

Agnotology and Policy Advocacy Groups

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Since January 2021, there has been an unprecedented, state-by-state attempt to pass three types of laws that increase curriculum oversight in American public schools, Pre-K to postsecondary. These three curriculum oversight laws would ban the so-called divisive concepts; secure the right for parents to object to instructional materials and topics; and require teachers, schools, and districts to provide public access to instructional materials. Forty-four states have introduced a divisive concepts policy and eighteen states have passed some form of a divisive concepts law. Thirty-four states have introduced bills that would increase curriculum transparency, and at least twenty-six states have introduced parental rights bills with four states passing such laws.¹ Additionally, states often introduce legislation that combines these policies into one bill; or similar policies will be introduced and passed by local school boards, making it difficult to track curriculum oversight policies. Regardless, the sheer number of curriculum oversight bills introduced, and the number of receptive policymakers and legislatures that have passed them into law raises several questions. Why are so many states attempting to pass such laws? What do lawmakers know, or believe, about the curriculum in American public schools that would warrant a state-by-state legislative response? In other words, what information, or perhaps misinformation and disinformation about the curriculum in public schools is contributing to the unprecedented level of oversight?

This study analyzes the epistemic influence on how and why these types of policies are formed. Frank Fischer, et al. explain that “one of the most important issues for critical policy studies [has] to do with the nature of knowledge, both the knowledge used to shape policy and the kinds of knowledge and assumptions that guide the implementation of policy decisions.”² The nature of knowledge in this study is non-knowledge, or ignorance, meaning absence of true belief or holding false beliefs. Jennifer Logue observes, “rather than focus on curing unreason with rationality, or ignorance with knowledge,

we need to make unreason, irrationality, and ignorance itself the object of study.”³ This study engages with what is often unobserved in education policy studies, that is, the influence and implications of manufactured ignorance. The word “manufactured” indicates something is human-made. For ignorance to be manufactured, an external influence, a person or institution, takes deliberate actions to produce non-knowledge.

In today’s post-truth society, it is not uncommon for false beliefs to inform policymaking. Post-truth is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as the “circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁴ According to Lee McIntyre, “post-truth amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not.”⁵ Policy advocacy groups like American Legislative Exchange Council, Manhattan Institute, Citizens for Renewing America, and America First Policy Institute, to name a few, have published model policies, commentary, reports, and toolkits that advocate for divisive concepts, parental rights, and curriculum transparency laws. The discourse in these materials strategically manufactures a common set of opinions and beliefs, with little evidence, about the day-to-day teaching and learning in America’s public schools. Ultimately, such opinions and beliefs have influenced policymakers to advocate for increased curriculum oversight.

AGNOTOLOGY

Agnotology, according to Robert N. Proctor, is the study of how ignorance is manufactured, produced, or culturally induced.⁶ In 1999, Proctor testified against the tobacco industry on the grounds that tobacco companies had strategically produced ignorance about the dangers of smoking. For instance, he argued that the tobacco industry knew about the adverse health concerns and to confront any market impediments, they advertised filtered cigarettes as approved by doctors. In the 1950s the tobacco industry was barred from making such claims, yet they continued to generate doubt in the growing evidence that cigarettes were linked to cancer. According to Proctor, the industry “launched a multimillion-dollar campaign to reassure consumers that the hazard had not

yet been ‘proven.’”⁷ Proctor argued, “the strategy was to question all assertions to the contrary, all efforts to “close” the controversy, as if closure itself were a mark of dogma, the enemy of inquiry. The point was to keep the question of health harms open, for decades if possible.”⁸ Other strategies used by the tobacco industry to manufacture ignorance were distributing information that pointed to other causes of cancer, conducting their own independent research to explicitly raise doubt in the evidence linking cigarettes to cancers, and maintaining a well-funded organizational structure of lobbyists and lawyers to support the argument that there is no definitive proof that cigarette smoking causes cancer.

