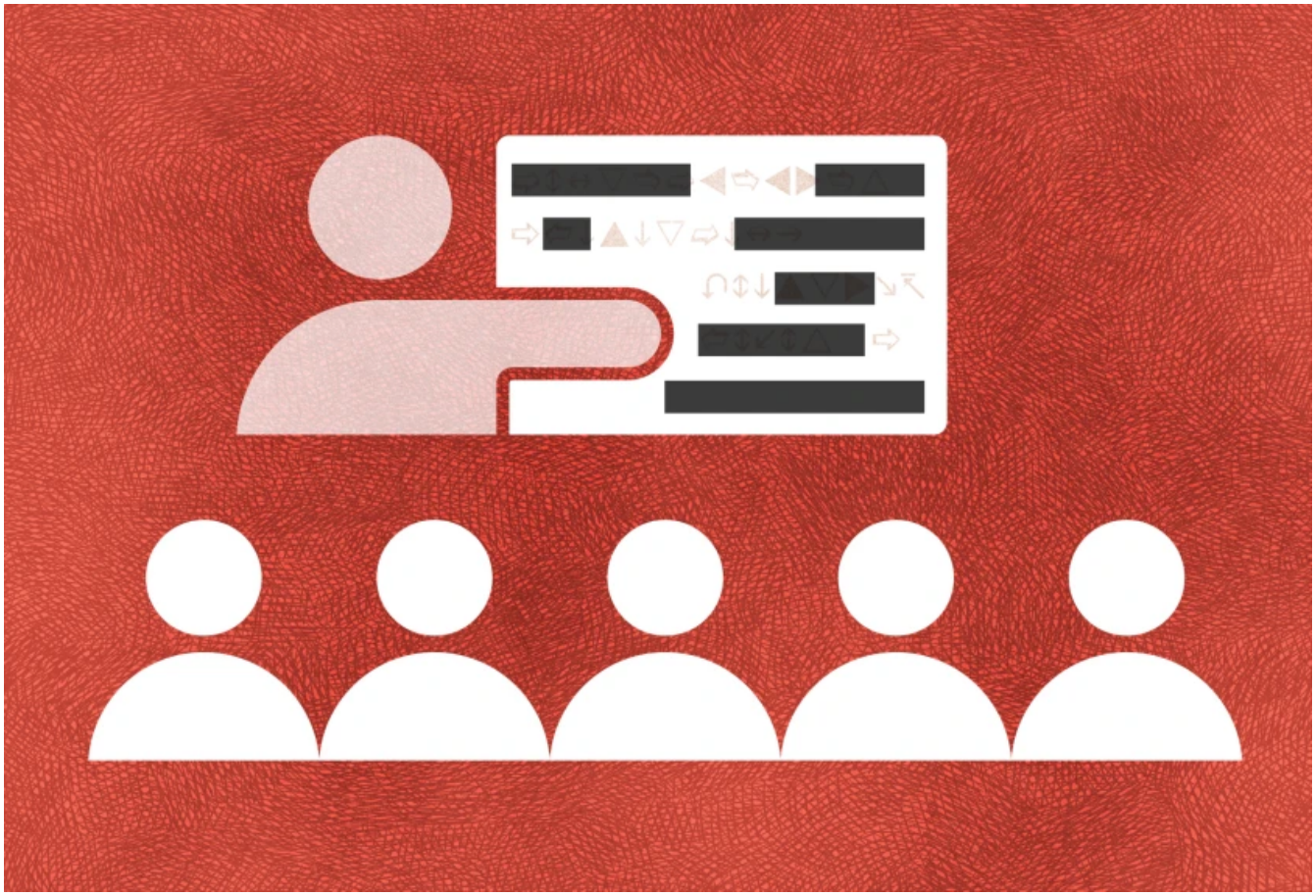
TEACHING OPINION

Students Aren't Being Indoctrinated. The Real Problem Is Mistrust of Teachers

Teachers are pulling back from important classroom debates

By Ken Futernick — November 14, 2025 5 min read



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Ken Futernick

Ken Futernick is a professor emeritus at California State University, Sacramento; a member of the El Dorado County, Calif., school board; and the host of the podcast, Courageous Conversations About Our Schools

In 2021, a Tennessee high school teacher named Matthew Hawn was fired after assigning readings about white privilege and discussing race in his class—topics some parents said violated the state's new rules against teaching "divisive concepts." Last December, a court reinstated him, ruling that his dismissal was improper.

