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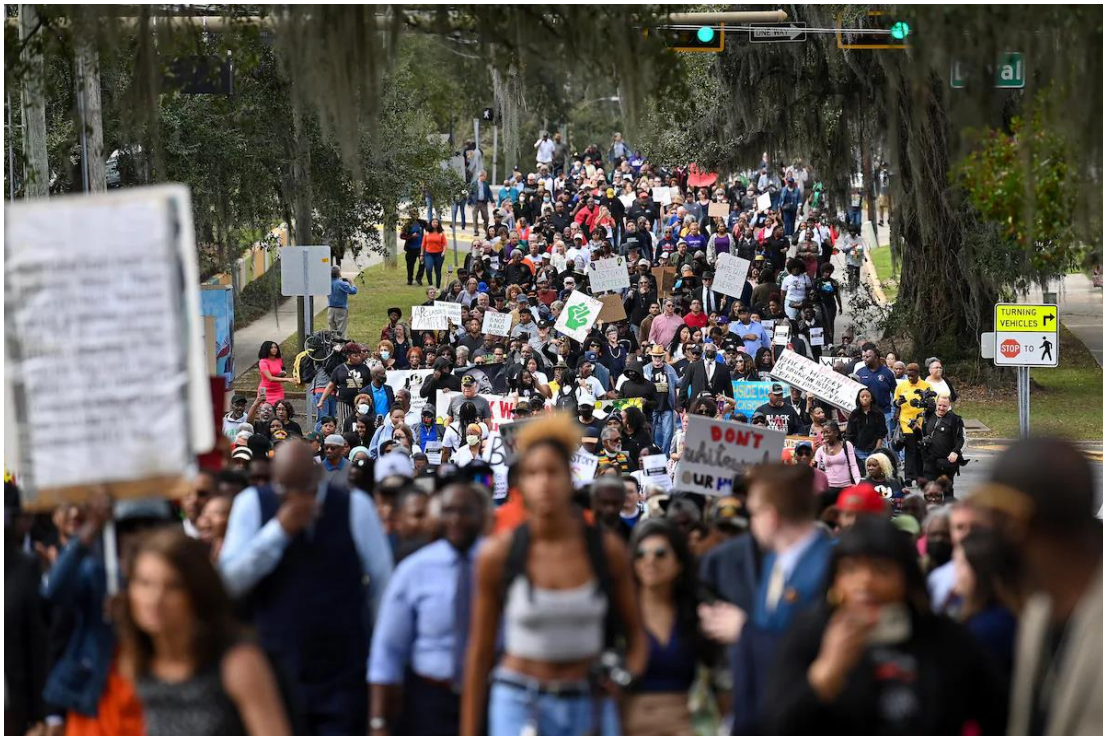
The irony of Black history legislation in Florida



Perspective by [Valerie Strauss](#)

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TALLAHASSEE, FL - On Feb. 15, 2023, demonstrators protested Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' (R) plan to eliminate Advanced Placement courses on African American studies in high schools, marching to Florida's State Capitol. DeSantis says Advanced Placement courses on African American studies violates the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act," which curbs race-related and gender curriculum from Florida classrooms. (Joshua Lott/The Washington Post)

Florida Gov. [Ron DeSantis](#) (R) and the state legislature have been on a crusade to rewrite education laws, policies and academic standards that forbid teachers from, among other things, restrict what teachers can say about race and racism in the United States.

His administration banned an Advanced Placement class on African American studies, released new social studies standards that require some students to learn that enslaved people enjoyed “personal benefit” from skills they developed, and censored math and social textbooks and other materials.

The governor promoted and signed a 2022 law — part of which a federal judge called “positively dystopian” — that forbids teachers from discussing anything that could make students “[feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress](#) for actions, in which he or she played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex” — which is a long way of saying that teachers should not talk about subjects including White privilege and institutional racism.

Given all of that, it may surprise you that Florida once had a law about the teaching of African and African American contributions across the curriculum that some Black educators found inspirational. Chike Akua, an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy at Clark Atlanta University, was one of them, and in this post he explains why. Akua specializes in the socio-historical and cultural foundations of education. His is a contributing author to “[The Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America](#).”

By [Valerie Strauss](#)

Valerie Strauss is an education writer who authors The Answer Sheet blog. She came to The Washington Post as an assistant foreign editor for Asia in 1987 and weekend foreign desk editor after working for Reuters as national security editor and a military/foreign affairs reporter on Capitol Hill. She also previously worked at UPI and the LA Times. [_Twitter](#)

The irony of Black history legislation in Florida

By **Chike Akua, Ph.D.**

The current controversy over curriculum in Florida is reminiscent of the early 1990s, a period in which culture wars over school curricula increased and intensified nationally. Many African Americans challenged the content and *intent* of the standard American public school curriculum. It was into the eye of this storm that I graduated, armed with a bachelor’s degree and secondary teacher certification, ready to teach and transform the lives of Black youth.

My first teaching assignment was in the fall of 1992 in a Virginia middle school, where the student body was about 50 percent Black and 50 percent White. I was one of six new African American male teachers hired at the school. We often found ourselves in

conflict with the administration and some of the other teachers who didn't seem to have the same faith in Black children's ability to achieve and excel that we did.

We found that our lesson plans and materials were being very carefully scrutinized by our school administrators because we were infusing our lessons with cultural examples of excellence, resistance and self-determination. However, these additions were outside of the prescribed curriculum. We were told to take down certain posters about Black history and culture that others deemed offensive, but that we felt were essential to helping our students understand their culture and history. For example, I had a poster of a Black man with the headdress of a king and arms powerfully outstretched with a silhouette of Africa behind him. Beneath it was a picture of the same man with head bowed and hands shackled with a silhouette of America behind him. The poster provided an opportunity for deep examination and inquiry. The poster told a story that our administrators were unwilling to acknowledge. It is a story that many are still unwilling to acknowledge or accurately assess today.