Agnotology focuses on the ignorance making strategies of individuals or institutions who hold authority over the dissemination of information to the public. Consider an analogy using Plato’s allegory of the cave. In this dialogue, the captives, who are unable to move their heads, are bound and facing in one direction. There is a fire behind them. They are only able to observe the shadows that are cast onto the wall in front of them. Those shadows, or illusions, are engineered by the puppeteers who manipulate their objects in front of a fire. What the captives believe to be real is not, and the illusions are a strategic ploy to manufacture their ignorance. Agnotological research does not focus on the ignorance of the captives but the ploy of the puppeteers. The puppeteers I am concerned with in this study are policymakers and policy advocacy groups, such as think tanks—and their ploy.

AGNOTOLOGY APPLIED TO CURRICULUM OVERSIGHT LAWS

In this study, the resources distributed by policy advocacy groups that support divisive concepts, curriculum transparency, and parental rights legislation are analyzed with an agnotological framework. Groups were selected based on whether they had published a model policy that corresponds to at least one type of curriculum oversight law; from there, corresponding articles, blogs, toolkits, etcetera, were also included in the analysis. The model policies and corresponding materials were analyzed to identify whether ignorance-making tactics were employed. Kevin Elliott’s work is helpful for identifying ignorance-making tactics.⁹ For example, groups may engage in manufacturing doubt about existing evidence or create their own evidence. Groups engaged in ignorance production

may construct narratives of unwarranted doubt and fear; or they may promote opinions, beliefs, and disinformation as rationale for a policy agenda.

To clarify, I turn to Jennifer Croissant's work which is instructive for understanding the particularities and instrumentality of manufactured ignorance. She outlines five properties of ignorance which are key to understanding how ignorance is manufactured: ontology and epistemology, scale, granularity, chronicity, and intentionality.¹⁰ For this purpose of this study, I focus on the scale, being a national phenomenon, the chronicity or chronic nature of ignorance production, and the intentionality of the person or institution to produce agnosis, the lack of, denial of, or indifference to knowledge.¹¹ Chronicity matters retrospectively in affirming the connection between the information that was produced about children being indoctrinated with divisive ideas to the policies that followed. Determining intention is challenging because to claim a person(s) or institution intentionally wanted to manufacture ignorance would require omni-present clairvoyance. However, certain patterns and actions can be identified that function as intent. For example, the goal of the tobacco industry was not to outright deny the adverse health effects of cigarette smoking, but to doubt the science. In this study, with policy advocacy groups and curriculum oversight policies, intention is evidenced by patterns of misinformation in the common discourse across institutions.

Hannah Arendt posited, in 1967, that "it may be in the nature of the political realm to be at war with truth in all its forms."¹² Her concern was that lying in politics would lead to more action than the truth because lies, misinformation, and in this case, manufactured ignorance, are carefully crafted to entice lawmakers to act. Further, Arendt addresses her concern about the deliberate and organized nature of lying in politics.

The hallmark of factual truth is that its opposite is neither error nor illusion nor opinion, no one of which reflects upon personal truthfulness, but the deliberate falsehood, or lie. [For instance] when the liar, lacking the power to make his falsehood stick, does not insist on the gospel truth of his statement but pretends that this is his "opinion," to which

he claims is his constitutional right. This is frequently done by subversive groups, and in a politically immature public the resulting confusion can be considerable.¹³

Arendt raises her concern over the mass manipulation of fact and opinion because she states, “the mere telling of fact, leads to no action whatever; it even tends, under normal circumstances, toward the acceptances of things as they are;” she continues, “since the liar is free to fashion his ‘facts’ to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations, of his audiences, the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller.”¹⁴ The fact that almost every state has introduced some form of a curriculum oversight policy is indicative of Arendt’s point, that false beliefs may lead to more action than truth. There are warranted reasons to critique public school curricula; however, the extraordinary response by policy advocacy groups and individual states to pass such laws signals a red flag.

