

Chapter 1

A Call to All Political Educators: Co-Creating Home to Sustain and Nurture Social Justice-Minded Teachers in This Moment

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ABSTRACT

The contexts within which social justice-minded public school teachers (SJST) work in the United States have always been replete with harm and healing. This is because SJST see their role as vital to the work of shifting localized material realities as well as engaging broader movements to bring about liberation, democracy, and radical reimagination. 2023 has certainly continued this dialectic: several bans on education are targeting marginalized communities. What impact does this have on SJST, who already have a complicated and passionate relationship with their calling as educators? How can comrades and accomplices outside of the institution respond to this impact? Because of its position outside of the K-12 institution, the identity and role of a political educator has allowed me to co-create spaces of home, hope, and healing for SJST that can strengthen responses in this hostile educational context. Implications of this work are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The political, social, and cultural contexts within which social justice-minded public school teachers (SJST) work in the United States have always been replete with harm and healing. This is because SJST often see their roles as vital to the work of shifting localized material realities as well as engaging broader movements to bring about liberation, democracy, and radical reimagination. 2023 has certainly continued this dialectic: there are 86 educational gag orders introduced as of February 14th; these bans target marginalized communities. What impact does this have on SJST, who already have a complicated and passionate relationship with their calling as educators? How can comrades and accomplices *outside of* the institution respond to this impact? In this article, I speculate on some of the answers to these questions. I reflect on my transition from being a public school teacher to becoming a political educator with the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) and the Institute for Teachers of Color (ITOC). Because of its position outside of the K-12 institution, the identity and role of a political educator have allowed me to co-create spaces of home, hope, and healing for SJST that can strengthen responses to this hostile educational context. Implications of this work are discussed.

The current political, social, and cultural contexts are hostile towards social justice-minded school teachers (SJST). In the past two years, legislators have passed 54 separate bills targeting discussions of race, racism, gender, sexual orientation, and other topics in varying academic and school contexts ([PEN America](#)). In Texas, the Relating to Public Education Bill Act, S. 8, (2023) prohibits public K-12 schools from providing any “instruction, guidance, activities, or programming” regarding sexual orientation or gender identity to students in grades K-12. In New Jersey, the Concerning the Teaching of Critical Race Theory Act, S. 2685 (2023) prohibits K-12 public schools from promoting or using materials that uplift “concepts related to critical race theory”; if passed, this bill will also establish a hotline for parents to notify the state of any use of critical race theory.

The PEN America report identifies the following four unique factors that unite these bills: (1) an effort to impose censorship; (2) a “foreseeable chilling effect” on the self-efficacy, agency, and power of educators and trainers, even as the bills seemingly allow for some degree of free expression; (3) intentional mischaracterization of how intellectual frameworks are taught and experienced by people in classrooms; and (4) contradictory and vague language that purports to uphold free speech in the interest of fortifying the bills themselves.

Where does this leave the SJST, who often see their work as implicated in shifting localized material realities as well as engaging in broader movements towards liberation, democracy, and radical reimagination? Specifically, what does this mean for the teacher who understands the ways in which her students’ exploration of their

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