered a cradle-to-prison-nexus signifying the relationship of exclusionary discipline to the increased likelihood of future incarceration (Hodges et al., 2021). At the same time, schools are still grossly underfunded, reinforced by segregated societies and schools (Weathers & Sosina, 2022), with funding mechanisms linked to property taxes (Rothstein, 2017), whereby affluent, white youth are less likely to be educated in underfunded schools (Diem & Welton, 2021). In fact, white youth are more likely to benefit on all levels, including better equipped schools and facilities, elevated school funding and teacher salaries, enhanced and expanded curriculum and extracurricular opportunities – all of which increase their likelihood and support for attending and succeeding in higher education (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Educational inequities and punitive treatment are reinforced by a neoliberal school environment (Au & Ferrare, 2015), including rampant high-stakes test-based culture, rigid academic focus, (Au, 2010), and exclusionary disciplinary system are increasingly deployed – with some social science scholars suggesting that schools are more likely to resemble prisons than education institutions (Kupchik, 2016). Black and Brown youth are

more likely to see police roaming the halls and encounter metal detectors, security cameras, and locked doors – all through the guise of “enhanced security” – as growing corporate control shapes school toward privatization, testing, and tutoring schemes (Casella, 2010; 2018; Deakin et al., 2018; Mitchell, in press). None of these “safety” measures prevented the tragedy in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 children were killed, and police stood outside and failed to intervene.

The pathologizing of youth associated with the reliance on exclusionary discipline may also be reflected in rising rates of mental health diagnoses, including attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, depression, and anxiety (Mate & Mate, 2020). The demands of competition and academic oppression begin in early childhood education, when “school readiness” standards sort youth based on metrics that blame youth and families for their lack of “preparedness” rather than holding schools accountable (Iorio & Parnell, 2015). As progressive movements engineer and advocate for social-emotional learning, advance critically-oriented frameworks – conservative attacks have taken hold (López et al., 2021). Educational inequities disproportionately affect minoritized youth and families, perpetuating societal inequities and reinforcing the status quo that aligns with the privileged white society (Hirschfield, 2018).

## **Appendix B**

### **Systems of Oppression in Schools**

In schools, systems of oppression are evidenced by the longitudinal prevalence of academic and discipline inequities, as well as the conceptualizations and strategies of reform – all which disproportionately impact minoritized youth (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). With regard to disciplinary inequities, as noted in the introduction, minoritized youth – are disproportionately excluded from educational opportunities through disciplinary tactics such as suspensions (Joseph-McCatty et al., 2022). Equally important to this system of oppression are the scholarly conceptualizations of discipline that are markedly influenced by bias. For example, the reliance on terminology focused on student “behavior” or “behavioral inequities” assumes that discipline is used only for misbehaving youth. Scholars have underscored a host of factors that may influence the disproportionate use of discipline, including structural inequities (Radd et al., 2021), pedagogical and administrative bias and stereotypes (Gilliam et al., 2016; Raible & Irizarry, 2010), and pre-service training shortcomings (Matias, 2016). Meanwhile, the student’s identity may be the greatest indicator of their likelihood to experience exclusionary discipline – a factor which drives differential or discriminatory treatment of minoritized youth (Owens & McLanahan, 2020; Skiba et al., 2016). The focus on “behavior” creates a tendency to individualize disciplinary problems, downplay the impact of adverse experiences and trauma (Crosby, 2015; Crosby et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2021), and relocate structural injustices onto youth through deficit-driven ideology (Valencia, 2010).

The unique intersection of racism, classism, gendered stereotypes, discipline, surveillance, and capitalism offers a foundation lens for understanding the persistence of academic inequities. Disciplinary-based disparities categorized as behavioral inequities may intertwine to influence academic outcomes, leading to increases in drop-out, grade retention, and lower academic achievement for minoritized youth (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Fabelo et al., 2011). Yet, academic inequities are often conceptualized through racialized and dichotomized notions of an “academic achievement gap”. Nearly two decades ago, Ladson-Billings (2006) re-conceptualized the academic achievement gap as an educational debt – framing the need to emphasize and include analysis that emphasizes historical, structural, economic, cultural, and sociopolitical factors that influence youth achievement outcomes. Nevertheless, we continued to see researchers rely on racialized and dichotomized conceptualization, such as the academic achievement gap, and more recently, the “suspension gap” (Borman et al., 2022). Both of these frameworks uphold white youth as the gold standard to aspire to and assume that academic and behavioral inequities will be solved if only these groups are equally achieving academically and behaviorally. Meanwhile, the continued reliance on test-based metrics to measure achievement have been shown to be an inadequate way of measuring learning (Saltman, 2022).

The racist traditions of IQ testing are directly relevant to the ways in which we understand youth academic outcomes in schools – through racialized notions of an “achievement gap” (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). The marker of intelligence quotient (IQ) began as a way to “prove” the perceived inferiority of racial minoritized groups and has since evolved to comprise everyday taken for granted measures of testing and

assessments used in schools around the world (Au, 2010). Alfred Binet, the pioneer of the IQ test downplayed the objectivity of the measure by stating: “the scale does not permit the measure of intelligence because intellectual qualities are not superposable” (Binet and Simon, 1916). As the lack of comparability of IQ testing was declared unscientific by the developer, this notion of sorting, categorization, and testing has led to widespread “understanding” of today’s academic inequities, based upon faulty assumptions of science (Garrison, 2009). These shortcomings are then contorted to justify oppressive politics

## Appendix C

### Education Censorship Newspaper Articles Analyzed

1	Justice Dept. Will Address Disturbing Spike in Threats Against School Personnel	Erica L. Green	NYT	10/5/21
2	Leonard Leo's Network is Increasingly Powerful. But It's Not Easy to Define	Kenneth P. Vogel	NYT	10/12/22
3	In Wisconsin, a Republican attempt to oust school board member	Stephanie Saul	NYT	11/3/21
4	Increasingly Powerful Coalition With a Changing Roster	Kenneth P. Vogel	NYT	10/13/22
5	In Tennessee, 'Maus' Fight Is Part of Bigger Battle	Sophie Kasakove	NYT	3/5/22
6	In Texas, a Battle Over What Can Be Taught, and What Books Can Be Read	Michael Powell	NYT	12/10/21
7	If It's Not Critical Race Theory, It's Critical Race Theory-lite	John McWhorter	NYT	11/9/21
8	Illiberalism Is a Danger to Us All	Jonathan Rauch and Peter Wehne	NYT	1/22/22

