

Rising push finds workarounds to teach Black history

Amid book bans, an ‘educational Underground Railroad’

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USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – Black historians read passages from banned books last month in a local park in Florida.

In Washington, D.C., Black members of Congress that same week hosted panels on preserving Black history at a conference.

And in Pennsylvania, a 91-year-old pastor reached out to an expert in South Carolina to help his church set up Black history lessons.

They are part of a growing movement across the country of educators, lawmakers, civil rights activists and church leaders who say there is a renewed urgency to teach Black history in the wake of a crackdown on Black scholars and inclusive lesson plans. The effort has seen historians share ways others can teach Black history, churches hold history classes during Bible study, film festivals showcase Black history work, and Black leaders in Congress ask museums and local institutions to help in the campaign to preserve that history.

“There’s a movement across the country to suppress the teaching of Black history,” said Marvin Dulaney, president of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. “We have to meet that challenge head- on.”

The push to teach more Black history comes as dozens of states, including Florida, Texas and Oklahoma, have adopted or proposed measures that critics say omit important parts of Black history or limit language related to race, sexuality and gender issues in public schools. Some have also banned books, many by Black authors that focus on race.

“There’s urgency because these histories are under assault,” said Bobby Donaldson, an associate history professor at the University of South Carolina. “The battles in Florida and elsewhere remind us that it’s urgent that we do this work now.”

Black history is American history

Dulaney along with other historians and activists stood last month in a Jacksonville park named after James Weldon Johnson, the late civil rights activist and composer, and read passages from banned books. There were readings from “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison and “Soul on Ice” by Eldridge Cleaver.

It was an unusual event for scholars attending the annual conference of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. Often they meet, share research and go home, Dulaney said. But this year’s conference theme was resistance and the gathering was in Florida, a state in the national spotlight for its efforts to restrict how Black history is taught.

The organization also hosted a town hall to discuss the importance of Black history and how to best teach it to students and others.

“We’re sort of being proactive this year because of what we’re confronting here as well as in other places in the country,” said Dulaney, deputy director of the African American Museum of Dallas.

He said the efforts are part of the organization's mission to accurately teach Black history. It was founded in 1915 by Carter G. Woodson, known as the father of Black History Month.

"Teachings and studying and promoting Black history is not about trying to make white people and white children feel bad," Dulaney said. "It's just a part of American history. It's also telling the truth that has been hidden so long."

Legislation passed in 14 states

Legislation to limit the teaching of "divisive" concepts or critical race theory in public schools and/or higher education institutions has been introduced in at least 21 states this year, according to Emily Ronco, a policy associate with the National Conference of State Legislatures. At least 14 states passed legislation. Last year, at least 24 states considered such legislation, according to NCSL.

Supporters of so-called anti-woke laws said such measures protect against teaching divisive issues and blaming current generations for past injustices such as slavery.

Republicans have particularly attacked critical race theory, calling it "woke indoctrination." Critical race theory is an academic framework that argues the legacy of slavery shapes systemic racism in existence today.

The debate on how Black history is taught has largely centered on Florida because state officials also banned this year the College Board's Advanced Placement African American Studies course. State officials there have said African American history is already taught in schools.

They've said some course material violates state law and take issue with the inclusion of lessons on the Black Lives Matter social justice movement, Black feminism and reparations.

Florida Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is running for president, signed the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act into law in 2022, which, among other things, limits how history can be taught.

"We won't allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other," DeSantis said in a 2021 statement announcing the legislation.

Jonathan Butcher, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, said there were institutional examples of racism throughout U.S. history, such as slavery. But, he argued, "I don't believe the United States has institutional racism any longer."

Butcher said it is the responsibility of school boards and policymakers to determine what should be taught.

"I'm not arguing that we omit important topics," he said. "I think it should be done in age-appropriate ways."

Showcase for Black history

The political battles have sparked a renewed passion for some to protect Black history, including books, films and historic documents.

In Washington, the March on Washington Film Festival kicked off its 10th year last month showcasing films that highlight Black history, including the Civil Rights Movement.