ANALYSIS OF POLICY ADVOCACY GROUPS

DIVISIVE CONCEPTS

The list of so-called “divisive concepts” first appeared in Executive Order 13950 signed during the Trump administration in 2021. The executive order came after Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, urged the Trump administration to ban government contractors from conducting training sessions that included critical race theory (CRT). CRT, at the behest of Rufo, then became conflated with public schools and classroom discussions about racism and sexism, despite CRT being non-existent in public school curriculum standards.¹⁵ After Executive Order 13950 was revoked by President Joe Biden, policy advocacy groups and state policymakers began copying (usually word for word) the list of divisive concepts to their own model policies. The purpose was to ban lessons that might teach about racism or sexism in a way that may be confused with CRT or promote the belief that one race or sex is inherently superior to another. The divisive concepts laws are grounded in the belief that learning about topics like systemic racism promotes a divisive ideology and could cause individuals to feel guilt, shame, discomfort, and psychological distress.¹⁶

Divisive concepts (or anti-CRT) model policies have been created by Citizens for Renewing America (CRA), Manhattan Institute, American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), National Association of Scholars with Civics Alliance (NAS), Alliance for Free Citizens (AFC), Goldwater Institute, and Heritage Foundation.

The model policy from CRA would prohibit “the teaching and promotion of critical race theory.”¹⁷ Among the commentary published on their website, it is stated that CRT has been pushed into “every facet of American society,” and is “intended to corrupt children and future generations into both self-loathing and hatred toward their fellow countrymen.”¹⁸ CRA’s toolkit tells parents they will be attacked by critical race theory activists warning, “this is not like boxing—this is like social jiu-jitsu where you use their own tactics against them to expose them.”¹⁹

The Manhattan Institute claims students are being indoctrinated by the divisive concepts. They allude to a connection between CRT and other critical theories, claiming critical pedagogy will be evident in a school that uses words such as “achievement gap,” “equity,” “implicit bias,” and “meritocracy.”²⁰ According to the Manhattan Institute and ALEC, the divisive concepts are violations of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibit discrimination based on race. They are implying that teaching about white male privilege, for example, is discriminatory towards white male students. ALEC’s model policy continues, “for education to create citizens capable of self-government, students need to engage with a variety of viewpoints on challenging issues.”²¹ However, the variety of viewpoints with which students may engage, according to ALEC, would exclude those who believe there is an inherent systemic nature to racism and sexism.

The AFC has two model divisive concepts policies that, despite having two different titles, contain the same language. AFC’s toolkit claims, “School Boards [sic] across America are imposing radical, Marxist, racist course studies on our children from the very youngest all the way through the system. It has gotten so radical that there literally are moves to move to ‘equity math’ that denies that $2=2=4!!$ [sic].” The toolkit creates a narrative, without evidence, that American public schools are teaching students to be racist, at one point even

suggesting students are being exposed to mind control.²²

The NAS with the Civics Alliance has a variety of resources including model policies, a palm card, toolkits, pledges, and model civics codes. The introduction to NAS's model policy states,

Radical activists seek to transform all education into political activism to advance 'social justice.' Their favored pedagogy is 'service-learning,' and they particularly focus on using civics education as a Trojan horse for their revolutionary project, by using civics education, under names such as *action civics*, *new civics*, *civic engagement*, *project-based civics*, and *global civics*, into radical propaganda and vocational training for social justice activism. Revolutionary *action civics* has infiltrated all levels of education, and radical activists now threaten to impose it by state legislation.²³

The text of the model policy states that "true civic education is not political action itself but rather preparation for, and prerequisite to mature political life." Despite what they are espousing in this claim, political life is active. Their claim that civic education is not political action is inherently contradictory because participating in a mature political life *is* active civic involvement. One must act, for example, by voting, writing to representatives, or advocating for policies, to be a civically engaged citizen.