9	In Backlash to Racial Reckoning, Conservative Publishers See Gold	Elizabeth A. Harris	NYT	8/15/21
10	Leonard Leo Pushed the Courts Right. Now He's Aiming at American Society	Kenneth P. Vogel	NYT	10/12/22
11	How Educational Differences are Widening America's Political Rift	Nate Cohn	NYT	9/8/21
12	How Book Bans Turned a Texas Town Upside Down	Erika Hayasaki	NYT	9/8/22
13	He Fuels Cultural Fires For the Right in Florida	Trip Gabriel	NYT	4/24/22
14	Teach '1619' and '1776' U.S. History	David Bernstein	WSJ	4/10/22
15	Georgia Candidates Try to Outdo One Another on the 'Woke Mob' in Schools	Charles M. Blow	NYT	5/6/22
16	Getting Personal With Black History	Nicolas Rapold	NYT	4/9/22
17	State Bans on Critical Race Theory Won't Work	Tony Woodlief	WSJ	8/20/21
18	District's Focus on Bias Ignited Fury in Virginia	Stephanie Saul	NYT	11/14/21

19	Do Democrats Have a Messaging Problem	Jeremy W. Peters	NYT	11/8/21
20	How Should We Teach Our Nation's History?	Opinion Letters	WSJ	4/18/21
21	Energizing Conservative Voters, One School Board Election at a Time	Stephanie Saul	NYT	10/21/21
22	Critical Race Theory Is the Opposite of Education	Gerard Baker	WSJ	6/21/21
23	Florida Rejects Math Textbooks, Citing Prohibited Topics	Dana Goldstein	NYT	4/18/22
24	Florida Releases Reviews of Math Books	Dana Goldstein and Stephanie Saul	NYT	5/8/22
25	Forced Forgetting	Timothy Snyder	NYT	7/4/21
26	Free Speech Is Under Threat	The Editorial Board	NYT	3/20/22
27	Free Speech Threatened, Group Says	Jennifer Schuessler	NYT	11/9/21

28	Democrats Need Schools Back to Normal	Michelle Goldberg	NYT	11/9/21
29	Critical Race Theory: A Brief History	Jacey Fortin	NYT	7/27/21
30	Critics Call It the 'Don't Say Gay' Bill. What Does the Text Actually Say?	Dana Goldstein	NYT	3/19/21
31	The Woke 'Model Minority' Myth	William McGurn	WSJ	2/22/21
32	Virginia Breaks the School-Choice Barrier	The Editorial Board	WSJ	7/4/22
33	Debate Over Scope of Racism Embroils Schools	Trip Gabriel and Dana Goldstein	NYT	6/2/21
34	Chaos at the School Board Meeting	Michelle Cottle	NYT	9/8/21
35	Christian Schools Boom in a Revolt Against Curriculum and Pandemic Rules	Ruth Graham	NYT	10/19/21
36	BIPOC or POC? Equity or Equality? The Debate Over Language on the Left	Amy Harmon	NYT	11/1/21

37	Birth Pangs: One Nation, Many Truths	Jennifer Schuessler	NYT	7/3/21
38	Theories on Race, Gender and Sexuality Are Pivotal Issues in U.S. School Board Elections	Scott Calvert	WSJ	11/5/22
39	California 's Ethnic Studies Follies	Bret Stephens	NYT	3/10/21
40	Can We Talk About Critical Race Theory	Jay Caspian Kang	NYT	11/13/21
41	Caught in a Culture War, Georgetown Day School Holds Fast to Its Mission	Erica L. Green	NYT	3/24/22
42	Attack of the Right-Wing Thought Police	Paul Krugman	NYT	1/25/22
43	Attacking Jackson and Appealing to G.O.P. Base	Jonathan Weisman and Jazmine Ulloa	NYT	3/23/22
44	Banned Books, Censored Topics, Teaching About the Battle Over What Students Should Learn	Katherine Schulten	NYT	9/22/22

45	Bans on Critical Race Theory Threaten Free Speech, Advocacy Group Says	Jennifer Schuessler	NYT	11/8/21
46	After Note on Racism, School District 'Imploded'	Erica L. Green	NYT	10/11/21
47	All California Public High School Students Will Soon Have to Take Ethnic Studies	Soumya Karlamangla	NYT	10/14/21
48	America 's Racial Battles Have Long Played Out in Classrooms	Charles M. Blow	NYT	8/20/21
49	A Smaller, Angrier Christian Right	Michelle Goldberg	NYT	7/10/21
50	A Fast-Growing Network of Conservative Groups Is Fueling a Surge in Book Bans	Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter	NYT	12/2/22
51	A Law, an Email and a Furor Over Curriculums	Michael Powell	NYT	12/11/21
52	A Look Inside the Textbooks That Florida Rejected	Dana Goldstein and Stephanie Saul	NYT	4/22/221

53	A Maddening Debate Over Race Theory	Michelle Goldberg	NYT	6/29/21
54	A Change of Course	Daniel Bergner	NYT	9/11/22
55	A Daily Follow-up to a tricky topic		NYT	7/20/21
56	12 Teens on What Adults don't get	N/A	NYT	3/27/22
57	Channeling the Mama Bear: How Covid Closures Became Today's Curriculum Wars	Claire Cain Miller and Francesca Paris	NYT	11/7/22
58	Florida still won't specify why it rejected math textbooks	Ana Ceballos	TBT	4/18/22
59	An Ugly Game of Race Preferences	William McGurn	WSJ	3/10/21
60	Can Politics Get Better When Higher Education Keeps Getting Worse?	John Ellis	WSJ	1/14/22
61	College Statements Recognizing Stolen Native American Land Spark Pushback	Melissa Korn	WSJ	3/18/21

