

# **DEFENDING THE FREEDOM TO LEARN:**

Lessons in resisting the attacks on school boards, educators  
and books so all students can feel safe and welcome at school

## **Freedom to learn in 2023: Defending our students' freedom to learn**

Minnesotans across our state are raising their voices to defend our students' freedom to learn an honest history of the United States, both the good and bad, and their freedom to be safe and welcome as their authentic selves in their local public schools.

This document is intended to help Minnesotans resist the groups that want to inject their biases into our public schools and deny our students the knowledge and skills they will need to live and lead in the multi-racial, multi-cultural state they will inherit someday.

The recommendations that follow are based on extensive public opinion research conducted by Education Minnesota, the National Education Association's Department of Racial and Social Justice, We Make the Future, ASO Communications, the Transgender Law Center and other allies.

These recommendations are intended to inform local resistance to the national MAGA campaign to restrict what students may learn about race and gender through books in their school libraries, classroom curriculum, "gag orders" on teachers and bans on professional development that includes lessons in diversity, equity and inclusion.

The forums for this information could be informal conversations and public debates, social media and letters to the editor, school board meetings and campaigns for open school board seats this fall. The list is nearly endless, so the recommendations will be general enough to apply in multiple instances.


### **It's about #freedomtolearn**

Our core value is protecting the freedom of our students to learn important, age-appropriate lessons about the role of race and racism in the shaping of America because it's the best way to ensure the next generation doesn't repeat the mistakes of our past. And we believe LGBTQ+ students should have the same freedom to study in a supportive learning environment as any other student, despite the campaign of blaming-and-shaming transgender students by big money think tanks, certain MAGA politicians and right-wing media outlets.

Although the worst of these restrictions has missed Minnesota because of the resolute opposition of Gov. Tim Walz and the controlling majorities in the Minnesota House and Senate, they are close by. Since 2021, 18 states have imposed bans on what teachers can discuss about racism, sexism and gender, according to EdWeek magazine. Those states include North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Indiana and Ohio in the Midwest alone. The national infrastructure behind those biased laws is active in Minnesota and is focused on the 2023 school board races and certain school libraries.

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[www.educationminnesota.org](http://www.educationminnesota.org)

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**THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL  
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS**

# ***KEY POINTS***

- 1. Don't be afraid of this debate. Right-wing messages about public education only work in a vacuum.**
- 2. Most Minnesotans want real solutions to real problems, not MAGA nonsense in their schools.**
- 3. Framing these issues around the value of our students' freedom to learn is most effective.**

***USE #FREEDOMTOLEARN ON SOCIAL MEDIA***

## **General messaging guidance**

- Talk about solutions: Minnesotans want more teachers, more mental health teams and solutions to overcrowding and understaffing, not MAGA conspiracy theories and bigotry.
- Don't use their terms: CRT, gender ideology, grooming, even Black Lives Matter are disputed terms with shifting definitions.
- Define your vision and the MAGA groups' terms in plain English. Cite the specifics about what topics some groups want to restrict, including: slavery, MLK Jr., Rosa Parks, Juneteenth, the Trail of Tears, Anne Frank and children's books that acknowledge and explore the humanity of LGBTQ+ people.
- Remind people how parents and educators have worked together in the past and continue to do so: Tell stories of parent-educator collaboration for stronger schools, like vote yes campaigns on school referendums.
- Pivot to what matters to most people in your communities: Respond to attacks by stating your values and vision for inclusive education and your respect for all students - then talk about real priorities.

## **Use contrast to make your points, some examples:**

- Instead of helping our parents, educators and students get the support they need, XXX is attacking our public schools.
- Rather than working to keep students and educators safe, XXX wants to ban books and whitewash our history.
- Students, parents and educators need partners on the school board, not partisans.
- Rather than providing the resources and support our students need, XXX is driving caring educators out of the classroom.
- Instead of solving the educator shortage, XXX is attacking LGBTQ+ students and educators.
- Educators need time and support, not a role in a trumped-up culture war.

