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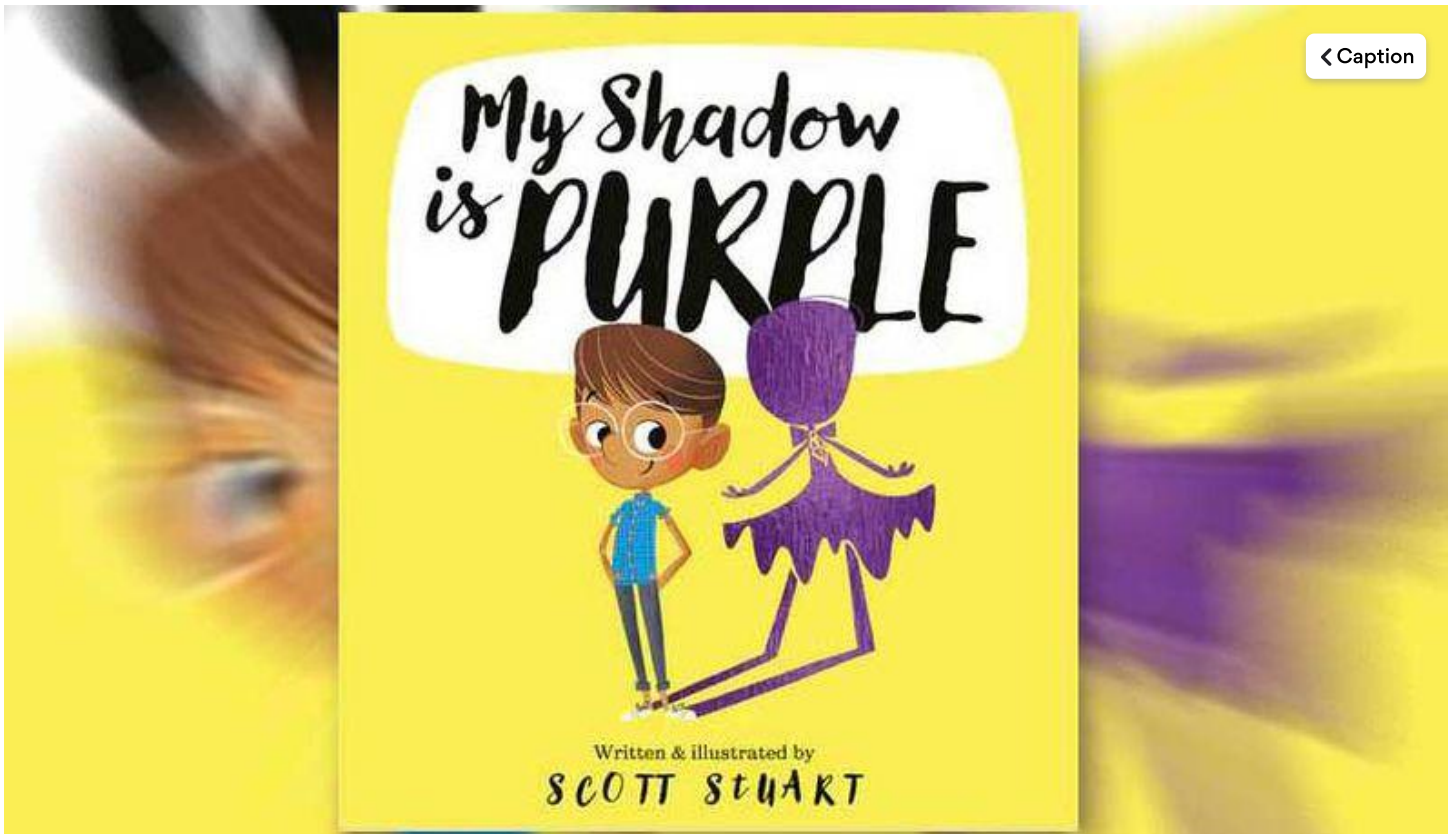
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Opinion: Cobb teacher facing firing shows culture war siege of classrooms



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By Maureen Downey

July 10, 2023



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The Cobb County School District has a history of capitulating to noisy extremists, most notably in 2002 when the administration appeased anti-evolution zealots by putting stickers

on 35,000 science texts proclaiming that evolution is “a theory, not a fact ... This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.”

