Opinion
Guest Voices



In a 2016 file photo, students at Don Bosco Cristo Rey High School in Takoma Park, Maryland, participate in a classroom exercise. (OSV News/CNS file/Catholic Standard/Jaclyn Lippelmann)



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Another academic year has begun. In many parts of the country elementary, middle and high school students have already returned to class. Most colleges and universities are also now welcoming students back to campus. So, as students, parents and educators are preparing for the academic year ahead and adjusting expectations, it seems like a good time to remember that education is supposed to be discomfiting.

I have been thinking about this fundamental characteristic of learning lately because the landscape and perceptions of education in this country continue to shift and, depending on which state you consider, they are shifting for the worse.

Take the state of Florida, for example.

Last year, Gov. Ron DeSantis, currently seeking to be the presidential candidate for the Republican Party, signed into law legislation that severely restricts how educators can teach and discuss issues related to race, gender and history. According to The Washington Post, the legislation in Florida "would allow parents to sue a school if any instruction caused students 'discomfort, guilt or anguish.' "

DeSantis has not shied away from prioritizing culture-war issues in his legislative agenda and presidential campaign, and has continually emphasized that his so-called "anti-woke" efforts seek to protect children and parental rights.

However, as many people have already pointed out, what is really going on is an effort to prevent the authentic presentation of challenging subject matter in the classroom under the guise of "protecting" students — especially white students — from feeling discomfort, concern, guilt or any other reaction to admittedly difficult, painful and complex facts in history and in the present.

As columnist Eugene Robinson noted earlier this year, this avoidance and even erasure of what we might call the "dangerous memories" of our collective past serves to bolster white supremacy and shield white children and adults from troubling but true and important realities.

Robinson also observed that this trend to protect white comfort is becoming a requisite position among some on the political right. He wrote, "It is becoming a MAGA article of faith that the nation's story must be told without causing any White people discomfort — and without any acknowledgment that our country's past has shaped its present."

This point was also emphasized by Robinson's Washington Post colleague Jonathan Capehart in a column last year that asked the important question: "What about Black students' 'discomfort'?"

Capehart noted, "That protection from 'discomfort,' of course, is a one-way street accessible only to White students. What about the unease Black students feel learning history that is sanitized or just plain incorrect?"

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It is obvious to anyone who has eyes to see, ears to hear and a brain to think that the legislation in Florida, and similar laws in dozens of other states, is really only about silencing truth, protecting white fragility, and further disenfranchising those who have been historically marginalized and harmed by structures of systemic racism and white supremacy in this country.

But even if that weren't the case and these laws and efforts were actually intended to protect students from discomfort, they would still be wrong.

Those of us who have dedicated our lives to education understand the inherently discomfiting nature of education. To learn something is to obtain knowledge about something one previously did not know. Therefore, it should not be surprising that the process of education is an essentially discomfiting experience because when you learn something, you either a) unwittingly expose your ignorance, if only to yourself, as you gain new knowledge or b) must relearn something you thought you knew but now realize was incorrect or inaccurate. Both circumstances require humility and patience, an openness to being challenged and the wherewithal to endure what is sure to be an uncomfortable experience at times.

Art Markman, a psychologist writing last year in Psychology Today, explained:

> Learning new things often requires some amount of discomfort. It can be frustrating to be really bad at something when you are first acquiring a skill. You may feel lost when encountering topics you know nothing about. On top of that, confronting information that contradicts deeply-held beliefs can also make you feel bad.

This is not to suggest that learning is always a *negative* experience or something bad just because it often involves the uncomfortable. On the contrary, like Markman's example of an athlete who must train to improve at their sport and, as a result, is often sore and uncomfortable, a student — a child, teen or adult learner — will inevitably feel uncomfortable as they acquire new knowledge and relearn wrong assumptions or false information.

As Peter Bregman wrote in a 2019 Harvard Business Journal article, "While the *act* of learning is primarily intellectual, behavioral, or methodological, the *experience* of learning is primarily emotional. And it's the emotional experience of learning — of being a beginner and making mistakes, often publicly — that often keeps people from even trying to learn."

We already have an ingrained bias to avoid uncomfortable situations and feelings, which makes learning something new — at whatever level — challenging enough. But when you consider the increasingly politicized efforts to discourage already difficult attempts at authentic learning, the experience of real education can seem nearly impossible today, at least in some parts of this country. Add to this dynamic the toll that such legislative efforts and cultural biases is having on teachers, which is affecting morale and increasing fear among educators, and the problem only grows.

Instead of running away from the discomfort and difficult subjects necessary to be a well-educated citizen, moral person and good community member, what if we sought out those challenging educational opportunities on purpose? What if instead of legislating that students shouldn't be made to learn about difficult historical truths because they might at times feel uncomfortable, we instead encouraged our students to face hard truths, examine their own behaviors and worldviews, learn from experiences and outlooks different from their own, and courageously risk stepping outside their comfort zones to really learn about the world?

Recently, some researchers, such as Kaitlin Woolley and Ayelet Fishbach, have been exploring some overlooked benefits of actively seeking out experiences of discomfort as a sign of self-growth and intellectual development. Within the Christian spiritual tradition we also know how important it is to recognize the value of voluntarily seeking discomfiting situations, from physical discomfort through forms spiritual or ascetical practices such as fasting, to intellectual discomfort through forms of ongoing spiritual conversion and self-reflection.

The efforts underway in state legislatures to silence the teaching of historical facts and hard truths in our schools are dangerous and need to be stopped. But if we have one positive takeaway from this otherwise atrocious trend, perhaps it's the opportunity to be reminded that authentic education and genuine learning is almost always uncomfortable. And whether the final result is knowing mathematical fractions better or knowing the history of slavery in America better or knowing God better, we should not shy away from lifelong learning, even when it might feel uncomfortable.