62	Critical Race Theory in Our Schools	Opinion Letters	WSJ	7/8/21
63	Education Schools Have Long Been Mediocre. Now They're Woke Too	Daniel Buck	WSJ	8/19/21
64	Even Homer Gets Mobbed	Meghan Cox Gurdon	WSJ	12/27/20
65	Federal Lawsuits Say Antiracism and Critical Race Theory in Schools Violate Constitution	Douglas Belkin and Jacob Gershman	WSJ	7/1/21
66	Florida Moves to Restrict Teaching About Sexual Orientation	Arian Campo-Flores	WSJ	2/25/22
67	Girls as . . . Not Necessarily Woke	Bruce Gilley	WSJ	10/10/22
68	How Teachers Are Secretly Taught Critical Race Theory	Nicole Ault and Megan Keller	WSJ	9/2/22
69	Why Do We Send Teachers for Re-Education?	Opinion Letters	WSJ	8/24/22
70	If 2021 Elections Are Any Guide, 2022 Will Be a	Opinion Letters	WSJ	11/16/21

	Doozy			
71	In San Francisco, Parent Anger Focuses on School Board Recall	Christine Mai-Duc	WSJ	11/27/21
72	In Tennessee Law on Teaching About Race, Supporters and Opponents See Vindication	Scott Calvert	WSJ	4/11/22
73	Inside the Woke Indoctrination Machine	Andrew Gutmann and Paul Rossi	WSJ	2/11/22
74	McAuliffe's Gift to the GOP	Kimberley A. Strassel	WSJ	10/21/21
75	Merrick Garland Has a List, and You're Probably on It	Gerard Baker	WSJ	10/11/21
76	My High School's 'Antiracist' Agitprop	Sahar Tartak	WSJ	9/15/22
77	New Virginia Hotline Lets Parents Report 'Divisive Teaching Practices	Omar Abdel-Baqui and Jennifer Calfas	WSJ	1/26/22

78	Noonan and the San Francisco Schools	Opinion Letters	WSJ	2/25/22
79	Public School, Parents' Rights and Civic Peace	Opinion Letters	WSJ	11/1/21
80	Republicans Could Take Democrats to School	Jason L. Riley	WSJ	10/26/21
81	School Board Candidates Who Pushed 'Parental Rights' See Mixed Results	Ben Chapman	WSJ	11/13/22
82	School Boards Ask for Federal Help as Tensions Rise Over Covid-19 Policies	Jennifer Calfas	WSJ	9/30/21
83	School Boards With New Conservative Majorities Make Changes, Including Firing Superintendents	Ben Chapman	WSJ	12/16/22
84	Virginia Dad Takes On the School Board	William McGurn	WSJ	10/11/21
85	Virginia's 'Phony' Culture War	William McGurn	WSJ	11/8/21

86	Teachers Unions and Critical Race Theory in Schools	Opinion Letters	WSJ	7/15/21
87	The Revolt of the Unwoke	William McGurn	WSJ	7/26/21
88	A Simple First Step for Youngkin to Stop Leftist Tyranny	R. R. Reno	WSJ	11/7/21
89	The American Principle of Local Education	Opinion Letters	WSJ	10/18/21
90	The Biden Administration's New Salvo Against Charter Schools	Jason L. Riley	WSJ	4/26/22
91	Theories on Race, Gender and Sexuality Are Pivotal Issues in U.S. School Board Elections	Scott Calvert	WSJ	11/5/22
92	What Is to Be Done About the Woke School?	Opinion Letters	WSJ	6.30/21
93	The Patriot Act Wasn't Meant to Target Parents	F. James Sensenbrenner	WSJ	10/12/21

94	Classroom Chaos in the Name of Racial Equity Is a Bad Lesson Plan	Jason L. Riley	WSJ	5/11/21
95	DeSantis, GOP escalate fight against 'woke capital'; Companies punished for stances on social issues	Jessica Guynn	USA Today	4/25/22
96	Scholars agree on history education basics; Educators urge debate, empathy and nuance	Erin Richards	USA Today	8/23/21
97	Teach nation's racist past to help prevent hate crimes; How 18-year-old suspected Buffalo shooter shows inflammatory speech still terrorizes my community	N/A	USA Today	5/18/22
98	Teaching doesn't go by the textbook; History classes can vary based on methods, views	Trevor Hughes	USA Today	8/23/21
99	America's public servants say they feel they're under siege; Experts and people on front lines see an increase in death threats	Dennis Wagner	USA Today	11/2/21

100	DeSantis pushes 'Stop WOKE' bill amid opposition; Businesses worry about harm to recruitment	Kathryn Varn	USA Today	4/7/22
101	Teaching preschoolers about race and racism; Racial attitudes form during infancy, research shows, so early education is key	Alia Wong	USA Today	9/29/21
102	Texas abortion 'bounties' spark raft of imitations; Similar bills filed around US on guns, education	John Fritze	USA Today	10/27/21
103	Virginia race tests Trumpism strategy; A more palatable messenger could win	Board of Contributors	USA Today	10/27/21
104	Advocating for parental choice doesn't make me an anti-vaxxer	Celeste Fiehler	USA Today	10/26/21
105	Ex-Cowboy Maryland tackling racism	Emily Adams	USA Today	7/8/21
106	Garland defends memo on threats to educators; Republicans grill attorney general at Senate panel hearing	Bart Jansen and Alia Wong	USA Today	10/28/21

107	History classes keep exploring race despite political pressure	Erin Richards, Natalie Pate, Meghan Mangrum and Ryan W. Miller	USA Today	3/10/22
108	Moms for Liberty: An education army builds; Activists aim to shape school agendas, elections	Zac Anderson and Sommer Brugal	USA Today	12/29/21
109	Reporting on race revives bitter memory	Antonia Hylton	USA Today	9/2/21
110	Texas eyes more limits on teaching; Republicans push to restrict talk of racism	María Méndez and Austin American-Statesman	USA Today	7/21/21
111	Conservative school boards are reshaping US education; Push to dismantle how classes teach race, equality, inclusion	Erin Richards and Lindsay Schnell	USA Today	10/22/21

