

Florida Scoured Math Textbooks for 'Prohibited Topics.' Next Up: Social Studies.

Behind the scenes, one publisher went to great lengths to avoid mentions of race, even in the story of Rosa Parks.



By Sarah Mervosh

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The nitty-gritty process of reviewing and approving school textbooks has typically been an administrative affair, drawing the attention of education experts, publishing executives and state bureaucrats.

But in Florida, textbooks have become hot politics, part of Gov. Ron DeSantis's campaign against what he describes as “woke indoctrination” in public schools, particularly when it comes to race and gender. Last year, his administration made a splash when it rejected dozens of math textbooks, citing “prohibited topics.”

Now, the state is reviewing curriculum in what is perhaps the most contentious subject in education: social studies.

In the last few months, as part of the review process, a small army of state experts, teachers, parents and political activists have combed thousands of pages of text — not only evaluating academic content, but also flagging anything that could hint, for instance, at critical race theory.

A prominent conservative education group, whose members volunteered to review textbooks, objected to a slew of them, accusing publishers of “promoting their bias.” At least two publishers declined to participate altogether.

And in a sign of how fraught the political landscape has become, one publisher created multiple versions of its social studies material, softening or eliminating references to race — even in the story of Rosa Parks — as it sought to gain approval in Florida.

“Normally, a state adoption is a pretty boring process that a few of us care about, but there are a lot of people watching this because the stakes are so high,” said Jeff Livingston, a former publishing executive who is now an education consultant.

It is unclear which social studies textbooks will be approved in Florida, or how the chosen materials might address issues of race in history. The state is expected to announce its textbook decisions in the coming weeks.

The Florida Department of Education, which mandates the teaching of Black history, emphasized that the requirements were recently expanded, including to ensure students understood “the ramifications of prejudice, racism and stereotyping on individual freedoms.”

But Mr. DeSantis, a top Republican 2024 presidential prospect, also signed a law last year known as the Stop W.O.K.E. Act, which prohibits instruction that would compel students to feel responsibility, guilt or anguish for what other members of their race did in the past, among other limits.

The state's guidelines for evaluating textbooks targets “critical race theory,” a graduate-level academic theory that rarely appears in younger grades but has become a catchall to some conservatives; and “social emotional learning,” an approach that tries to help students develop positive mind-sets and that is viewed by the DeSantis administration as extraneous to core academics.





including more than a dozen by McGraw Hill, a major national publisher.

The alliance, whose co-founders served on Mr. DeSantis’s education advisory team during his transition to governor, has helped lead a sweeping effort to remove school library books deemed as inappropriate, including many with L.G.B.T.Q. characters. It trained dozens of volunteers to review social studies textbooks.

In a summary of its findings submitted to the state last month, the group complained that a McGraw Hill fifth-grade textbook, for example, mentioned slavery 189 times within a few chapters alone. Another objection: An eighth-grade book gave outsize attention to the “negative side” of the treatment of Native Americans, while failing to give a fuller account of their own acts of violence, such as the Jamestown Massacre of 1622, in which Powhatan warriors killed more than 300 English colonists.

In a statement, McGraw Hill said it was awaiting word about approvals. “We look forward to supporting Florida educators and students as we have for many decades,” the company said.

The Florida Citizens Alliance is pushing the state to add curriculum from Hillsdale College, a small Christian school in Michigan that is active in conservative politics.

Hillsdale has drawn admiration from the DeSantis administration, but its K-12 history and civics materials, which emphasize primary sources, are meant to guide teachers — not be a textbook for students. The curriculum was not included in Florida’s official review, and the state did not comment on the group’s recommendations.

Of the nearly 20 publishers who applied in Florida, one major player was not on the list: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, or HMH.

HMH, which won approval for social studies textbooks during Florida’s last review six years ago, was among the publishers whose math textbooks were initially rejected last year for “prohibited topics” and other unsolicited strategies, such as critical race theory or social emotional learning. (The textbooks were later approved after what HMH described as minor revisions.)

The company said in a statement that it did not compete in Florida this year because of “business priorities” and that the math textbook rejections and Florida’s legislation around race were not factors in its decision.

“For competitive reasons, we do not share our strategic decision-making process,” the company said.

The company, though, is pursuing social studies bids in other states, including South Carolina, North Carolina and New Mexico.

Another previously approved publisher, Discovery Education, also chose not to participate this year. The company did not respond to requests for comment.

One Publisher’s Edits: Rosa Parks

In an attempt to cater to Florida, at least one publisher made significant changes to its materials, walking back or omitting references to race, even in its telling of the Rosa Parks story.



Rosa Parks, right, was fingerprinted after she refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955. Underwood Archives/Getty Images

The publisher, Studies Weekly, mostly serves younger students, with a focus on science and social studies, and its curriculum — short lessons in weekly pamphlets — is used in 45,000 schools across the country, according to its website. Its social studies materials are used in Florida elementary schools today.

The New York Times compared three versions of the company's Rosa Parks story, meant for first graders: a current lesson used now in Florida, an initial version created for the state textbook review and a second updated version.