The Goldwater Institute's model policy maintains the premise that teaching about and acting against systemic racism denies equal rights to all races. They address the concept of reverse racism, implying that providing "differential treatment" to racially or ethnically minoritized people is a form of racism against white people. The model policy also states that words like "diversity, equity, and inclusion" have been distorted to mean that white people should face discrimination.²⁴ The Heritage Foundation takes a unique approach. Their model policy states:

Whereas, slavery, legal racial discrimination, and racism are so inconsistent with the founding principles of the United States

that Americans fought a civil war to eliminate the first, waged long-standing political campaigns to eradicate the second, and have made the third unacceptable in the court of public opinion, all of which means that America and its institutions are not systemically racist and confutes the notion that these should be at the center of public elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions.²⁵

Their language implies that because of the civil war, the Civil Rights movement, and shifting public opinion, racism has been resolved and eradicated. While past efforts may be evidence of progress, the model's language manufactures doubt that racism still exists, despite copious evidence that racism does still exist.

PARENTAL RIGHTS AND CURRICULUM TRANSPARENCY

States that have passed a divisive concepts law subsequently have an incentive to surveil classroom teachers to ensure they are not teaching the banned concepts. Parental rights and curriculum transparency laws operate in tandem with the divisive concept's laws. For example, in Florida, the curriculum transparency law cross-references F.S.1003.42, which is the statute that includes the divisive concepts.²⁶ Curriculum transparency laws would require schools to post all instructional materials, including lesson plans, on a publicly accessible forum. Parental rights laws award parents the right to review and object to any material they find unsuitable for their child, as well as bring action against individual teachers, schools, or entire districts that may violate their rights or other laws requiring transparency. Together, these laws represent a unique approach to curriculum oversight.

Parents' rights have been upheld and protected by U.S. Supreme Court cases, federal rulings, and subsequent state statutes since 1923. However, parental rights advocates believe parents' rights must be enshrined in the constitution. In the same respect, schools are already held accountable for maintaining transparency about testing, annual performance and progress reports, and the standards. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires each district to make such information publicly available on the state department website.²⁷ The parental

rights amendments and curriculum transparency laws should not operate as a source of manufactured ignorance. In fact, having more transparency in schools should operate as a form of resistance to manufactured ignorance. However, both laws are designed to enforce more surveillance on classroom teachers and censor ideas. Policymakers and policy advocacy groups are engaged in espousing a narrative that more transparency and parental rights are needed to protect children from public schools that are engaged in indoctrination.

There are ten different policy advocacy groups that have published model policies for either parental rights, curriculum transparency, or both, and even more that have commentary, reports, blogs, etc. In the interest of time and space, the analysis below will be limited to documents obtained from Moms for Liberty (M4L), Manhattan Institute, and the NAS in association with America First Policy Institute (AFPI).

Moms for Liberty (M4L) was founded in January 2021 by Tiffany Justice and Tina Descovich. Their primary issue was to oppose COVID-19 restrictions and mask mandates in Florida schools. After mask mandates were banned in Florida, they expanded their platform to oppose instructional materials they believe are divisive or harmful. In a video posted to their website they claim, “our schools are becoming indoctrination camps and a breeding ground for hatred and division.”²⁸ The parental rights model policy featured on M4L’s website proposes that school districts create procedures for parents to learn about instructional materials, procedures for parents to “object to instructional materials [which] may be based on beliefs regarding morality, sex, and religion or the belief that such materials are harmful.” In their toolkit “Social Emotional Learning: Don’t Be Fooled By The Title [sic],” they maintain that SEL utilizes Gloria Ladson-Billings’ culturally responsive teaching to filter lessons through CRT. They claim that the goal of SEL is to “psychologically manipulate students to accept the progressive ideology that supports gender fluidity, sexual preference exploration, and systemic oppression.”²⁹

M4L has become well known in popular media for protesting at school board meetings and trying to ban books they believe are being used by public schools to indoctrinate or sexualize children. M4L is systematically producing

disinformation about public education and curriculum. This is not to say there are no reasons to doubt public schools, however, there is no widespread evidence that public schools are systematically educating children with sexualized, evil, anti-American, divisive ideas.