112	Critical race theory bans are taking a toll; Educators see stress on teachers, a chill on learning	Christine Fernando	USA Today	9/13/21
113	Education will be on the ballot in 2022; Parents' voices in Virginia could echo nationwide	Ledyard King and Mabinty Quarshie	USA Today	12/7/21
114	Learning about race and racism in schools; Some students in Texas share their experiences	Ella Malena Feldman, Austin American-Statesman	USA Today	7/9/21
115	Teaching race amid surge in state bans; Schools find ways to still provide historic context	Alia Wong	USA Today	10/29/21
116	Virginia's tip line worries educators; Move adds to debate over teaching 'divisive' topics	Ryan W. Miller	USA Today	2/1/22
117	'Critical race theory' war is meaningless; Our nation's history with race isn't a theory	N/A	USA Today	11/5/21

118	'Critical race' raises familiar furor; Ebonics, LGBTQ issues sowed earlier controversy	Javonte Anderson	USA Today	8/16/21
119	Educators say history lesson is best dam against racist tide	Alia Wong and Romina Ruiz-Goiriena	USA Today	5/20/22
120	GOP eyes takeover of school boards; How race is being taught is central to its message	Chris Quintana	USA Today	10/24/22
121	Race, public safety drove many voters	Phillip M. Bailey, Mabinty Quarshie and Chelsey Cox	USA Today	11/5/21
122	Teaching critical race theory is patriotic, not anti-American	Kevin Cokley	USA Today	7/7/21
123	Big money targets school board races; Local contests proxies for national issues	Nicole Carroll	USA Today	10/31/22
124	How critical race theory was used to spur voters	Nicole Carroll	USA Today	11/8/21

125	Our View: Schools should decide what belongs in class	Mary Altaffer	USA Today	7/7/21
126	Politics besiege school board meetings; Latest rift is over critical race theory	Ryan W. Miller	USA Today	7/6/21
127	Unfamiliar with critical race theory or related terms?; Here are 15 phrases and their definitions	Olivia Krauth	USA Today	8/23/21
128	Path looks clear for Jackson; Even critics expect her to be confirmed to Supreme Court	Courtney Subramania, and John Fritze	USA Today	3/28/22
129	Cross Country: How Teachers Are Secretly Taught	Nicole Ault and Megan Keller	WSJ	9/3/22
130	'Allow teachers to teach the truth'   Column; A future Florida classroom of fear and loathing and no critical race theory, imagines Leonard Pitts	Leonards Pitts Jr.	TBT	7/16/21
131	A closer look at Florida's rejected math textbooks; The state still isn't answering questions about	Jeffrey S. Solochek	TBT	4/26/21

	why it declared some books unfit, so it was time to start searching			
132	A Florida student reported a teacher for misconduct. Then the student started facing trouble.; A roundup of Florida education news from around the state	Jeffrey S. Solocek	TBT	6/26/21
133	After criticism, Pinellas School Board may rethink public comment rul	Jeffrey S. Solocek	TBT	11/30/22
134	As school mask debate fades, some parents turn ire to 'critical race theory'	Jeffrey S. Solocek	TBT	10/16/21
135	At UF, someone used 'critical' and 'race' in a sentence. Trouble ensued	Divya Kumar	TBT	11/30/21
136	Battle over critical race theory won't benefit GOP in the long run	Jonah Goldberg	TBT	7/23/21
137	Book about Holocaust banned in Tennessee school district	N/A	TBT	1/27/22
138	Conservative Hillsdale College is helping DeSantis reshape Florida education	Ana Ceballos	TBT	6/30/22

139	Critical race theory sparks debate in Hernando schools; The school district has repeatedly said it is not teaching the theory	Jake Sheridan	TBT	8/23/22
140	Defenders and opponents of critical race theory are prone to exaggeration	Jonah Goldberg	TBT	7/8/21
150	DeSantis amps up rhetoric against critical race theory during rowdy event	Ana Ceballos	TBT	12/15/21
151	DeSantis appoints Corcoran to Florida's Board of Governors; The board oversees the state's 12 public universities	N/A	TBT	5/27/22
152	DeSantis signs Florida race-related instruction bill	N/A	TBT	4/22/22
153	Florida's 'anti-woke' bills raise concerns for scholars who teach about race	Divya Kumar	TBT	1/19/22
154	Florida's focus on math textbooks may be nothing compared to what's next	Jeffrey S. Solocek	TBT	5/16/22

155	Florida 'woke' law pushed by DeSantis now challenged by 3 federal lawsuits	N/A	TBT	8/18/22
156	Florida debates book bans in public schools	Jeffrey S. Solochek	TBT	1/26/22
157	Florida Department of Education offers examples of math book concerns	Jeffrey S. Solochek	TBT	4/21/22
158	Florida education board approves new school standards	Marlene Sokol	TBT	7/14/21
159	Florida math textbook reviewers made comments on race, climate change, records show	Ana Ceballos	TBT	5/6/22
160	Florida race-related instruction bill ready for DeSantis	Ryan Dailey	TBT	5/9/22
161	Florida rejected dozens of math textbooks. But only 3 reviewers found CRT violations	Ana Ceballos	TBT	5/12/22
162	Florida school district cancels civil rights seminar over race theory concerns	Mike Schneider	TBT	1/24/22

163	Florida targets school math textbooks over critical race theory objections	Ana Ceballos	TBT	4/16/22
164	Focus on the student as Tampa Bay schools reopen after the holidays	Tampa Bay Times Editorial Board	TBT	12/28/21
165	Gov. DeSantis' throws more red meat to Florida Republicans	Mac Stipanovich	TBT	3/31/21
166	Gov. Ron DeSantis targets critical race theory as Florida examines academic standards	Ana Ceballos	TBT	6/7/21
167	Hillsborough rejects idea to embrace Florida's ban on 'critical race theory'	Marlene Sokol	TBT	8/12/21
168	How Florida's 'anti-woke' bill could impact public universities	Ana Ceballos	TBT	4/15/22
169	How to keep critical race theory and other bummers out of school books	Stephanie Hayes	TBT	6/14/21
170	Why the Lawyers Cartel Is Pushing for Woke Law	John McGinnis	WSJ	7/16/21

## CURRICULM VITAE

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Brandon D. Mitchell

949.290.0546

[brandon.mitchell@louisville.edu](mailto:brandon.mitchell@louisville.edu)

962 Sheridan St. Ypsilanti, MI 48197

### Current Employment

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Adjunct Professor, University of Tennessee

2024

### Education

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University of Louisville, Louisville, KY  
2024

**Ph.D., in Social Work expected May**

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
2020

**Master of Social Work**

Washtenaw Community College, Ypsilanti, MI  
2018

**Addiction Studies**

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI  
2017

**Bachelor of Arts in Psychology**

Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Rapids, MI  
Henry Ford College, Dearborn, MI

Music Education  
Music Education

### Research Statement

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My research explores: (a) how aspects of society influence the school system such as through policies and media discourse to (b) re-envision justice-oriented school social work.