Robert Raben, founder of the festival, said the push to restrict the teaching of Black history has only spurred more organizations to act. "I'm immensely sorry that forces who consciously don't want us to know our history are back in force," Raben said. "But the unintended consequence is a huge number of people and an

increasingly diverse number of people stand up and say, ‘You can’t have democracy with that kind of fascist restrictions on our past.’ ” The weeklong festival focuses on lesser-known heroes and activists and stories often not told.

“We’ll rely on our own educational Underground Railroad, or in those states where we’ve got access to the curriculum in the classroom, we’ll just double down,” Raben said. “People cannot be afraid of teaching the past. I’ve been Jewish for 6,000 years. It is in our DNA that you have to know your history to know where you’re going.”

‘We are not going to stand silent’

Civil rights activists and others said they must do a better job of teaching Black history in churches, community venues and homes.

Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League, said his organization is exploring how it can incorporate Black history sessions in its after-school programs.

Meanwhile, the civil rights organization and others have endorsed legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “Freedom to Learn” campaign, a movement to combat restrictions and misinformation about Black history and critical race theory.

“We are not going to stand silent, sit on our hands and watch and not respond to this effort to degrade Black history. It is absolutely offensive to me,” Morial said. “There’s no American history without Black history.”

Crenshaw, who is credited with codeveloping critical race theory, said more than 23 states have passed a ban on the way Black history can be taught, including details of the Tulsa race massacre in Oklahoma.

In 1921, a white mob burned and looted homes and businesses in a Black community there and killed possibly as many as 300 Black residents.

“This is about taking away our ability to narrate our lives,” Crenshaw told a packed ballroom last month at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s conference in Washington. “It’s about taking away our ability to talk about inequality. It’s about our inability to talk about the continuing ways that racism shapes every aspect of our existence. If they can take away our ability to speak to reality, how are we going to be able to transform our reality?”

Beyond schools for history classes

In July, Faith in Florida, a coalition of churches advocating for social justice issues, launched a Black history program offering an online toolkit that includes videos, books and other resources.

Black churches have the power and responsibility to fill in gaps if educators don’t or won’t, said the Rev. Rhonda Thomas, executive director of Faith in Florida. She dismissed arguments that teaching comprehensive Black history could offend white children.

“That was ridiculous considering that Black children and Black adults have been offended for years,” Thomas said. “And nothing was ever watered down nor erased.”

Donaldson of the University of South Carolina called the fight over teaching Black history an “awakening.” He said there are organizations that have long been teaching and researching history and building archival collections.

“People are now reminded that there is far more work to do,” Donaldson said. “We’re also reminded that we

can't simply rely on our schools to be the one portal or vessel by which we expect our children to be educated."

Black history taught by any means

Donaldson said it's important to train others how to teach history, including hosting workshops and providing critical resources. He participated in a panel last month on the importance of preserving the history of the Civil Rights Movement along with South Carolina Rep. James Clyburn, a civil rights veteran and one of the highest-ranking African Americans in Congress.

"Not only are we engaged in a battle about the teaching of history, we have a generation who is passing away who have stories to be told and to be documented," Donaldson said.

It's during times of such pushback that museums also play a critical role in offering rich history experiences, said Tonya Matthews, president and chief executive officer of the new International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina.

"One of the ways that museums fit into any of these conversations is in our superpower," she said. "We refer to ourselves as free-choice learning institutions."

Matthews likened the debate over teaching African American history to the 1970s when there were intense discussions, and sometimes protests, over starting Black studies programs at colleges. She also noted fights over desegregating classrooms.

"Part of these are unfinished conversations," Matthews said. "Until we're willing to sit in this space calmly and carefully ... we're going to keep revisiting this conversation."

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Bobby Donaldson,

an associate history professor at the University of South Carolina

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Participants join a "Banned Book Readout" sponsored by the Association for the Study of African

American Life and History on Sept. 21 at the James Weldon Johnson Park in Jacksonville, Fla. The organization held its annual conference in Jacksonville and also hosted a town hall on the importance of Black history. COREY PERRINE/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION



Nicole Neily, right, president of Parents Defending Education, speaks during a Senate Judiciary committee hearing to examine book bans, focusing on how censorship limits liberty and literature, in Washington on Sept. 12. JACK GRUBER/USA TODAY

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