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FROM CONTENTIOUS POLITICAL TIMES TO AN AUTHORITARIAN ASSAULT: SITUATING TEACHERS' WORK AMIDST AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

DENISHA JONES

DEFENDING THE EARLY YEARS

When we issued our call for this special issue on Teachers' Work in Contentious Political Times in February 2024, we understood the precarious situation facing educators. Still, we did not realize how quickly ideological political battles would give way to the outright dismantling of public education. Within days of taking office, the current administration issued an executive order demanding an end to "radical indoctrination in K -12 schooling" by threatening to withhold federal funds (United States Government, 2025). Building upon their previous attempts to upend the summer of 2020 uprising for racial justice, the office of the president immediately set to work weaponizing the federal government to enact Project 2025. Created by the Heritage Foundation and other conservative organizations, this policy agenda clearly articulated a plan to shutter the Department of Education and replace various equity programs like Title I with block grants to states to increase vouchers and charter schools (American Oversight, 2025). Another executive order issued the same day paved the way by redirecting federal funds to these education privatization initiatives under the guise of "expanding educational freedom and opportunities for families" (United States Government, 2025b).

A few weeks later, another executive order called for closing the US Department of Education and returning education authority to the states (United States Government, 2025c). Though the power to shutter this office remains in the hands of Congress, the new Secretary of Education committed to honoring the wishes of the administration, began taking the necessary steps by firing half of the department's staff and gutting programs like the Institute of Education Sciences and the office of Civil Rights Data (Binkley & Megerian, 2025). Even if Congress is able to prevent the closing of the Department of Education, the cuts to various programs and transferring of various functions to other federal agencies while ensure that office is unable to do its job—"enforcing federal statutes prohibiting discrimination and ensuring every student has access to an education that will help them reach their full potential" (Walker, 2025).

Another attempt to silence the growing movement of student protest to the genocide in Gaza came from an executive order that paved the way for immigration customs and enforcement (ICE) to surveil, detain, and attempt to deport legal permanent residents who engaged in college protests (United States Government, 2025d). Framed as a means of addressing antisemitism on college campuses and eliminating radical support for terrorist organizations, this order makes clear the administration's authoritarian attempt to punish free speech (Giroux, 2025). The State Department has revoked at least 300 visas, leading ICE to detain several college students, while others fled after reports that ICE was searching for them (Jeyaretnam, 2025).

In under three months, the office of the President has made it clear that attacking education is part of a larger strategy to dismantle the federal government and replace it with a corporate-led authoritarian state. "This is the logic of authoritarianism: to hollow out democratic institutions and replace education with white Christian propaganda and a pedagogy of repression. At issue here is an attempt to render an entire generation defenseless

against the very focus seeking to dominate them” (Giroux, 2025, para 5). What began during the first administration through attempts in various states to ban CRT, “divisive concepts”, gender equity, and support for LGBTQ students, is now being institutionalized at the federal level. The previous reports of a chilling effect (American Oversight, 2025; Hagopian, 2025) as teachers in states where vague laws combined with severe penalties left them afraid to teach accurate history was the canary in the coal mine. Today, teachers find themselves working in dangerous times as their attempts to engender critical thinking and civic responsibility can be deemed illegal, costing them their livelihood and possibly their freedom.

During times like this, we must learn from the past because although this current assault on democratic education may feel novel to some, educators in the past faced similar situations. In fact, some argue that the history of Black education in the United States is the development of fugitive pedagogical practices that allowed Black educators to subvert the demands of white supremacist school leaders while instilling Black history and pride in their students (Givens, 2021). The pursuit of education for those legally denied the right to read while forcefully held in bondage led to fugitive practices that continued even when schooling was offered through unequal segregation. Givens (2021) documented the fugitive pedagogical practices of educators who refused to submit to an institution of schooling that sought to instill self-hatred and loathing in the minds of Black students. Many Black educators took covert actions to mask their use of pro-Black curriculum materials when under the surveillance of white administrators. Others secretly joined Black movements to promote Black history and worked tirelessly to ensure their students learned an accurate portrait of their ancestors. Some worked to develop new scripts of knowledge to supplement the official anti-Black curriculum with narratives that critiqued the system and provided new curriculum materials, including textbooks (Givens, 2021). Others participated in political movements to secure rights for Black people, risking their right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

These and other examples of how educators resisted political movements that sought to suppress their ability to engage in social justice education (see Hagopian, 2025) provide a critical lens to situate teachers’ work in the current moment. Despite the threats, real and imagined, educators have refused to submit to authoritarian demands. In this special issue, we include articles that document various aspects of teachers’ work during this current political moment. Through organizing social movements, engaging in legislative and policy analysis, documenting teacher experiences, and exploring alternative pedagogical and teaching practices, educators provide a glimpse into how they respond to threats of rising fascism and attacks on marginalized communities. We present these critical narratives in an effort to disrupt and expose the status quo that seeks to silence and disappear those who threaten a repressive new world order. We invite you to learn from this collection of critical research and examples of contemporary fugitive pedagogues with the hopes that this tool will aid in your efforts to resist the attacks and build an anti-oppressive future.

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AUTHOR

Dr. Denisha Jones joined the Defending the Early Years Advisory Board in 2014 and worked as the Director of Early Childhood Organizing and Co-Director before becoming the Executive Director in 2022. She has a B.S. in Early Childhood Education and a Certificate in Nonprofit Leadership from the University of the District of Columbia, a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from Indiana University, and a J.D. from the University of the District of Columbia. Denisha is an adjunct faculty member in the Art of Teaching Program at Sarah Lawrence College and the School of Education Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Howard University. Her research interests include organizing activist research projects that examine grassroots movements to achieve racial justice in education, documenting the value of play as a tool for liberation with an emphasis on global approaches to play, and collaborating with parents and educators to foster positive racial, ethnic, and cultural identity development in the early years. Her first co-edited book, *Black Lives Matter at School: An Uprising for Educational Justice*, was published in 2020 by Haymarket Books.