[Research Gate](#)

[Google Scholar](#)

[ORCID](#)

[www.bdmitchell.com](http://www.bdmitchell.com)



## Dissertation

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**Mitchell, B.** (in press). *Understanding the Multidimensional Ramifications of Education Censorship to Promote Justice-Oriented School Social Work* .

**Study 1:** A National Review of Education Censorship Policies

**Study 2:** An Analysis of Mainstream Newspaper Articles

**Study 3:** An Analysis of School Board Public Comments in Michigan

**Study 4:** Interviews & Focus Groups with School Social Workers

## Peer-Reviewed Publications

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Lucio, R., Shayman, E., **Mitchell, B.**, & Souhrada, E., (2024). What is Essential in School Social Work Practice? *School Mental Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-024-09643-z>

Lucio, R., Incitti, J., & Souhrada, E., & **Mitchell, B.** (in press). Examining School Social Work Certification across Midwest States. *International Journal of School Social Work*.

**Mitchell, B.**, & Greer, C. (2024). Constructing Youth Identities: Newspaper Article Depictions of Exclusionary Discipline. *Critical Questions in Education* 15(1) 211-242. <https://academyedstudies.files.wordpress.com/2024/01/mitchell-greer-final.pdf>

Greer, C., Fosl, L., & **Mitchell, B.** (2023). Reimagining Approaches to Out of School Time Spaces that Center Youth. *Children & Schools*. Special Issue: Organized Activities During out of School Time. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdad026>

**Mitchell, B.** (2023). Newspaper constructions of the COVID-19 learning loss. *Critical Education*, 14(4) 42-74. <http://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v14i4.186736>

**Mitchell, B.**, & Greer, C. (2022). The COVID-19 Learning loss: Fact or stigma? *Children & Schools*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdac018>

Frey, A., **Mitchell, B.**, Kelly, M., & McNally, S. (2022). School-based mental health practitioners: A resource guide for educational leaders. *School Mental Health*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12310-022-09530-5>

Crosby, S.D., Kniffley, S.D, **Mitchell, B.**, Jones, K., Middleton, J., Caine, A., & Vides, B. (2022). "De-colonizing mental health": Exploring insights from clinicians trained in Kniffley Racial Trauma Therapy. *Practice Innovations*, 7(3), 280-292. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pri0000187>

Altranice, K., & **Mitchell, B.** (2022). Catalysts of conscientization among the professoriate: A descriptive phenomenological study. *Journal of Social Work Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10437797.2022.2062508>

- Mitchell, B.**, Utterback, L., Hibbeler, P., Logsdon, A., Smith, F. P., Harris., L. Castle, B., Kerr, J., & Crawford, T. (2022). Patient-Identified markers of quality care: Improving HIV service delivery for older African Americans. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*. 10, 475–486. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-022-01237-2>
- Storer, H., **Mitchell, B.**, & Wiley-Sthapit, C. (2022). Healthy at home? Constructions of safety in newspapers' reporting of domestic violence during the coronavirus pandemic. *Violence Against Women*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221150277>
- Frey, A.J., Small, J.W., Walker, H.M, **Mitchell, B.**, John R. Seeley, Feil, E.G., Lee, J., & Forness, S.R. (2022). First Step Next: A synthesis of replication randomized controlled trials from 2009-2011. *Remedial and Special Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325211068>
- Jen, S., Harrop, E., Christine, B., Galambos, C., **Mitchell, B.**, Wiley-Sthapit, C., Storer, H. Gonzalez-Benson O., Kim, J., & Zhou, J. (2021). Discursive constructions during COVID-19: Calling for the critical analysis of discourse in Social Work in and beyond the pandemic. *Journal of Society for Social Work Research*. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/716953>
- Lacombe-Duncan, A., Logie, C.H., Li, J., **Mitchell, B.**, Williams, D., & Levermore, K. (2021). Social-ecological factors associated with having a regular healthcare provider among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in Jamaica. *Global Public Health*. [doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1887316](https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2021.1887316)
- Mitchell, B.**, Frey, A., & Kelly, M. (2021). Certification and professional preparation of school social workers, school psychologists, and school counselors. *Children & Schools*. [doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab016](https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab016)
- Mitchell, B.** (2021). Supporting students and families in post pandemic school systems. *Children & Schools*. [doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab019](https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdab019)
- Nash, W., Harris, L.M., Heller, K. & **Mitchell, B.** (2021). “We are saving their bodies and destroying their souls.”: Family caregivers’ experiences of formal care setting visitation restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In (Ed) Edward Alan Miller’s The COVID-19 Pandemic and Older Adults 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*. [doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2021.1962164](https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2021.1962164)

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## Peer-Reviewed Book Chapters

- Kelly, S., M., **Mitchell, B.**, & Frey, A. (2023). *The landscape of school mental health workforce preparation: Challenges and best practice recommendations for unifying the field*. In M.D. Weist, N. A. Lever, C. P. Bradshaw, J. S. Owens (Eds). *Handbook of School Mental Health* (3rd Ed.) Springer.

Nash, W., Harris, L.M., Heller, K. & **Mitchell, B.** (2021). "We are saving their bodies and destroying their souls.": Family caregivers' experiences of formal care setting visitation restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. In E. A. Miller's (Ed). The COVID-19 Pandemic and Older Adults 1<sup>st</sup> Edition. Routledge.

Frey, A., Mandlawitz, M., Perry, A., Walker, H., & **Mitchell, B.** (2021). *Education policy for children, youth, and families*. In Hall, W. J., Lanier, P. J., Jenson J.M., and Fraser, M.W. (Eds). *Social policy for children and families: A risk and resilience perspective* (4th Ed.) Sage.