So, it's no surprise the first educator facing termination for violating Georgia's vague and politically motivated 2022 divisive concept law teaches in Cobb. Gifted teacher Katie Rinderle's transgression was reading “My Shadow Is Purple,” a rhyming book that challenges gender stereotypes, to a fifth grade class.

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Her suspension followed a complaint from a parent who felt lines in the book — “My shadow loves playing with all sorts of toys/things loved by girls and things loved by boys” — promoted LGBTQ concepts that were “divisive.”



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On the crowd-sourced book review site Goodreads, “My Shadow Is Purple” draws unanimous praise for its illustrations, charm and positive message that not everyone conforms to traditional expectations. “This book could be read at the beginning of the school year to give students a pep talk about being individuals and not forcing themselves to fit into anyone’s life,” wrote a reviewer.

Rinderle faces a termination tribunal on Aug. 3, a reprisal by the Cobb district that is generating criticisms. Australian Scott Stuart, the author of “My Shadow Is Purple,” used social

media to lament that Rinderle’s case shows “how much more interested the school system in the U.S. is in playing politics than they are in educating kids. It’s gross. It’s disgusting.”

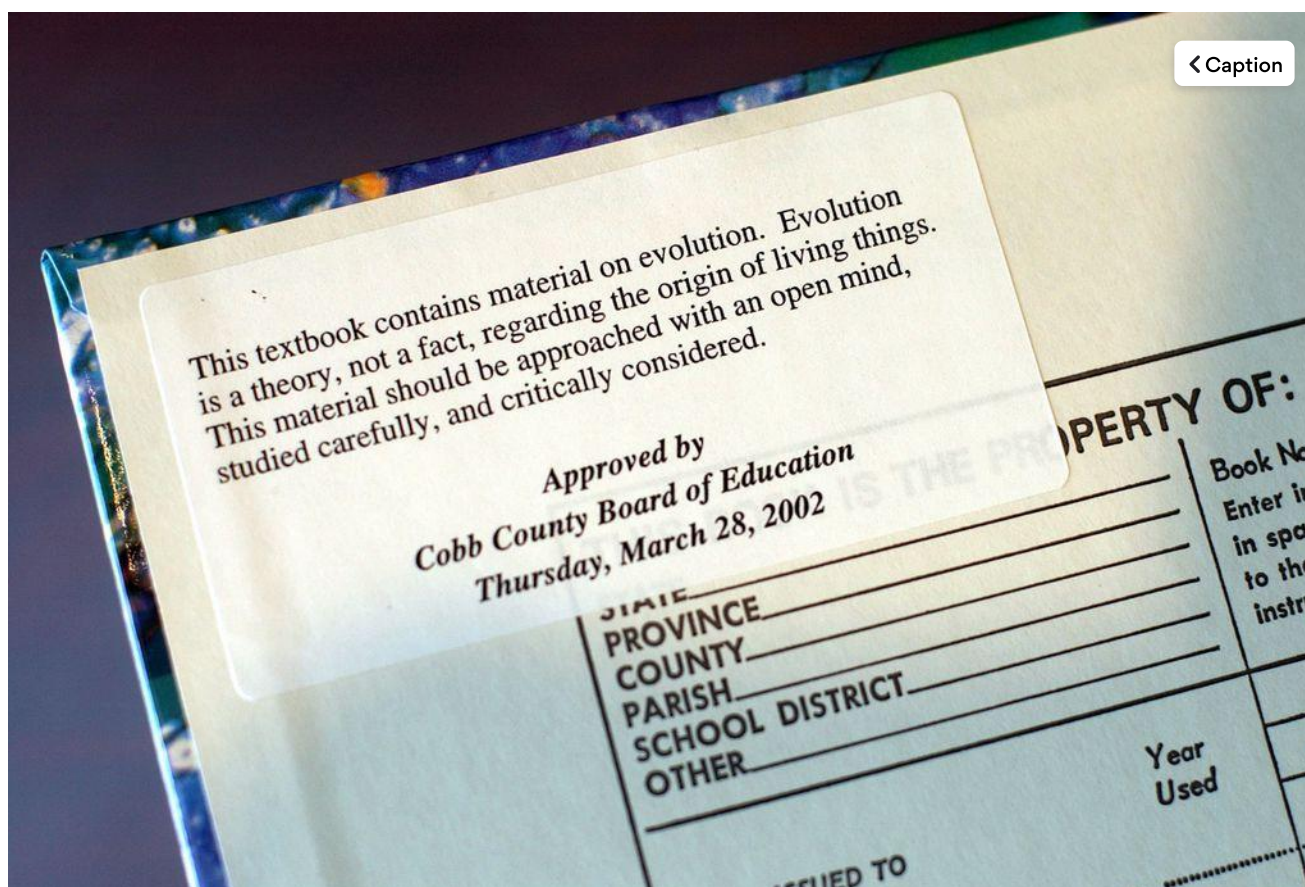
As usual, Cobb is defending its actions. It stood by the anti-evolution stickers despite a court ruling deeming the labels unconstitutional and ordering their removal. The district even brushed off the concerns of the National Academy of Sciences, a nonprofit society of distinguished scholars chartered by Congress to advise the federal government on scientific and technical matters that counts 80 Nobel Prize winners in its ranks.

