

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JULY 13, 2022

'Divisive' story of founder of public education

Virginia's public school system was born 152 years ago this month.

“Be it enacted by the General Assembly that there shall be established and maintained in this state a uniform system of public schools,” reads the act approved July 11, 1870. “The public free school system shall be administered by the following authorities, to wit: a Board of Education, a Superintendent of Public Instruction, county superintendents of schools, and district school trustees.”

The occasion provides an opportunity to revisit the story of Virginia's first superintendent of public instruction, William Henry Ruffner, who was also the architect of the public school system. The act passed by the General Assembly in 1870 was based upon his proposals.

Ruffner (1824–1908) has been called “the Horace Mann of the South,” a reference to the Massachusetts lawyer and legislator who was our young nation's first major advocate for public education. (It should be noted that he is not the only historical figure from the American South to bear that label. The “Horace Mann of Virginia” is perhaps more appropriate, and just about impossible to dispute.)

A Lexington native, pastor and educator whose life story intersects with Washington and Lee University, Virginia Tech, Longwood University in Farmville and Roanoke College in Salem, Ruffner campaigned fiercely for the maintenance and survival of free public school against critics who saw free schools as an unnecessary burden on the state's finances.

A supporter of the Union who nonetheless served in the home guard when Virginia seceded to become part of the Confederacy, Ruffner wasn't an example of enlightened thinking on the defining issue of his age, the ownership of enslaved persons. A slave owner himself, Ruffner contended that the institution of slavery needed to come to an end, but for economic reasons, not moral reasons. He was unfortunately a believer in the innate superiority of the white race and a proponent of “colonization” — a school of thought pushing the notion that free African Americans should emigrate to Africa rather than remain in the country.

Flawed champion of equal education

But unlike many of his white contemporaries, he believed free and enslaved Black Americans should be educated. He ran Sunday schools for African Americans in pre-Civil War Virginia, a practice at odds with the establishment, though he stated he was only providing oral instruction, as state law forbade that reading be taught to enslaved people.

His views might have been influenced by his father Henry Ruffner, who was once president of Washington College — now Washington and Lee — but resigned after stirring controversy by authoring a paper advocating for the gradual emancipation of slaves in western Virginia.

The public school system William Ruffner designed was segregated by race, which caused African American members of the General Assembly to vote against it in protest. Ruffner argued tensions would

run too high if schools were integrated, though he articulated a belief that someday there would be no prejudice between the races.

Though separate but equal ultimately proved a failure in practice, Ruffner at least had a goal of equal education for white and Black students, and he founded separate summer institutes for training white and Black teachers.

Ruffner was a tireless advocate for free public school, defending it constantly against critics who considered it a waste of state money and who disapproved of educating Black students. Though the General Assembly replaced Ruffner in 1882, the institution he created endured and evolved.

After a brief stint teaching at Roanoke College, Ruffner would end his career as principal of the State Female Normal School in Farmville, a teacher training school for white women created in 1884. Ruffner had long called for the establishment of such a school, though the General Assembly at first thwarted these ambitions. This Farmville school eventually became Longwood University.

Here is a historical figure with personal flaws and wrongheaded views whose legacy nonetheless persists with every Virginia school bus ride and with every raised hand in a Virginia grade school classroom, the fruits of his vision continuing to benefit the people of the commonwealth long after his death.

Is Ruffner's story 'divisive'?

In 2022, Virginia's superintendent of public instruction post is occupied by Jillian Balow, imported from Wyoming by Gov. Glenn Youngkin. Her main qualification appears to be a worldview compatible with Youngkin's pledge to end the teaching of "divisive concepts" — which in practice appears aimed to muzzle any discussion of race and discrimination past and present in Virginia classrooms.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative nonprofit dedicated to promoting educational excellence — that takes positions that align with Youngkin's, such as advocacy for charter schools — published a report in 2021, "The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History."

The report's introduction begins, "Is America a racist country? Or the greatest nation on earth? Or both or neither or some of each? For the sake of our children's education ... we need a more thoughtful and balanced starting point for the whole conversation — one that leaves space for nuance, mutual understanding, and hope for the future."

Nothing to argue with there. The nonpartisan report goes on to evaluate how K-12 standards for history and civics stack up in every state. Virginia received a B+ rating, which essentially amounts to "good but needs improvement in a few specific areas."

Wyoming, where Balow had served as Superintendent of Public Instruction since 2014, received an "F" in civics and history from this conservative think tank. "Wyoming's civics and U.S. History standards are inadequate, failing to offer even a basic outline of essential content," the report reads.

We hope this is not an omen. It would be a travesty to see Virginia's standards of education downgraded to appease ideological dogma, whether those dogmatic views come from right or left.