It was not uncommon for one of us to be called to the office for questioning about our methods and materials. But as a result of our methods and materials, we were achieving academic and behavioral results (that other teachers were not achieving) and often from students deemed unreachable. In my third year, I was voted Teacher of the Year by my colleagues.

In 1994, two years after I began teaching in Virginia, the state of Florida passed landmark legislation that required the teaching of African and African American contributions across the curriculum. Florida Statute 1003.42(h) required that teachers teach "...the history of African Americans, *including the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery*, the passage to America, the enslavement experience, abolition, and the contributions of African American society [italics mine].

When I first heard about this legislation in 2006, I was stunned. I couldn't believe such a law existed and I began to think how much easier my job might have been had I had this law to stand on. By 2006, I had spent 13 years *covertly* teaching my students African and African American contributions, accomplishments, views and values in my language arts and reading classes.

Though I was a recognized and respected educator, it was not uncommon for me to be called into special meetings with principals and assistant principals where my teaching methods and materials were called into question. But they never had to justify the cultural inaccuracies and omissions in the curriculum I was required to teach.

I knew, as a language arts teacher, that there were many rich examples of reading, writing, language and literature that developed in early Africa. There are many robust, research-based examples to demonstrate this. For example, "The Teachings of Ptahhotep" is regarded by some scholars as the oldest complete text in the world, dating back more than 4,300 years. It is a form ancient wisdom literature with insights that would serve students very well today, yet it is typically not represented in school curricula. However, none of this content was in the curriculum, reading or literature books.

Because of these omissions, uninformed students would get the notion that Africans contributed nothing of significance in the way of literature. In addition, we did not want our students to think their story began in slavery; it began in dignity and sovereignty. Within each culture is a key to unlocking the best possibilities for humanity. These cultural

keys contain insights and solutions to the challenges all humans face. When we do not create a context for retrieving these cultural keys, our nation and indeed all of humanity is diminished.

I learned to turn in lesson plans that detailed what administrators wanted to see, but teach lessons infused with cultural content that I knew my students needed. The personal stress I felt was real and visceral, especially during those first years in Virginia. Though I tried to remain centered, I felt like I had to put on cultural and spiritual armor every day.

When I learned about the Florida African American history legislation years later, I thought about how empowering such legislation could be for students and teachers. Over the years, it was the Afrocentric and culturally responsive methods, materials, content and intent of my teaching that helped me reach chronically underperforming students that others were unable to reach.

Later in my scholarly research about Florida's African American history legislation, after reviewing other state policies on African American history, it became clear that Florida's legislation was the most comprehensive because it focused not only on African American history, but on, "the history of African peoples *before* the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery" which is a period of time often neglected. In addition, Florida's legislation required that the African and African American contributions and accomplishments be taught across *all* disciplines, not just in social studies. Indeed, every state should have such a comprehensive statute!

How ironic that the state with the most comprehensive and progressive African American History legislation is now at the forefront of curriculum culture wars and is now promoting curriculum that suggests that enslaved Africans "developed skills which could be applied for their personal benefit."

In fact, historical research clearly demonstrates that Africans brought with them the skills of architecture, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, agricultural engineering, carpentry, iron work and much more. They brought the knowledge of cotton, sugar, rice and indigo cultivation (and other subsequent inventions and technologies) that ultimately made America a world super power in a relatively short period of time, due to wealth amassed from the brains and backs of captive Africans. Indeed the nation's own Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture bears witness to these facts!

As a policy analyst, I interviewed the legislators and educators who brought Florida's 1994 African American history legislation into being to determine why it was enacted. The first theme that emerged from my interviews with these legislators and educators was that of inaccuracy. Each of the respondents indicated that there were blatant inaccuracies that had not been properly challenged or changed. The second theme was omission. Each of the respondents indicated that there were deeply significant omissions in the curriculum that did not reflect the seminal accomplishments and contributions that Africans and African Americans made to the nation and the world.

The third theme that emerged in my interviews was correction. The blatant inaccuracies needed to be corrected to provide more authentic historical narratives. The fourth theme was inclusion. The corrected narratives needed to be included in a new curriculum which more effectively reflected the rich depth of African American history and culture. These same themes emerge today in a nation so desperately in need of a

curriculum that teaches our nation's greatest ideals, withering failures and our greatest triumphs.

Effective and inclusive curricula exist but are deeply suppressed. In addition, curricular inaccuracies and omissions contribute to implicit bias and also prevent Whites and others from accurately and critically examining their own individual and collective attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Lack of knowledge about this nation's history is literally hazardous to the health of African Americans. As Carter G. Woodson (father of Black History Month and author of "The Miseducation of the Negro") observed, "There would be no lynching if it did not start in the school room."

Here are three recommendations for moving forward:

1. Educate teachers and school leaders in the best of African American culture, history, views and values.
2. Infuse authentic African and African American culture and history into lessons, teaching methods and instructional materials.
3. Provide age-appropriate opportunities for students to do their own fact-finding and research using historically and culturally authentic resources.

In a multicultural society and a diverse world, children are at a disadvantage when they are not taught authentic cultural and historical knowledge. However, when they are taught authentic cultural and historical knowledge, they can transform inequities and embrace opportunities for themselves and the greater good.

Chike Akua, Ph.D. is an assistant professor of educational leadership and policy at Clark Atlanta University who specializes in the socio-historical and cultural foundations of education. His is a contributing author to *The Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America*.