Some of the material was provided by the Florida Freedom to Read Project, a progressive parent group that has fought book ban efforts in the state, and confirmed by The Times.

In the current lesson on Rosa Parks, segregation is clearly explained: "The law said African Americans had to give up their seats on the bus if a white person wanted to sit down."

But in the initial version created for the textbook review, race is mentioned indirectly.

"She was told to move to a different seat because of the color of her skin," the lesson said.





Rosa Parks

In 1955, Rosa Parks broke the law. In her city, the law said African Americans had to give up their seats on the bus if a white person wanted to sit down. She would not give up her seat. The police came and took her to jail.

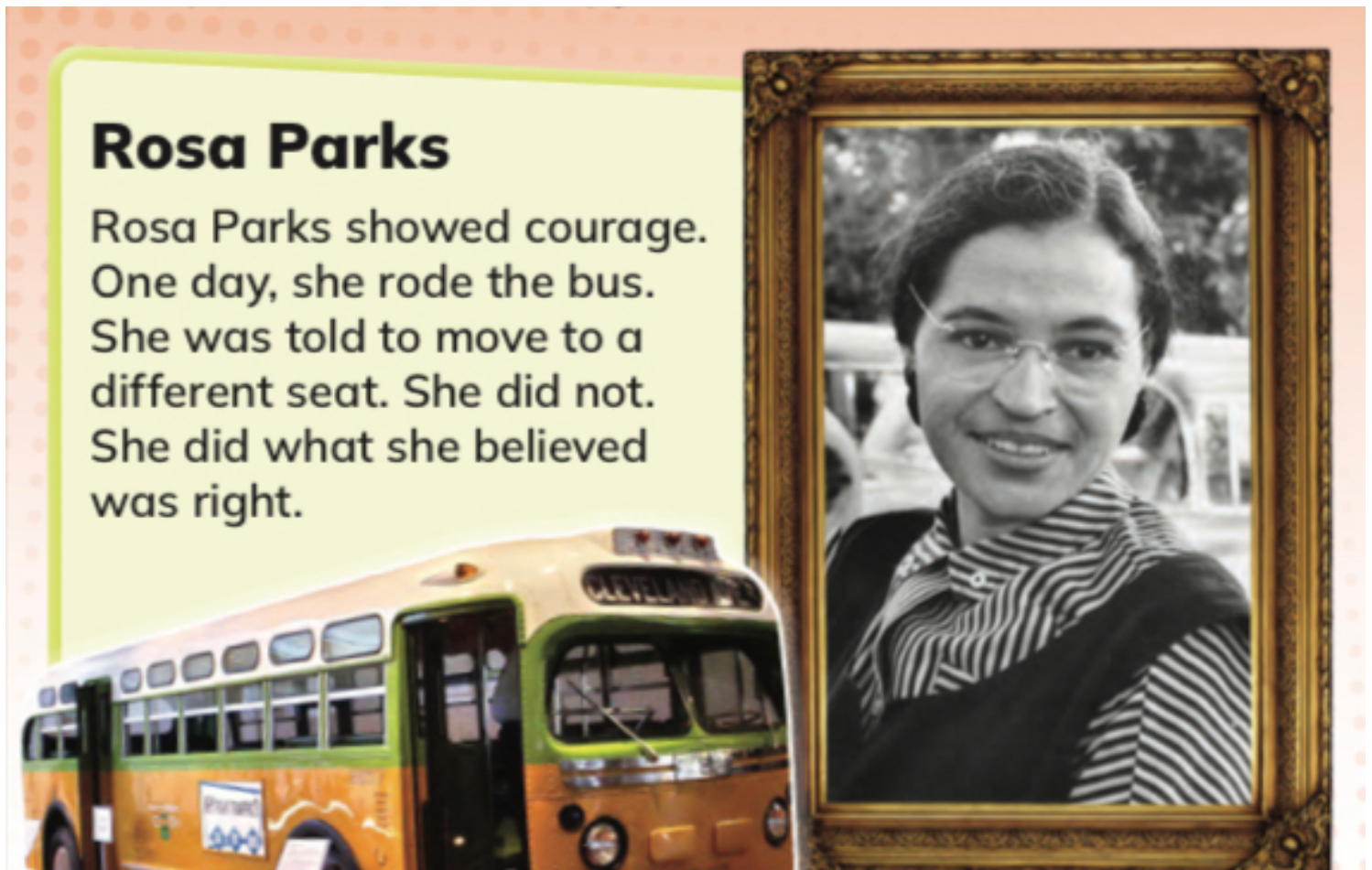
The current version of a Studies Weekly lesson on Rosa Parks uses the words "African Americans" and "white" to explain segregation law. Florida Freedom to Read to Project

Rosa Parks

Rosa Parks showed courage. One day, she rode the bus. She was told to move to a different seat because of the color of her skin. She did not. She did what she believed was right.



In the initial version for the review, Ms. Parks was told to move because of "the color of her skin." Florida Freedom to Read Project



In a second updated version, her story is told without mention of race or segregation law. Studies Weekly
In the updated version, race is not mentioned at all.

"She was told to move to a different seat," the lesson said, without an explanation of segregation.