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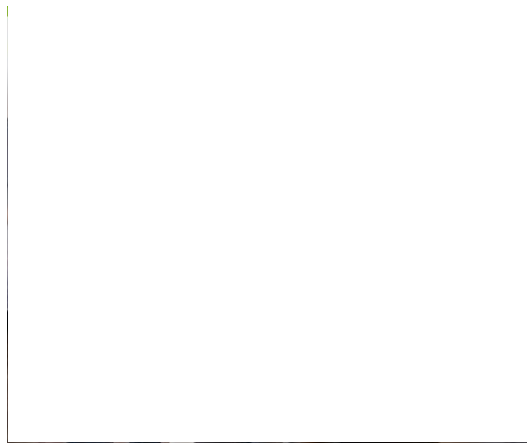
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Credit: AJC

It took a lawsuit by mortified Cobb parents who didn’t want biology class turned into Bible study to finally compel the district in 2006 to agree that it would not take out or edit materials on evolution in textbooks and would pay the parents’ legal fees.

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The Cobb County School District seems to succeed academically in spite of its [clumsy](#) and [regressive leadership](#). That has a lot to do with the education-minded families who move to Cobb for its schools and the dedicated teachers who work there.

But teacher groups contend the consequences hanging over Rinderle may dissuade other teachers from considering jobs in the county, fearing their careers could hinge on the outrage of a parent or two. Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, said the divisive concepts and [parents' bill of rights](#) laws recast teachers as adversaries.

“These bills have taken the parent-teacher collaboration out of the equation,” said Morgan. “We have an adversarial process now, and teachers are automatically second-guessing themselves for anything that a parent might find objectionable. As we are seeing, even a single complaint by a single parent can harm an educator’s career.”

(I have to note that it is frustrating to see school districts dismiss hundreds of parents protesting sexist dress codes or decrepit classrooms, yet leap into action to vilify a teacher after hearing from a handful of parents in these orchestrated culture war campaigns.)

Last week, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona warned that teachers in America were under siege and went from pandemic to persecution in a growing culture of toxic disrespect. “I keep hearing talk about a teacher shortage issue,” he said. “Are we going to talk about the national teacher respect issue?”

[Addressing](#) the 2023 National Education Representative Assembly in Orlando, Florida, Cardona said, “That disrespect comes from so-called leaders that complain about public education, but sleep well at night knowing their teachers are making less than [\\$40,000 a year](#) ... from those who want to privatize education and starve public schools from the resources they need ... from those seeking to divide our nation by politicizing equity and inclusion. There is a toxic disrespect from demagogues who attack the safety and belonging of LGBTQIA+ students and students of color, banning books and whitewashing our history.”

That disrespect for educators took center stage at the Moms for Liberty summit in Philadelphia last week where former President Donald Trump attempted to outdo the anti-education

rhetoric of his chief rival for the 2024 GOP nomination, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis. Trump told an audience of 650 that he would “liberate our children from Marxist lunatics and perverts who have infested our educational system.”

About the Author



Maureen Downey



Maureen Downey has written editorials and opinion pieces about local, state and federal education policy since the 1990s.

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