

PRESS RELEASE

Trouble in Censorville: The Far Right's Assault on Public Education – and the Teachers Who are Fighting Back

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Trouble in Censorville is an urgent bulletin from the teachers and librarians on the front lines of the war against reason that is sweeping our country. Their powerful testimony is enraging – these vicious attacks are not what they signed up for. But it's also profoundly uplifting, a vision of courage, resistance, and grace under fire that is a model for us all in these dark times.

— Alison Bechdel, author of *Fun Home*

An essential record of the often-invisible war on educators. Moving and inspiring, these stories are a reminder that teachers and librarians are on the front lines of the resistance against authoritarianism.

-- Annalee Newitz, author of *Stories Are Weapons: Psychological Warfare and the American Mind*

An urgent and compelling battle cry against the insidious rise of censorship. Everyone who believes in freedom of expression should examine this text.

— Juno Dawson, Author of *This Book is Gay*

A Teacher's-Eye View of The Radical Right's Crusade to Take Down Public Education

Across the country, right-wing moral panic (or ideological opposition to diversity and changing social mores *masquerading* as moral panic) has resulted in book bans and, in Republican-controlled statehouses, the passing of an unprecedented number of laws that invoke the “divisive concept” premise to legitimate discrimination. Since 2020, legislation spearheaded by conservative politicians have affected over one million educators and over 22 million students throughout the States. From Florida, whose “Don’t Say Gay” law prohibits K-12 instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation, to Texas, which is shuttering libraries in schools, America is in the middle of a far-right war on public education.

For the first time, K-12 educators who have been threatened, ostracized, smeared as “pedophiles” and “Marxists,” placed on leave, and fired for teaching the historical truth of the struggle for racial justice, or for offering books by and about LGBTQ+ people are telling their harrowing, powerfully personal stories. In *Trouble in Censorville: The Far Right's Assault on Public Education – and the Teachers Who are Fighting Back*, 14 public school teachers bring readers face-to-face with first-hand accounts of what it means to be living and working under these realities.

Educators predict the future of a generation of students who are told to walk out of the room in the face of discomfort and who no longer have access to books or critical thinking about American society. They describe the social isolation of being the only teacher in their school to fight back against far-right agitators and extremist trolls. They talk, with unvarnished honesty, of their pent-up anger over institutional betrayal, and of the terrible toll the radical right's culture war on public education has taken on their mental and physical health, from panic attacks to insomnia to high blood pressure.

And yet, these teachers are fighting back. They're mobilizing colleagues, parents, and community members who share their faith in the freedom to read, the freedom to think critically, the freedom to challenge small-minded provincialism. Their stories of frontline resistance, collected here, provide a battle plan for confronting censorship, rallying support, and mobilizing a grassroots defense of public schools.

Terrifying, infuriating, and inspiring, *Trouble in Censorville* sounds the alarm for a democracy on fire.

From the book ...

Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr., the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year who faced harassment for daring to be queer in a school that would not defend gay students and teachers, writes:

After Trump's election in 2016, ... the dial on bigotry of all kinds got turned up. Suddenly, hatred became protected political speech.... When a parent would blatantly say something like, "Well, we don't want our children reading that Black stuff," we would be asked to please pick a white author, and not always just for this particular family but for the whole class and curriculum.

Gavin Downing, a middle school librarian who refused to let his principal unilaterally ban books from the library, writes:

*My home address was provided by the district to this community member, the one who wanted *Jack of Hearts* removed. Even now, months after the final decision of the ban, I'm very cognizant of windows and blinds, of doors being locked, of being alone when I'm in my home or the school library.*

Monica Coles, a non-binary elementary school art teacher placed on leave for wearing insufficiently "feminine" attire, writes:

My theory is that the parents who saw me at Meet the Teacher Night, who couldn't have been nicer to me in my classroom, started talking about my suit and the way I looked, and then other parents recognized me at carpool and joined them in talking about how I looked different from the other teachers in the building.... Whatever form of dialogue they had, things escalated really quickly over that weekend, I believe. Meet the Teacher happened the Monday evening before school started, which was on Wednesday; by Sunday night, my career at that school was over.

Trouble in Censorville began in August 2022 when a public school teacher reached out to Nadine M. Kalin, a professor of art education, and Rebekah Modrak, professor of art and activism. The teacher asked: Did the professors know how they could bring to the public's attention their story of being placed on leave? As important, how could they sound the alarm about the far-right assault on our public schools? Their story moved Kalin and Modrak to collect it and others in a book that would bear witness to history, chronicling the radical

right's full-court press against public education, and rouse readers to action – before it's too late. The testimony of the educators in this book is both a form of self-healing and a firehouse alarm: democracy's burning.

Availability:

Trouble in Censorville will be available in e-book and print versions at Disobedience Press, Amazon, and other booksellers. <https://disobediencepress.com/>

Book Contributors: Ellen Barnes, Willie Edward Taylor Carver Jr., Monica Coles, Gavin Downing, Carolyn Foote, Matthew D. Hawn, Martha Hickson, Jill James, Mark Johnson, Misty L.C., Elissa Malespina, Sally Middleton, Julie Miller, Melissa Grandi Statz.

Video Testimonials and Digital Assets: Ellen Barnes, Monica Coles, Gavin Downing, Carolyn Foote, Matthew D. Hawn, Martha Hickson, Jill James, Mark Johnson, Amanda Jones, Elissa Malespina, Sally Middleton, Julie Miller, Melissa Grandi Statz. Video testimonials and short trailers will be available on the website [Censorville.com](https://censorville.com) beginning June 5, 2024.

Editors:

Rebekah Modrak is a Professor at the Stamps School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan. She is an artist and writer who analyzes and critiques consumer culture, including COVID-era privatization of public education as parents began to refer to teachers as “public servants,” subsidized by their tax dollars and therefore answerable to them as consumers.

Nadine M. Kalin is a Professor in the Department of Art Education in the College of Visual Arts and Design at the University of North Texas. She teaches courses in the areas of curriculum and pedagogy, pre-service art teacher preparation, and socially engaged art and is author of the book *The Neoliberalization of Creativity Education*.