"Moms For Liberty" says book about MLK violates new law banning CRT in Tennessee

Judd Legum Dec 1, 2021 81 19

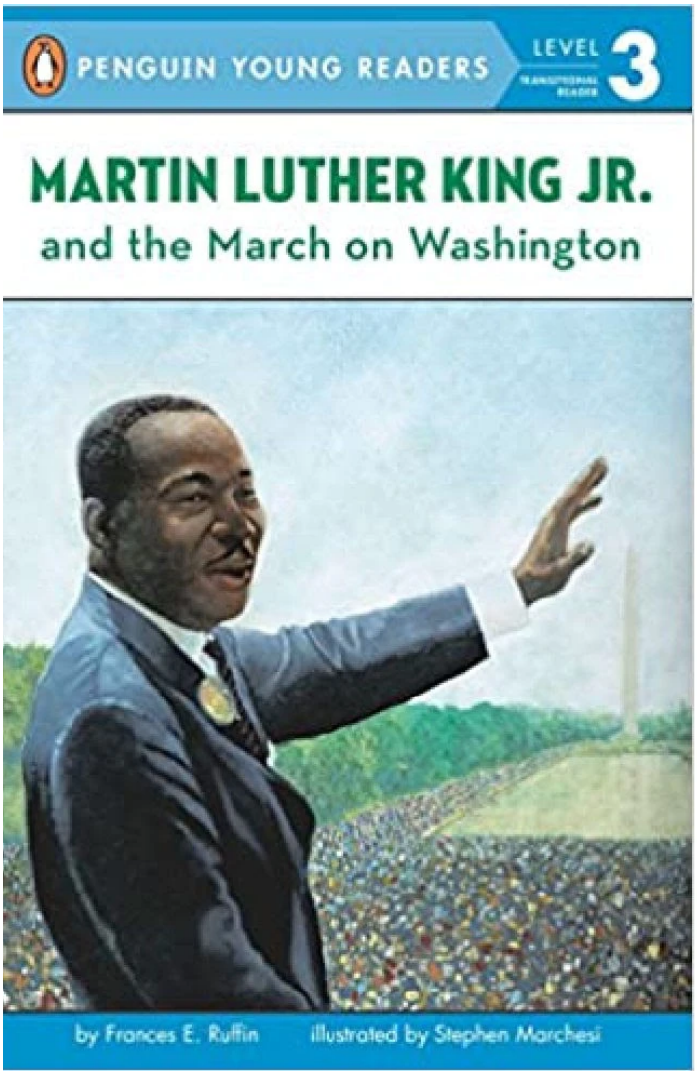
In May, Tennessee passed a law banning Critical Race Theory in K-12 schools. The state is already seeing the ugly consequences of the law. And things are likely to get worse.

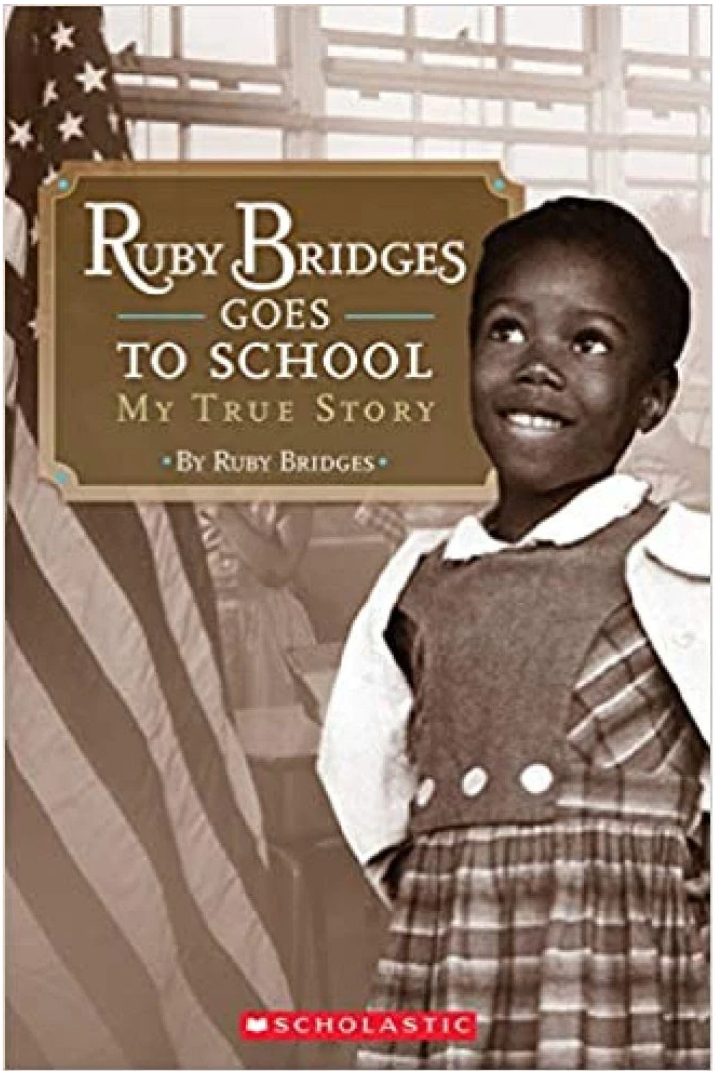
While Critical Race Theory is not taught in K-12 schools in Tennessee, the law bans instruction or material that "include" any of one of 11 poorly defined concepts. A sampling:

