



Op-Ed by Dr. Adora Obi Nweze featured in the South Florida Sun Sentinel | March 3, 2022

As a former long-time school teacher and administrator, my bedrock values involve nurturing our children and providing them with the love, instruction, and guidance they need to be successful adults. I try to assume that the majority of us share common values. In my day-to-day life, I need to believe that we all want the best for all children, no matter their race, ethnicity, or ZIP code.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and certain state lawmakers are working hard this year to prove that wrong. They may say they want what's best for kids, but clearly, that goodwill does not extend to all children. Children of color are outside their circle of love.

First, there is the proposed \$200 million penalty for school districts that chose to make their best, good-faith effort to protect their students, teachers, and staff by requiring masks during the worst of the pandemic. State Rep. Randy Fine, R-Palm Bay, cooked up the penalty to punish 12 school districts that stood firm even in the face of the governor's anti-mask directive.

Fine would have those districts pay a financial price for choosing to put the safety of students and school employees over politics.

The districts affected are Alachua, Brevard, Broward, Duval, Hillsborough, Indian River, Leon, Miami-Dade, Orange, Palm Beach, Sarasota, and Volusia. In the worst-hit county, Miami-Dade, the \$71.8 million withheld would fund more than 1,500 teaching positions at a beginning salary of \$47,500. Fine claims his penalty will fall only on certain district employees, as money will come from funds for their salaries. This is a fig leaf meant to cover the truth. Who does the representative believe these employees serve? They serve children, and it is kids who will ultimately be impacted by his political vendetta.

Beyond the fact that children will be impacted is the truth of which children will be harmed. A penalty on these 12 districts will affect 56% of the total 2.8 million students in Florida's public schools. That breaks down to about 69% of Black students, 64% of Hispanic students, 63% of Asian students, and 41% of white students. I know I am not the only one who sees this disparity. Fine's penalty falls

most heavily on students of color, just as their districts are working to overcome the educational impacts of a long and difficult pandemic that touched the lives of every child in our schools.

One politician wanting to punish children, children of color in particular, for the sake of politics would be daunting. It is appalling that Florida's governor has chosen to support the idea. However, it is not surprising in the context of other actions undertaken by DeSantis. Withholding money from districts that serve a large percentage of Florida's children of color goes hand in hand with the governor's other attempts to use race to divide us.

His proposed "Stop WOKE Act" inspired the ugliness that is the so-called "Individual Freedom" bill (HB 7/SB 148) currently on track to become state law. This legislation seeks to censor full, honest discussions of America's history — most telling, discussions that involve racism and sexism, both of which have played a defining role in numerous historical events.

In practice, the bill is likely to chill any classroom discussion about race. The "individual freedom" of the bill's title appears to refer only to the desire of certain members of the racial majority to be free from potentially unpleasant discussions of how people of color have fared in history, why they came to be treated that way, and how that might impact society today.

All children deserve to know the good and bad of our past. All students deserve this state's full and unstinting support of their public schools. And no child should ever be denied knowledge or punished for the sake of pure politics. I have to keep telling myself: We all want the best for *all* children. Working together in the best interest of students, let's show that statement to be true.

Adora Obi Nweze is president of the NAACP Florida State Conference. She spent decades as a classroom teacher and administrator in Florida's public schools.

Be Safe, Mask Up and Take Care!

Dr. Adora Obi Nweze
State President
Florida State Conference NAACP
Board member, NAACP National Board of Directors
adoranweze2@gmail.com

Shawn Kinsey
State Secretary

Raquel L. Wright
Assistant State Secretary

Florida State Conference NAACP
Cell: 863-651-1402
Fax: 1+863-259-4176

fscnaacp@gmail.com
www.flnaacp.com