One can't help but wonder: what would this administration find acceptable should a teacher choose to share the multifaceted history of William Henry Ruffner in the classroom? Would students be allowed to consider the whole man?

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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Dodging discussions by removing books from school shelves

We have in our possession an item so potent that at least one Roanoke Valley school system has taken great pains to make sure no grade school student can idly get their hands on it and put themselves in danger.

We're referring, naturally, to the Stonewall Book Award winning children's picture book "When Aidan Became a Brother," written by Kyle Lukoff and illustrated by Kaylani Juanita.

Published in 2019, this very sweet, slender volume tells a straightforward story of a boy named Aidan whose parents are about to have a second child. Aidan wants to be a good older brother but worries he'll do something wrong, until he comes to the realization that he knows how to love and that should be enough.

A parent's complaint in November led to the removal of "When Aidan Became a Brother" from the Herman L. Horn Elementary School library. Though three Roanoke County school district librarians who reviewed the request ruled the book should remain in circulation, an appeals group composed of three community members overrode them, and now one can only read about Aidan and his family after checking the book out from the Horn Elementary guidance office.

The aspect that got Aidan's story placed in Roanoke County Public Schools guidance office jail is that Aidan is a transgender boy, accepted by his parents and his school friends.

Author Lukoff, a transgender man, worked as a school librarian before becoming a full-time writer.

In his author note at the back of the book, he explains that he wrote this story for kids who are transgender, or for any child who might in other ways feel like they don't fit in, that they might grow up to help create a world that supports and believes in them.

He dedicates the book "To those who came before me, to those who came up with me, and to those who will come up after me."

Disappearing books

The Publishers Weekly review states that "the creators' exploration of one transgender child's experience emphasizes the importance of learning 'how to love someone for exactly who they are.'" It's recommended for ages 5-8.

Hypothetically, it might well be understandable that some — not all, but some — parents might feel awkward explaining what "transgender" means to their elementary school-aged child if they hadn't been planning for that particular conversation.

The parents' complaint to Roanoke County schools, acquired by Roanoke Times reporter Sam Wall through a Virginia Freedom of Information Act request, carries that imagined concern to an extreme,

arguing that encountering this book unsupervised could "traumatize" a child, and that no books on this theme should be stocked elementary school libraries.

Roanoke County Public School officials have not confirmed whether the complaint against "Aidan" led to a proposed policy change for how books are added to the school's collection. The additional requirements for reviewing new books create what a retired school librarian described as an "unreasonable" workload ("Officials eye changes to library policy," May 29).

Even if the new Roanoke County policy isn't a direct result of that parental challenge, it doesn't take much brain strain to guess precisely what problem the school system is trying to head off at the pass.

Across the country, conservative activists have demanded the removal of LGBTQ-themed and race-themed books from library shelves, often working from shared lists. In a truly saddening development, school districts of their own volition have begun preemptively pulling targeted books before any angry complaints can be filed.

Popping bubbles

Hiding books won't keep children sealed tight in idea-proof bubbles. At the very least, the internet exists. Put blocks on it, kids know how to get around those. Even if the blocks are successful, there's always the old-fashioned way that controversial subjects spread: chatter from peers in school.

When it comes to transgender related-issues, at least, Lukoff's book could double as a tool for addressing the topic in a well-informed, healthy, positive manner, should a parent choose to do so.

Regarding campaigns to remove books from public libraries: Independent journalist Matt Taibbi notes the irony that the same conservatives who complain that their opinions are being silenced by the "woke left" are squandering an opportunity to seize the moral high ground on free speech.

In a recent essay with the blunt title "Democrats and Republicans have one thing in common: Both suck on free speech," Taibbi argues that Republicans, who in the past have embraced censorship campaigns, have great reasons to reverse course and set a better example.

"This script by all rights should have flipped once campuses, the executive ranks of internet companies, and federal agencies like Joe Biden's CDC began pushing increasingly draconian censorship concepts to 'deplatform' right-wing or conservative ideas," Taibbi writes. "Instead, having had years in the political wilderness to stew over the problem, the red response to new left censoriousness has often instead come via unoriginal and equally batty attempts at legislative bans."

Of course, it doesn't stop at legislative bans. Consider the case in Virginia Beach (May 23 editorial, "Virginia is for book censors?") in which two Republican politicians are seeking to use the courts to get a pair of books declared obscene so that restrictions can be placed on booksellers that carry them.

Those of a certain age who recall the eras of Satanic Panic and the Parents Music Resource Center know that nothing calls more attention to a creative work than a public censorship campaign.

For anybody out there who may have grown newly curious about "When Aidan Became a Brother," but who find themselves intimidated by the prospect of calling Horn Elementary to request the book from the guidance office, you're in luck. A Google search turns up dozens of videos of Lukoff and Juanita's book read aloud, sometimes in celebration of Pride Month — which is this month. Watching or sharing those videos could be a small way to join in the celebration.