### **Peer-Reviewed Conference Presentations**

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Alvarez, M, **Mitchell, B.**, Rautiola, K., Koller, S., Lindsey, B. C. (2024). *Examining the Critical Issues Facing School Social Work: Leading in Challenging Times*. School Social Worker Association of America National Conference, Baltimore, MD.

**Mitchell, B.** (2024). *News Discourse of Education Censorship*. The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

Greer, C., Fosl, L., & **Mitchell, B.** (2024). *Reimagining Approaches to Out of School Time Spaces that Center Youth*. The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

**Mitchell, B.**, Lucio, R., & Souhrada, E. (2024). *Education Censorship: Implications for Justice-Oriented School Social Work*. School Social Worker Association of America National Conference, Baltimore, MD.

Clement, D., & **Mitchell, B.** (2023). *Moral Disengagement and the Nice White School Board*. University Council For Educational Administration Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

Clement, D., **Mitchell, B.**, Henry, K., Cordova, A., Martinez, D., Diem, S., Odom, D., & Simon, C. (2023). *Is There a Hard Reset Without Interest Convergence? And Other Pragmatist Questions for Critical Praxis*. Symposium. University Council For Educational Administration Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

**Mitchell, B.** (2023). *Understanding the Education Censorship Movement: Policy Implications for School Social Workers*. School Social Worker Association of America National Conference, Denver, CO.

**Mitchell, B.**, & Sterrett-Hong, E. (2023). *Censorship and Control: Critical Policy Analysis of Exclusionary Education Legislation*. The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Chicago, IL.

Clement, D., & **Mitchell, B.** (2023). *Revising Racism: Anti-CRT Hysteria and the Nice White School Board*. The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Chicago, IL.

- Crosby, S, Kniffley, S., **Mitchell, B.**, Jones, K., & Middleton, J. (2023). *De-Colonizing Mental Health: Clinician Perspectives on Kniffley Racial Trauma Therapy*. Society for Social Work and Research, Phoenix, Arizona.
- Mitchell B.** (2022). "We can't reward those who didn't do anything": Media Representations of the COVID-19 Learning Loss. Round table presentation. The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference, San Diego, CA.
- Wiley-Sthapit, C., Storer, H., **Mitchell, B.** (2022). *Healthy at Home?: Constructions of Safety in Newspaper Reporting of Domestic Violence during the Coronavirus Pandemic*. Poster presentation. Society for Social Work and Research.
- Jen, S., Barber, S., **Mitchell, B.**, & Willey-Sthapit, C. (2022). *Discourses of Ageism, Racism, and Gender during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Critical Discourse Analysis Round table*. Symposium presentation. Society for Social Work and Research.
- Frey, A., Kuklinksi, M., Bills, K., Small, J., Forness, S., Walker, H., Feil, E., Seeley, J., & **Mitchell, B.** (2022). *Comprehensive Cost Analysis of First Step Next*. Conference Symposium at the Society for Social Work and Research.
- Ezekekwu, E., Umar, K., **Mitchell, B.**, & Thornewill, J. (2021). *Robust Public Health Preparedness for Preventing the Next Pandemic*. Pandemics, Location and Mobility. Ponta Delgado, Azores, Portugal.
- Nash, W., Harris, L.M., Heller, K. & **Mitchell, B.** (2021). *Caregiver Reactions to COVID-19 LTC Visitation Restrictions*. American Academy of Nursing's Health Policy Conference.
- Storer, H., Gonzalez-Benson, O., Willey-Sthapit, C., Sarah J., & **Mitchell, B.** (2021) *Critical Analyses of Pandemic Discourses to Reimagine a Socially Just Society: Ageism, Domestic Violence, and Migrant Labor in the Context of Coronavirus*. Society for Social Work and Research.
- Logsdon, A. R., Smith, P. F., Utterback, L., Hibbeler, P., **Mitchell, B.**, Harris, L. M., Castle, B., Kerr, J. C., & Crawford, T. N. (2021). *Engagement and Linkage to Care Among African American Older Adults Living with HIV/AIDS: Exploring Pre- and Post-Incarceration Experiences*. International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Champaign, IL.
- Mitchell, B.** 2021. *International Education Policy: A Risk and Resilience Perspective*. International Social Work and Development (Online Conference).
- Mitchell, B.**, Utterback, L., Logsdon, R. A., Smith, P., F., Hibbeler, P., Harris, L., Castle, B., Kerr, J., & Crawford, T. *Older African American's Living with HIV: Patient*

*Identified Markers of Quality Care.* (2021). International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Champaign, IL.

Utterback, L., **Mitchell, B.**, Hibbeler, P., Smith, P., F., Logsdon, R. A., Harris, L. Castle, B., Kerr, J., & Crawford, T. (2021). *“Like an Outcast to Everyone” Narratives of Intersectionality with an Older African American’s Living with HIV.* International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Champaign, IL.

Joseph, A., Massey, M., Sanders, J., & **Mitchell, B.** (2021) *Childhood adversities and student schooling experiences: An intersectional look at teacher surveillance.* The American Educational Research Association Annual Conference.

**Mitchell, B.**, & Knauer, H., (2020). *Do School Social Worker Certification Requirements Increase Their Presence in Schools.* Society for Social Work Research, Washington D.C.

**Mitchell, B.**, Stansbury, C., & Knauer, H., (2020). *Examining School Social Worker Influence on Student Disciplinary Outcomes.* Society for Social Work Research, Washington D.C.

Gutierrez, L., Inahuazo S., & **Mitchell, B.**, (2019). *Campus Climate for Latinx Students at a Predominately White Institution During the Trump Administration.* Society for Community Research and Action, Chicago, IL.

Barton, M., Asker, J., **Mitchell, B.**, Engstrom, A. & Park, N. (2017). *Teaching the Good Life: The effectiveness of Positive Psychology classes in college students’ well-being.* Depression on College Campuses Conference. Ann Arbor, MI.

## **Manuscripts Under Review**

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**Mitchell, B.** *Education Capture: Education Censorship and the Elite Capture of the Public Educational System.* Book proposal.