Christopher Rufo, along with James R. Copland and John Ketchum, wrote Manhattan Institute's model policy for curriculum transparency. The policy suggests public schools should provide public access to instructional, training, and learning materials. In particular, they suggest all training materials or activities used for staff, and all curricular materials or activities used for students "on matters of nondiscrimination, diversity, equity, inclusion, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, or bias, or any combination of these concepts with other concepts," shall be displayed on the school website.³⁰ In a commentary published by Rufo, he argues that anyone against his curriculum transparency policy is in favor of government secrecy, and that "left-wing activists" (he cites the ACLU and PEN America as examples), believe "speech is violence, transparency is censorship, and democracy is tyranny."³¹ Manhattan Institute's policy, aligned with Rufo's beliefs, misrepresents the opposition to curriculum transparency by creating a false dilemma, claiming that anyone opposed to his transparency law is in favor of government secrecy, violence, censorship, and tyranny. The ACLU has issued a statement in favor of transparency, with the caveat that transparency is sought in a good faith effort to make information transparent and accessible to parents and communities. Whereas the bills the ACLU and PEN America are explicitly against are transparency bills that ban the so-called divisive concepts and place parents at the forefront of taking legal action against public schools.³²

The model policies endorsed by AFPI are published in association with the NAS and the Civics Alliance. The AFPI states that their policies align with the beliefs of the "majority of registered voters" without evidence to indicate they have surveyed registered voters. For example, they provide no evidence to support the claim that "the majority of register voters believe too many public school boards do not respect the role of parents."³³

NAS's Academic Transparency Act, a model policy for curriculum transparency, states that "radical activist schoolteachers and administrators

impose action civics, critical race theory, and other forms of politicized instruction whenever they can avoid oversight.”³⁴ In their factsheet advocating for the federal bill HR5, “The Parents’ Bill of Rights Act,” AFPI states,

Over the last few years, parental rights have consistently been trampled on by school boards, school administrators, teachers’ unions, and teachers. An ever-growing movement is now infusing classrooms with race-based policies and instruction that sexualizes young children and deconstructs the nuclear family.³⁵

In AFPI’s toolkit, they call parents to action, claiming CRT is anti-American rhetoric threatening to dismantle societal progress. They suggest policies that include terms like “equity” or “social justice” are policies that make it acceptable to treat people differently based on the color of their skin.³⁶ According to NAS and AFPI, parents should be frequently attending school board meetings, not for the purpose of staying informed and involved, but for the purpose of interrogating, scrutinizing, and putting pressure on board members to enforce their agenda.

DISCUSSION

Post-truthness is harmful to society when public policies follow a public opinion that is shaped by disinformation. In a high school textbook titled *Problems of American Democracy* published in 1922, author R.O. Hughes measures the effect of ignorance upon a nation. He states, “under an absolute monarchy or an oligarchical government, the citizens are less troublesome if they do not know too much. But in a democracy the dangerous ones are those who do not know or who only half know. They are the ones who can be led astray by false and foolish notions.”³⁷

Returning briefly to Proctor’s work, he identified aspects of agnotology in the operations of the tobacco industry and their marketing ploys. The tobacco industry represented scientific evidence as not being definitive proof that cigarettes cause cancer, and therefore the product was “innocent until proven guilty.” Their narrative, marketed and distributed by successful, organized public relations campaigns, manufactured disinformation, and led consumers to retain

false beliefs, a.k.a. ignorance. The policy advocacy groups presented in this study have manufactured a narrative of false beliefs that public schools are systematically indoctrinating children with dangerous, age-inappropriate ideologies.