> "Privilege" based on race or sex
>
> "Discomfort" or "guilt" based on race or sex
>
> "[D]ivision between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people."

Armed with this vague law, a Williamson County, Tennessee chapter of Moms For Liberty, a right-wing dark money group, filed a complaint with the Tennessee Department of Education. The complaint alleges that the language arts curriculum for second graders in Williamson County school violates the law banning Critical Race Theory.

Specifically, Moms For Liberty objected to the inclusion several books, including "Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington," and "Ruby Bridges Goes to School," an autobiography of the first Black child to integrate a New Orleans school, adapted for young readers.





Type your email... Subscribe

Moms For Liberty claims that the inclusion of these books "reveals a heavily biased agenda, one that makes children hate their country, each other, and/or themselves." With regards to the Martin Luther King Jr. book specifically, Moms For Liberty cites two issues:

> Pages 22-23 shows photographs of white firemen blasting black children to the point of "bruising their bodies and ripping off their clothes."
>
> Pages 18-19 show photographs of white and colored drinking fountains, asking "Which of these fountains looks nicer to you."

The group also objected to the teacher's manual accompanying the book because it had a negative depiction of Bull Connor, the notorious racist who used hoses and attack dogs

to enforce segregation.

4. To the black community, *one man stood for hate more than any other person* in Birmingham. Eugene "Bull" Connor was the Commissioner of Public Safety. *This meant that he led the police and fire departments. Connor used his job to maintain segregation and bully blacks.*

Moms For Liberty also objects to another book in the curriculum about Ruby Bridges, "The Story of Ruby Bridges by Robert Cole," because the book does not mention "black heroes" such as "Justice Clarence Thomas," "Morgan Freeman," and "Secretary Ben Carson."

The complaint alleges that this Second Grade Language Arts curriculum includes 9 of the 11 concepts prohibited by the new anti-CRT law. Further, Moms For Liberty asserts that "[s]ome children are seeing counselors to overcome the emotional trauma inflicted upon them" by this curriculum.

"100% concerned"

This week, the Tennessee Department of Education rejected the complaint. But it wasn't based on a determination that the curriculum did not violate the new anti-CRT law. Rather, Moms For Liberty made a technical error in submitting its complaint. The group referenced instruction during the 2020-21 school year. But the law only applies to curriculum starting with the 2021-22 school year.

The same texts, however, are still being used by Williamson County second graders. Moms For Liberty could easily refile its complaint and, next time, it might be successful. Anne McGraw, a former member of the Williamson County School Board and current parent, said she is "100% concerned" that a future challenge by Moms For Liberty may work.

But even if Moms For Liberty is never able to stop second graders from reading about Ruby Bridges, that doesn't mean the law will not have an impact on the curriculum. Earlier this month, the Tennessee Department of Education released an 11-page rule detailing how the law will be implemented. Teachers who are found to be violating the law — by, for example, suggesting that people of a certain race have more privileges than others — can be subject to "[d]isciplinary or licensure action." In other words, teachers

who discuss race or gender in ways that are prohibited by the law can not only lose their job, but their right to be a teacher in Tennessee.

"Part of the goal of this is just to strike fear and hesitation with teachers -- that if they mess up, it could be catastrophic for them professionally," McGraw said, "So that's already having its intended effect."

There is also an incentive for schools to deal harshly with teachers who are perceived as violating the new law. Schools that are found to violate the law by including any of the 11 prohibited topics in the classroom can be subject to millions in funding reductions.