Joseph, A., Massey, M., Sanders, J., & **Mitchell, B.** (Revise & resubmit). *Assessing Disproportional Calls Home for Problems at School: A Critical Race Framing and analysis of race, ethnicity, gender, and childhood adversities.*

**Mitchell, B.** *A Historical Review of Education Censorship and Restrictions on Youth Rights: 2020-23.* (Revise & resubmit). In M. McNulty & T. A. Price (Eds). *Public spaces, politics, and policy: Historical entanglements with irrational momentism.*

**Mitchell, B.**, Lucio, R., Souhrada, E., & Buttera, K. (Revise & resubmit). *Understanding the Attacks on Social-Emotional Learning: Strategizing on the Response and Advocacy of School Mental Health Practitioners.*

Lucio, R., & **Mitchell, B.** *School Social Work in the United States: Using the past to ground the future.*

## **Manuscripts in Preparation**

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Lucio, R., **Mitchell, B.**, Souhrada, E., Dibble, N., Braunginn, J. *Mapping the Council For Social Work Competencies to the School Social Work Practice Model.* School Social Work Practice Model: An Implementation Guide.

Lucio, R., **Mitchell, B.**, Souhrada, E., Dibble, N., Braunginn, J. *Aligning the School Social Work Practice Model to Social Work Competencies.* Children & Schools Special Issue.

**Mitchell, B.** *Abolitionist Perspectives in School Social Work.*

**Mitchell, B.** *Understanding the Dimensions of Youth Behavior.*

**Mitchell, B.** *Education Capture: Education Censorship and the Elite Capture of the Public Educational System.* Book in progress.

**Mitchell, B.,** & Lucio, R., *Undermining Youths Rights in Education: Network Influences and Education Censorship*

Sterrett-Hong, E., Barbee, A., Winters, A., **Mitchell, B.**, Jones, V., Hines-Martin, V., Thomas, S., Tianhong, Y., Kendrick, J., & Adams, M. *Surface vs. Deep Anti-Racist Culture and Experiences of Micro-Aggressions and Motivation among Faculty and Staff of Color at a Predominantly White Institution.*

Harris, L.M., Bloomer, R. **Mitchell, B.**, Williams, S., Osezua, V., Sato, D, Byun, K., Hambrick, M. & Thang, N.D. *Exploring the Varied Dimensions of Youth's Ideas for Social Change: A Photovoice Project on HIV Risk and Resilience in Vietnam.*

Ezekekwa, E., & **Mitchell, B.** *Theoretical Perspective on Hospital Readmission & Socio-Economic Status.*

Clement, D., & **Mitchell, B.** *Revising Racism: Anti-CRT Hysteria and the Nice White School Board. An Analysis of School Board Public Comments.*

**Mitchell, B.,** & Clement, D. *School Board Decision Making in Response to Public Comments Relative to An Equity Resolution Policy.*

**Mitchell, B.,** & Clement, D. *School Board Public Comments and Media Influence.*

Sterrett-Hong, E., Smith, B., A., Machinga, O., R., **Mitchell, B.** *HIV Healthcare Engagement.*

Sterrett-Hong, E., **Mitchell, B.** *Systematic Review of Community Based Participatory Action Research of Youth Mentoring.*

Ezekewu, E., Umar, K., **Mitchell, B.**, Thornewill, J. *Robust Public Health Preparedness for Preventing the Next Pandemic.*

Altranice, K., & **Mitchell, B.** *Positive and Negative Consequences of the Racial Conscientization Process for Black Americans.*

Altranice, K., & **Mitchell, B.** *Descriptions of Racial Conscientization and Critical Consciousness.*

Frey, A., Small J., Childs, T., Skidmore, B., & **Mitchell, B.** *Disproportionality and the Role of Teacher Bias.*

Lee, J., Frey, A., & **Mitchell, B.** *Sequential Analysis of Behavioral Coach Use of Motivational Interviewing Skills.*

Small, J., Frey, A., Lee, J., & **Mitchell, B.** *A Systematic Review of School-Based Motivational Interviewing.*

### **Publications (non-peer reviewed)**

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**Mitchell, B.**, The Death of Nex Benedict and The Extreme Impact of Education Censorship. *School Social Work Association of America Position Statement.*

**Mitchell, B.**, (in press). Education Censorship and the Contemporary Challenges for Social Work. *School Social Work Specialty Practice Area, National Association of Social Workers.*

**Mitchell, B.**, Lucio, R., Souhrada, E. (2023). School Social Work Association of America and the Michigan Association of School Social Workers Combined Position Statement: A National Overview of Education Censorship. *School Social Work Association of America and the Michigan Association of School Social Workers.* [https://www.sswaa.org/files/ugd/426a18\\_4686eb1550b04ba29116a7db8938e7a5.pdf](https://www.sswaa.org/files/ugd/426a18_4686eb1550b04ba29116a7db8938e7a5.pdf)

Lucio, R., Souhrada, E., & **Mitchell, B.**, Dibble, N., Braunginn, J. (in-progress). Advocating for State DoE/DPI School Social Work Certification GOLD Standard. *School Social Work Association of America Position Statement.*

Lucio, R., Souhrada, E., & **Mitchell, B.**, (in-progress). Exemplary Certification Standards in School Social Work. *School Social Work Association of America Position Statement.*

### **Service Commitments**

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## Academic Service

Children & Schools <i>Ad hoc reviewer</i>	2023 - current
Critical Education <i>Ad hoc reviewer</i>	2023 - current
International Journal of School Social Work <i>Ad hoc reviewer</i>	2022 - current
School Mental Health <i>Ad hoc reviewer</i>	2021 - current
School Social Worker Association of America <i>Board member: PhD Student Representative</i>	2023 - current
<i>Committee member: Membership</i>	
<i>Subcommittee member: Advocacy and legislative action committee</i>	2022 - current
<i>Subcommittee member: Social and emotional learning</i>	
School Social Work Special Interest Group (SSWR) <i>Board member: PhD Student Representative SSW SIG</i>	2024-current