According to Lorraine Code, “policy development is closely tied to something akin to a specific ‘world view.’”³⁸ What then, when the world view tied to policy development is one that would systematically engage in false, misleading, and/or subjective narratives? Consider the world view in which the policy advocacy groups presented here characterized public schools and educators. For example, Citizens for Renewing America claimed that CRT was undermining a free society and that it inflamed division. The Manhattan Institute claimed racially charged theories were being used to indoctrinate children. NAS created model policies that would force schools to display, publicly, all instructional materials used in classrooms by teachers, including daily lesson plans, under the presumption that schools were undermining parents’ values through controversial curricula. The AFPI maintained that radical activists were imposing controversial ideas on students whenever they could avoid oversight, which is why they argue more oversight is necessary.

Agnotology, post-truth, and education policies align when policymakers engage in espousing deliberate falsehoods in the name of the constitutional right to opine, and those falsehoods determine the policies they support. Arendt warns that the First Amendment and the right to have an opinion could eventually lead to less protection and more misinformation. She states, “whether the First Amendment will suffice to protect this most essential political freedom, the right to unmanipulated factual information without which all freedom of opinion becomes a cruel hoax, is another question.”³⁹ When policies are adopted that are objects of disinformation, opinions, or manufactured ignorance, the implication is a post-truth society struggling to maintain a body of democratic, knowledgeable, and informed citizens.

RESISTANCE TO POST-TRUTH

Proctor argues that like ignorance, “knowledge, too, has a face, a house, and a price – there are people attached, institutions setting limits, and costs in

the form of monies or opportunities lost. Decisions of what kind of knowledge ‘we’ want to support are also decisions about what kinds of ignorance should remain in place.”⁴⁰ Even without the presence of divisive concepts, parental rights, and curriculum transparency policies, the American public education system is arguably already operating under a system designed to manufacture ignorance. Paulo Freire calls this the “banking model” of education. Students are delivered a standardized curriculum, and held accountable by standardized tests. The standardized system of education considers ignorance as an absence or lack—hence a void to be filled with *proper* or *correct* information. In an attempt to thwart ignorance, the system thrives on manufactured ignorance. In other words, restricting critical inquiry and academic freedom is compounded by curriculum oversight policies that are both objects of and instruments for manufactured ignorance. Rather, I suggest a reformation of the teaching field that values ignorance as an ontological particularity of human flourishing.

What does such a reformation look like? While space here is limited, and further explanation is necessary, I introduce a praxis of pragmatic ignorance as an instrument of resistance in our post-truth society. A praxis of teaching and learning that is (re)defined in terms of pragmatic ignorance establishes not knowing as something that is necessarily practical. To fully develop pragmatic ignorance as a praxis for resistance against post-truth society, I suggest first understanding ignorance as a paradox. Sandrine Parageau demonstrates the concept of ignorance as a paradox with her assertion that early modern English and French philosophers encouraged those seeking truth and knowledge to “voluntarily induce and experience ignorance.”⁴¹ To evade ignorance, one must be ignorant. A theory of pragmatic ignorance would position the paradox of ignorance as ontological to knowing and will be defined in terms of action (with risk), experience, habits, growth, inquiry, meliorism, and truth.

A praxis of pragmatic ignorance would prioritize actions that intentionally capitalize on one’s own ignorance, developing habits that are rooted in knowing there are unknowns, and deliberately seeking inquiry and experience in order to develop knowledge. Jacques Rancière explains what this process may look like. He writes, “whoever looks always finds. He doesn’t necessarily

find what he was looking for, and even less what he was supposed to find. But he finds something new to relate to the *thing* that he already knew.”⁴² Habit, in this sense, modifies the experience and the quality of subsequent experiences. Experiences that are intentionally led by habits of ignorance position the would-be knower with the unknown, where the would-be knower is in a constant state of inquiry into known unknowns.

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41 Sandrine Parageau, *The Paradoxes of Ignorance in Early Modern England and France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), 20.

42 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Translated by Kristen Ross. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 33 (italicized emphasis appears in original text).