Type your email... Subscribe

The operative behind the complaint

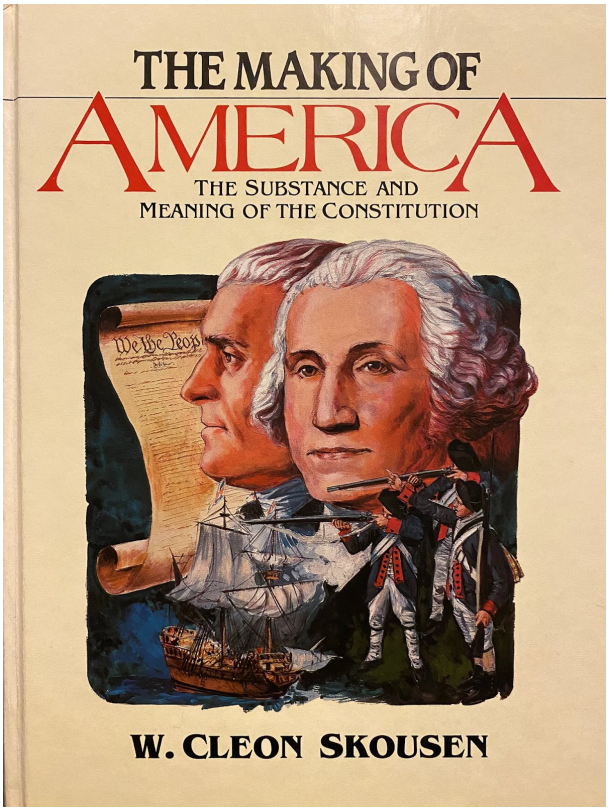
The author of the complaint to the Tennessee Department of Education is Robin Steenman, chair of the Williamson County chapter of Moms For Liberty. The national organization, Moms For Liberty, is a dark-money group based in Florida. Steenman's initial complaint about the Second Grade Language Arts curriculum, which was submitted to the Williamson County School Board, included objections to a teacher's guide that wasn't used in Tennessee schools — it was from Florida.

Steenman is not a parent of students in Williamson County public schools. On her Twitter account, which has since been deleted, Steenman said in August 2020 that she would "never" send her kids to public schools and described public school teachers as "brainwashing assholes."

There is evidence that the overwhelming majority of Williamson County public school parents don't share Steenman's concerns. Parents in Williamson County public schools have the right to opt their children out of any book in the curriculum and the school will provide an alternative. There are thousands of Second Graders who attend Williamson County public schools. At a recent Williamson County school board meeting, the board revealed that only a handful of parents across all grades had opted out of any books. The largest number of students opted out of any individual book was eight — and that was for Hatchet, which is assigned to Middle School students.

Moms For Liberty's preferred history text

We know which history books Moms For Liberty doesn't like. But how should people learn about history? The Moms For Liberty website recommends The Making of America, a 1985 text by W. Cleon Skousen, who died in 2006. Skousen was a supporter of The John Birch Society, a far-right organization that opposed the civil rights movement. He was also a conspiracy theorist, and once "accused the Council on Foreign Relations and the Rockefellers of puppeteering the election of Jimmy Carter to pave the way for One World Government."



Skousen's book characterizes "black children as 'pickaninnies' and American slave owners as the 'worst victims' of slavery." The book claims that the Founders wished to free the slaves but "[m]ost of [the slaves] were woefully unprepared for a life of competitive independence." Skousen asserts that abolitionists "did much to perpetuate slavery" by taking a "too militant" approach.

There is a section of the book titled "Three Fifths Compromise Not Demeaning To Slaves."

Type your email... Subscribe

81 19 Share

Write a comment...

Patricia mcmillen Dec 20, 2021

Wow, somehow I missed this column until I saw the link in todays piece about DeSantis' proposed propaganda, I mean legislation. Kinda important to read them in sequence. Amazing reporting/writing, thank you Judd & co!

Reply

Patricia mcmillen Dec 20, 2021

Wow, somehow I missed this column until I saw the link in todays piece about DeSantis' proposed propaganda, I mean legislation. Kinda important to read them in sequence. Amazing reporting/writing, thank you Judd & co!

Reply

17 more comments...

Ready for more?

Type your email... Subscribe

© 2022 Popular Information LLC · Privacy · Terms · Collection notice

Get the Substack app

Substack is the home for great writing