The case quickly became a national flashpoint. Critics accused Hawn of indoctrination; supporters warned that his firing would chill honest classroom discussion. His story highlights a question at the heart of today's education debates: *What does it really mean to teach students how to think, rather than what to think?*

That question isn't new. Anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote, "Children must be taught how to think, not what to think." Albert Einstein echoed the idea: "Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think." Martin Luther King Jr. added, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically."

Yet, the fear that teachers are failing to heed this timeless advice has resurfaced with growing intensity—amplified by right-leaning groups such as Moms for Liberty and echoed at the highest levels of government.

Just nine days after President Donald Trump was sworn in for his second term, he issued an executive order declaring that "parents have witnessed schools indoctrinate their children in radical, anti-American ideologies." The order authorized the federal government to impose sanctions on educators it deemed in violation, and several states have followed suit. In 2024, for example, Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita established Eyes on Education, a portal allowing students, parents, and

educators to submit reports of curricula, programs, or policies they find objectionable. "Our kids need to focus on fundamental educational building blocks, not political ideology—either left or right," Rokita wrote.

Accusations of indoctrination sound urgent, but they rest on two faulty assumptions:

1. The false divide between knowledge and indoctrination

The first mistake is the belief that teaching "what to think" is always wrong. In reality, good education involves both imparting established knowledge and engaging students in unsettled debate.

Teaching students *what to think* begins each morning when they recite the Pledge of Allegiance. The ritual reminds them that loyalty to our country—and to its promise of "liberty and justice for all"—is something to be valued. Much of the rest of the school day is also devoted to conveying what society already knows to be true. A 5th grader must understand that a 10% increase is not the same as an increase of 10 percentage points. Kindergartners must begin learning that basic kindness and respect for others are nonnegotiable expectations.

But there are times when teachers should *not* tell students what to think—when claims are unsettled and reasonable disagreement exists. These moments, though rarer than critics suggest, are among the most valuable in education.

- Teachers at almost any level might ask students to think about the pledge and the meaning of words like "liberty" and "justice."
- A social studies teacher might ask students to study and respectfully debate their views about curtailing violence in schools.
- A science teacher might invite students to examine evidence on how much humans contribute to global warming.
- A middle school teacher might lead a conversation on the best ways to respond to

bullying.

Telling students what to think about unsettled issues is wrong pedagogically and, often, morally. Pushing them to adopt one's own beliefs prevents them from thinking for themselves—and meets the very definition of indoctrination.

Of course, people will disagree about what counts as "settled." The safest and most principled approach for teachers is to err on the side of recognizing reasonable alternatives when they engage contested topics. That's how students learn to think critically, and it avoids the possibility and the perception of teacher bias.

2. The myth of mass indoctrination

The second mistake is assuming that widespread indoctrination is actually happening. For all the inflammatory anecdotes, there is little credible evidence that large numbers of educators are systematically pushing personal political agendas. Indeed, this was a key finding of a 2024 study conducted by the American Historical Association of secondary history classrooms in the nation's public schools. In a 2025 study from Brown University's Annenberg Institute, researchers surveying American high school students concluded that while "some so-called divisive topics make their way into classrooms ... the nation is not experiencing an epidemic of widespread indoctrination from the teacher workforce."

The far greater danger is self-censorship. Fearing backlash or career consequences, many teachers now avoid important, complex subjects that students should be exploring. According to teachers' union leaders in Indiana, the Eyes on Education portal is contributing to an atmosphere of fear among educators. In a national survey conducted before the 2024 presidential election, most teachers said they would not discuss the election at all. How can young people learn about democracy if their teachers are afraid to talk about elections?

This atmosphere of fear among some parents helps explain the rise in home schooling and the growing perception among teachers that the public views them negatively—sentiments driving many from the profession at a time when schools already face severe shortages.

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The real crisis in American education isn't that teachers are succeeding at indoctrination; it's that the accusation of indoctrination is succeeding at generating fear. That fear drives good teachers out of the classroom, silences open discussion, and erodes public trust in one of democracy's basic institutions.

The good news is that there is much teachers can do to reduce fear and build trust. Most importantly, they can communicate regularly with students and parents about their curricula, making it clear when they are teaching established knowledge and when they are inviting healthy debate. They can also uphold norms that ensure students feel safe sharing divergent perspectives on unsettled matters. Pundits and policymakers would be wise to reserve judgment before making unfounded accusations of educational malpractice.

If we truly want students to learn how to think, we must first trust the people we ask to teach them.