## Call out bad actors

- Assert that students should have the freedom to learn, then and define debates about curriculum on our terms.
- Call out politicians and groups who stir fears about LGBTQ+ people, particularly by exploiting the lack of familiarity with transgender people.
- Affirm the need to respect each other, transgender or not, and to support young people to be their authentic selves.
- Include the modifier that children should receive “age-appropriate” lessons as an inoculation against some of the wilder claims made in MAGA messaging.
- Parents, particularly Minnesota mothers, want their schools to respect children for who they are. These parents reject attempts to blame-and-shame young children for political reasons.

## General messaging guidance for educators

- Articulate the values that brought you into public education.
- Say what you truly teach about race and/or gender in school.
- Explain how it benefits all your students.
- Say why it matters to your students’ future success in life, however you define it.
- While we call out the opposition and their intentions, don’t reiterate their arguments or talking points. We focus on our values and vision for our schools and communities.

## Sample narratives

### Freedom to Learn

All students deserve the freedom to learn an honest history of our nation, both the good and the bad, so they can learn from our mistakes and create a better future for all Minnesotans. But certain politicians and national big money groups are trying to turn us against schools, deny them the funding they need, and ban books that provide accurate, age-appropriate lessons about the role of race, gender and civil rights in America. With the backing of a few greedy billionaires, they’re trying to distract Minnesotans, censor our children’s education, and divide us by how we look, where we live, and who we love. The billionaires and CEOs know that if we join together, we will make the wealthiest corporations finally pay what they owe in taxes, so our communities and our schools have the resources they need. It’s time to reject the lies and support leaders who will protect our children’s freedom to learn the lessons they need to live and lead in a multi-cultural, multi-racial Minnesota.

### Book bans and challenges

Most of us believe students should have the freedom to read age-appropriate books that explain our world and help them become the best versions of their authentic selves, but today a few greedy billionaires are paying for a national campaign to take away our students’ freedom to read. Instead of encouraging our young people to become lifelong readers, they’re trying to remove books from our school libraries so they can whitewash history and impose their beliefs about gender on the rest of us. It’s time to reject this trumped-up culture war. Instead, let’s support our teachers and school librarians as they use their expertise to make available the books our students need to become strong readers and critical thinkers who can learn from old mistakes, navigate new challenges and solve problems on their own.

## **Scapegoating LGBTQ+ students<sup>1</sup>**

Whether we are Black, white or brown, Native or newcomer, transgender or not, we want our kids to have the freedom to be themselves and pursue their dreams. But certain groups try to get and hold onto power by putting us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from or our genders. They fuel divisions between us, denying Black and brown students opportunities in underfunded schools, passing laws to erase our history of coming together—from Selma to Stonewall—and exploiting the lack of familiarity with transgender people to exclude trans kids from health care, school and sports. By speaking out for welcoming, honest and fully funded education, we can make our schools places where children of all races and genders are free to learn all that they—and our country—have the potential to be.

## **Advocating for ethnic studies**

All students deserve the freedom to learn an honest history of our nation, both the good and the bad, so they can learn from our mistakes and create a better future for all Minnesotans. But certain politicians and some national big money groups are trying to turn Minnesotans against their teachers, deny them the funding they need and ban accurate, age-appropriate lessons about the role of racism, gender and civil rights in America. Minnesota students need ethnic studies to develop their critical thinking skills and prepare them to live and lead in the multi-cultural, multi-racial Minnesota they will inherit someday. Instead of putting our students in the middle of a culture war, let's work together to give every student, everywhere, access to a caring teacher, a well-equipped classroom and a professional mental health team, in a fully funded school.

**To receive updated messaging guidance as it becomes available, or to request training for your group, sign on the Education Minnesota website here:**

**[www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/racial-and-social-justice/freedom-to-learn](http://www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/racial-and-social-justice/freedom-to-learn)**