## University Service

Anti-Oppression Committee University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work <i>Subcommittee Co-chair: Formalized Land Acknowledgement</i> <i>Subcommittee Chair: Environmental Justice</i> <i>Subcommittee Chair: Education Equity</i>	2022 - current
PhD in Social Work Program Committee University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work	2023 - current
Doctoral Student Peer Mentorship Committee University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work <i>Committee Chair</i>	2020 - current
Social Justice and Diversity Committee 2022 University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work <i>Subcommittee member: Education Censorship Advocacy and Resistance</i>	2021-

Faculty Search Committee 2021 -  
2022  
University of Louisville, Kent School of Social Work

### **Community Service**

Michigan Association of School Social Workers 2022 - current  
*Board member*  
*Subcommittee Chair: Research and Development*  
*Subcommittee member: Legislative Action Committee*  
*Subcommittee member: Diversity, Equity and Inclusion*

School Mental Health Consultation Team 2020 -  
2023  
Jefferson County Public Schools

2023 Racial Equity Task Force 2020 -  
Jefferson County Public Schools  
*Subcommittee member: Equity in Cultural Conditions, Practices, and Safety*

### **Teaching Experience**

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#### **Macro Policy**

Summer 2024  
College of Social Work  
University of Tennessee  
*Adjunct Instructor*

#### **Research Methods**

Summer 2024  
College of Social Work  
University of Tennessee  
*Adjunct Instructor*

#### **Social Welfare Policy**

Spring 2024  
College of Social Work  
University of Tennessee  
*Adjunct Instructor*

#### **Social Welfare Policy I**

Fall 2022  
Professor: Emi Ramirez  
*Teaching Assistant*

Kent School of Social Work and Family Science  
University of Louisville

- Provided course content (e.g., readings; videos; lectures)
- Policy assignment creation
- Hosted student sessions and individual meetings with students
- Graded weekly assignments and papers
- Student correspondence (e.g., text; email)

*“The teaching assistant was very helpful whenever I did reach out to him and proved himself to be very happy about his job.” – Student*

*“I really enjoyed this semester! I was a bit nervous coming into this class because I had basically no knowledge on policy and how that aspect of social work goes, but this class was so fun and I genuinely enjoyed learning! Thanks for a great semester!” – Student*

*“Thanks for all your help Emi and Brandon!” – Student*

## **Social Welfare Policy II**

Fall 2022

Professor: Emi Ramirez

*Teaching Assistant*

Kent School of Social Work and Family Science

University of Louisville

- Student support
- Email and text correspondence
- Assignment creation and course content development
- Weekly grading of assignments and papers
- Lecture: environmental justice and the climate crisis
- Lecture: housing policies, homelessness, and poverty
- Lecture: disproportionality in the child welfare system
- Lecture: veteran’s affairs and U.S. military imperialism

*“The teaching assistant, Brandon is absolutely amazing as well. I enjoyed reading his feedback and having his assistance throughout the semester.” – Student*

*“I felt like if I had a question, that I could ask what I needed to and either the professor or the TA would get back with me. I really liked the TA, Brandon.” – Student*

*“I enjoyed the supplemental videos Brandon created. I felt like there was a united approach between the instructors, sharing a similar teaching style which students aren’t always lucky enough to get with the teacher assistant and professor.” – Student*

*“Thanks again to Professor Ramirez and Brandon. This class was very, very good and well-constructed. You all really care about your students!” – Student*

## **Program Evaluation**

spring 2022

Professor: Dr. Lesley Harris

*Teaching Assistant*

Kent School of Social Work and Family Science

University of Louisville

- Synchronous and asynchronous course development
- Lectures, activities, grading, student hours

*“I think this is probably one of the best online classes I have ever taken! Dr. Lesley Harris and Brandon are always so helpful. Anytime I ask a question I get a quick and helpful response back. This helps me complete the assignments and have a better understanding.” – Student*

*“There hasn't been anything in this class that has hindered my learning. I would take any class that Dr. Harris taught and Brandon as well.” – Student*

*“Dr. Harris and Brandon are incredibly helpful, understanding, and responsive.” – Student*

*“I would like to say thank you to Dr. Harris and Brandon for doing an awesome job at teaching, communicating, encouraging, providing feedback and going above and beyond. They have both done a great job!” – Student*

## **Guest Lecturer**

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*Experiences in Qualitative Research.* Qualitative Methods, University of Georgia. Guest Lecture for Dr. Gaurav. Spring 2024. Sinha.

*Abolitionist Perspectives in School Social Work: Abolishing Punishing Frameworks in Schools.* Theory I: Philosophy of Science and the Development & Application of Theory in Social Work Research & Interventions, University of Louisville. Guest Lecturer for Dr. Heather Storer. Fall 2023.

*Legitimizing the Role of School Social Workers: A Review of State Certification Standards.* School Social Worker Policy and Services. School of Social Work, University of Michigan. Guest Lecturer for Professor Susan Klumpnar. Spring 2020.

*COVID-19 and the School Social Work Implications.* Curriculum development School Social Worker Policy and Services. School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Professor Klumpnar, Spring/Summer 2020.

*Legitimizing the Role of School Social Workers: A Review of State Certification Standards.*

School Social Worker Policy and Services. School of Social Work, University of Michigan. Guest Lecturer for Professor Beth Sherman. Fall 2019.

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**Guest Panelist**

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Kentucky Social Work Lobby Day 2022  
*Panel Representative*

February 2022

School Censorship Bills: A Critical Time in Social Work Education  
*Panel Representative*

March 2022

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**Professional Affiliations**

Michigan Association of School Social Workers  
School Social Worker Association of America  
Society for Social Work Research  
*School Social Work Special Interest Group (SSWR)*  
American Educational Research Association  
National Association of Social Workers  
University Council for Educational Administration

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**Professional References**

**Dr. Emma Sterrett-Hong**

Associate Dean of Equity and Inclusion  
Kent School of Social Work & Family Science  
University of Louisville  
[emma.sterrett@louisville.edu](mailto:emma.sterrett@louisville.edu)

**Dr. Rob Lucio**

Director of the MSSW Online Program  
Associate Professor  
College of Social Work  
University of Tennessee  
[rlucio@utk.edu](mailto:rlucio@utk.edu)

**Dr. Davis Clement**

Assistant Professor  
Department of Education  
Eastern Michigan University  
[rclemen8@emich.edu](mailto:rclemen8@emich.edu)