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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Gov. Youngkin tramples rights of trans kids

With the release of a document meant to shred protections for transgender students in Virginia's public schools, Gov. Glenn Youngkin sheds the tattered remnants of his moderate Republican costume. Bearing a mouthful of a title, the "2022 Model Policies on the Privacy, Dignity, and Respect for All Students and Parents in Virginia's Public Schools" buries its real aim under often-repeated assertions of compassion for "all students," "all children."

These assertions nestle uneasily with the proposed definition of a "transgender student" as "a public school student whose parent has requested in writing, due to their child's persistent and sincere belief that his or her gender differs with his or her sex, that their child be so identified while at school."

If one chooses to believe in the concept of the multiverse, then maybe one can picture an alternate universe where any youth dealing with gender dysphoria (about 5% of young adults, according to the Pew Research Center) can casually raise the topic with their parents over dinner and expect a calm, patient, empathetic reaction. Maybe in that same alternate universe, that child's schoolmates would never, ever choose to shun or bully a classmate whose appearance or behavior doesn't conform to social norms.

That world, however, is not the one we live in.

Denial is no solution

According to a 2019 survey by GLSEN (founded in 1990 as the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teachers Network) 84% of transgender youth feel unsafe at school, to the point that their grades suffer, they're more likely to miss school out of fear for their safety and less likely to pursue college. According to Human Rights Campaign Foundation statistics from 2018, 73% of LGBTQ youth have been threatened verbally because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. More than 70% of those responding to the survey reported feelings of depression, worthlessness and hopelessness.

Those statistics, by the way, can be found in "Model Policies for the Treatment of Transgender Students in Virginia's Public Schools," the 2021 Virginia Department of Education document published during Gov. Ralph Northam's term that Youngkin and his appointees have tossed into the bonfire.

The 2021 model policy proposal, while not above reproach, clearly defines a problem — the reception of transgender students in schools that contributes to high rates of discrimination, harassment and suicide — and posits potential solutions.

Youngkin's version rejects all the proposed solutions and denies a problem exists.

The new document declares that the 2021 model policies are an expression of a "particular ideological belief," the "belief that gender is a matter of personal choice or subjective experience, not sex. Many

Virginians reject this belief.” There’s no further explanation for whom these “many Virginians” are, beyond a hint that Northam’s 2021 model policies “may be contrary to their personal religious beliefs.”

The phrasing makes advocacy for LGBTQ rights sound like a minority religion, one the 2022 policy wants to hide in the closet to appease a majority religion’s members.

Hoping for litigation?

Regarding the question of whether or not staff members and fellow students should use the pronouns requested by youth whose sense of gender identity does not match with their biological sex — a matter over which much hay has been made for political gain but which in practice amounts to at most a tiny, harmless inconvenience — Youngkin declares no such thing will happen unless the child’s parents have demanded it in writing.

The reality of school is that teachers and staff can find themselves in the role of counselor when a student is dealing with a difficult personal problem, whatever that problem may be. Should that problem be gender dysphoria, the 2022 document would require school staff to immediately notify parents. There’s no room left for determining whether such an action will result in abuse or estrangement.

The real goal, it seems, would be to make sure any teen who finds themselves coping with this particular issue will be too terrified of the consequences to ever bring it up.

This new document will go into effect after a period of public comment, and should it do so unchanged, it’s likely to face legal challenges. Those who crafted this policy might be counting on that reaction.

As Youngkin’s policy would have it, a transgender boy or girl could only use the restroom that matches the biological sex they were born with. Regardless of what one’s opinion on this particular controversy might be, the law of the nation in fact is that a student has the right to use a restroom that matches that student’s preferred gender.

That legal determination exists as the result of a federal court case tried in Virginia, Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that transgender students must be allowed to use the restroom that matches their gender, and in 2021 the U.S. Supreme Court declined to take the case, letting the lower court’s ruling stand.

Social conservatives like Youngkin might well be hoping for a do-over.

Risks for job creation

But would that be worth the potential harm to Virginia’s economic development prospects, especially as we compete for high tech jobs to reenergize the very rural communities that helped alley oop Youngkin into office?

Consider that 289 companies have signed the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s “Business Statement Opposing Anti-LGBTQ State Legislation” in protest of policies that “isolate transgender youth” and “make schools less safe and inclusive for LGBTQ young people.”

What gets Youngkin favorable coverage on Fox News might risk sacrificing high-paying jobs for his supporters on the altar of political ambition.

To respect all Virginians is to acknowledge that Virginia isn’t just for lovers of culture wars.

