

# New Georgia teacher prep rules scrap 'diversity,' other 'woke' words

by Dave Williams | Aug 11, 2023 | Capitol Beat News Service



ATLANTA – Legal limits on how Georgia teachers can approach potentially divisive subjects are spreading from elementary and secondary school classrooms to university lecture halls.

Controversial changes to rules for teacher training the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC) adopted in recent months take effect Aug. 15. The new rules delete words including “diversity,” “equity” and “inclusion,”

and replace them with phrases including “fair access, opportunity, and advancement for all students.”

Those required changes in nomenclature also are tucked into broader legislation the Republican-controlled General Assembly passed last year prohibiting the teaching of “divisive concepts” in Georgia elementary and secondary schools. At the time, legislative Democrats, teachers, and civil rights advocates argued the restrictions would prevent teaching students the full reality of Georgia and U.S. history, both the good and the bad.

The new rules are sowing confusion among teachers, said Sarah Hunt Blackwell, First Amendment policy advocate for the Georgia chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

“Educators don’t know what they can and can’t say,” she said. “It’s a continuation of the divisive concepts bill.”

But supporters say the changes were adopted in an effort to avoid confusion.

Brian Sirmans, the commission’s chairman, said the University System of Georgia (USG) asked for the new rules to clarify expectations for incoming teachers. The words the commission voted unanimously to delete from teacher preparation standards have come to mean different things to different people in recent years, which has made interpreting them difficult, Sirmans said he was told by university system officials.

The changes are not aimed at reducing educational opportunities for minority students in Georgia, Sirmans told his commission colleagues before a vote in June.

“We still expect to prepare educators who are well prepared to meet the needs of all of the students they encounter,” he said.

The university system, in a statement issued Thursday, said the new rules came about after the system asked the commission for improvements in

literacy education and in what's required of teacher education programs on how to teach children to read.

"The proposed changes are the result of USG and PSC working together to review and revise rules for teacher preparation based on research-based practices that have been demonstrated to work best in teaching reading," the statement read. "USG teacher preparation programs will follow these rules as updated and approved by the PSC."

But critics say Georgia's new rules are part of a multi-state effort by conservative Republicans aimed at "woke" policies in education, including the "Don't Say Gay" bill Florida lawmakers passed last year prohibiting discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in the schools.

"These rules changes indicate the commission doesn't see the necessity of teachers being prepared to teach diversity," Hunt-Blackwell said.

Hunt-Blackwell said the proposed rules changes were moving "under the radar" until the Georgia Coalition for Education Justice – an alliance of students, educators, parents and civil rights advocates – got wind of them. The coalition sent a four-page letter to the commission opposing the changes, held news conferences, and assembled speakers to testify against the rules at commission meetings.

"This has made a huge splash," Hunt-Blackwell said. "This was the first time in decades people came to testify at their meetings."

Hunt-Blackwell cited a study released last year by Hanover Research – a think tank that encourages school districts to adopt diversity, equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies – that reported a link between teachers prepared in DEI and a narrowing of academic achievement gaps for students.

"We as educators recognize our student body reflects our communities and state, and the population of our state is more diverse than ever," said Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators. "Aspiring

educators need the course work, information, and resources so they are not overwhelmed by the diversity of their classrooms.”

Morgan said Georgia’s teacher preparation programs have improved significantly in recent years.

“Changing these rules is taking a piece of that away,” she said. “Taking out these words is, in a sense, watering down.”