It's unclear which of the new versions was officially submitted for review. The second version — which doesn't mention race — was available on the publisher's website until last week.

Studies Weekly made similar changes to a fourth-grade lesson about segregation laws that arose after the Civil War.

In the initial version for the textbook review, the text routinely refers to African Americans, explaining how they were affected by the laws. The second version eliminates nearly all direct mentions of race, saying that it was illegal for "men of certain groups" to be unemployed and that "certain groups of people" were prevented from serving on a jury.

Belief systems are deeply rooted in the way people and communities act. The communities in the former Confederate States had centuries-old belief systems. They believed African Americans should be enslaved. They believed African Americans were not equal to anyone in their community. They believed that Congress in Washington, D.C., didn't have the authority or knowledge to tell them how to run their communities or their businesses. These communities did everything they could to keep things the same as they were before the war.

Many states, including Florida, held conventions for their new constitutions but didn't invite any of the newly emancipated African Americans. In 1865, before the passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, the Florida legislature created laws that were biased against formerly enslaved people. Historically known as the "Black Codes," the laws enforced discrimination and segregation. **Discrimination** is the unfair treatment of people based on their race, age, gender, religion, abilities, or beliefs. **Segregation** is the forced separation of different groups of people in a country, state, or community based on race, age, gender,

"Black Codes" denied African Americans their basic civil rights in Florida. The laws made it a crime for African American men to be unemployed. If an African American man did not have a job, he could be fined a large amount of money or imprisoned. These laws also prevented African Americans from

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Florida attached qualification rules and fees at polling places that made voting participation more difficult for specific groups of people. Public buildings had

all schools, churches, and government buildings. The policy of "separate but equal" was supported by the Supreme Court until 1954.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/16/us/florida-textbooks-african-american-history.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

Segregation

Many states, including Florida, held conventions for their new state constitutions at the end of the Civil War as part of the process of officially rejoining the United States. However, they didn't invite any of the formerly enslaved people to be a part of the process. In part, this was because many communities in the South held on to former belief systems that some people should have more rights than others in their community.

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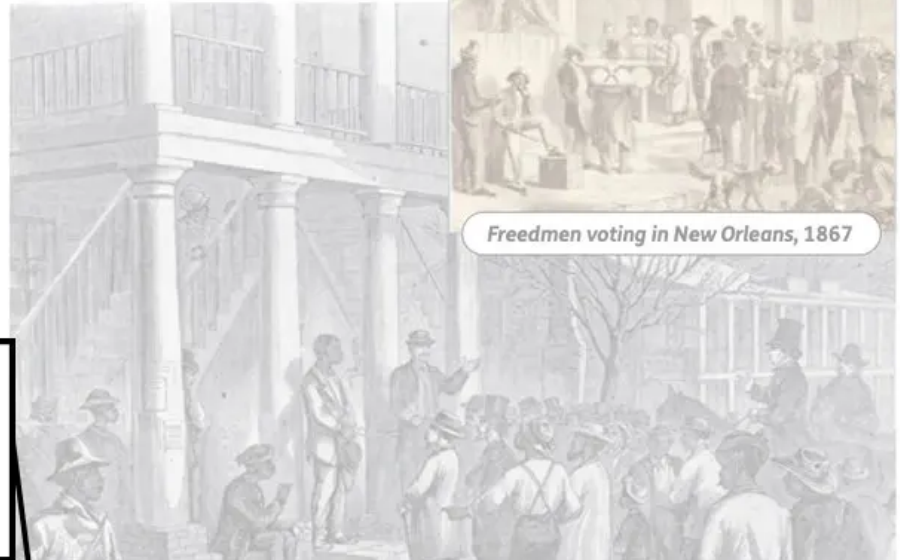
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laws were very strict. They even made it a crime for men of certain groups to be unemployed. If these men did not have a job, they could be fined a large amount of money or imprisoned.

These laws also prevented certain groups of people from serving on a jury. The 15th Amendment guaranteed

However, state and local governments in the South attached qualification rules and fees at polling places that made voting more difficult for specific



Freedmen voting in New Orleans, 1867

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A second version eliminated mention of "African Americans" and in some cases used the phrase "certain groups" as a stand-in. Studies Weekly

With these changes, it is unclear if Studies Weekly is an outlier, or if other publishers may also have curbed their materials.

The Florida Department of Education suggested that Studies Weekly had overreached. Any publisher that "avoids the topic of race when teaching the Civil Rights movement, slavery, segregation, etc. would not be adhering to Florida law," the department said in a statement.

But Studies Weekly said it was trying to follow Florida's standards, including the Stop W.O.K.E. Act.

"All publishers are expected to design a curriculum that aligns with" those requirements, John McCurdy, the company's chief executive, said in an email.

The company's curriculum is no longer under consideration by the state.

After questions from The Times, the company removed its second, scrubbed-down version of the curriculum from its website last week and said that it had withdrawn from the state's review.

The Florida Department of Education said it had already rejected the publisher, citing a bureaucratic snafu in the company's submission.

The company may still try to win over individual Florida districts. It has now gone back to its first version of the new curriculum — the one that says Rosa Parks was told to move her seat “because of the color of her skin.”

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