

Why fascists fear teachers

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The title of my new book, *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*, is intended as a warning, but it may belie what the book is at its core: a love letter to teachers. I write about teachers' seemingly small everyday acts, like fostering empathy, confidence, critical thinking and mastery, that cultivate opportunity and humanity in our young people. And I look back at historic acts of heroism, such as the teachers in Norway who were among the first and most resolute to protest the Nazi takeover, even when the Nazis tried to violently force them into submission. When I heard that story many years ago, I would never have believed that echoes of authoritarianism would reverberate in the United States today. Nor could I have imagined that this book would come into the world at a time when heinous acts of political violence are occurring with horrifying frequency, violence that I condemn with every fiber of my being. Yet here we are.

I try in this book to answer several questions. Teachers are widely recognized and appreciated for dedicating themselves to helping all children reach their unique potential. So why are there so many attacks on teachers? Why do so many extremist politicians think it's OK to smear and insult teachers? Why are we seeing the defunding of already strapped schools, the book bans, the censoring of honest history and so many other actions that prevent our children from getting the education they deserve? Why are these actions, which are warning signs of increasing authoritarianism, happening in the United States today?

The answer is that authoritarians fear a well-educated citizenry. They fear what educators do—the teaching of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism—because their brand of greed, power and privilege cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens. Public education is essential to a free and fair America, and teachers are essential to public education. We're under siege not for anything we do wrong, but for all the things we do right.

The Founding Fathers believed public education was a bulwark against tyranny. *Why Fascists Fear Teachers* lays out the plot to undermine public education, which a conservative

activist declared outright required his allies to be “ruthless and brutal.”

Extremists are executing that plot with alarming resolve: Starve public schools of the funds they need to succeed, then criticize them for their shortcomings. Erode trust in public schools by stoking fear and division, including attempting to pit parents against teachers. And replace them with homeschooling and private, religious and online schools. All toward their end goal of destroying public education as we know it, atomizing and balkanizing education in America, bullying the most vulnerable among us and leaving the students with the greatest needs in public schools with the most meager resources.

I tell the stories of teachers who have fought for their students and for the promise of public education. I hope educators will see themselves in its pages. And I hope it will help parents, students, policymakers and everyone invested in our nation's future understand why teachers and public schools are essential to individual opportunity, our collective prosperity and the survival of our democracy.

That feels especially crucial as the country reels from another horrific political assassination. Political violence is never acceptable. Never. As every living former president has said in the wake of Charlie Kirk's assassination, all Americans must condemn violence and de-escalate the tensions roiling the country. In many ways, teachers can serve as the antidote to them, by

helping students navigate this trauma and division and by modeling civil discourse.

No one should condone—and certainly no one should celebrate—violence. But in this highly charged moment, many people are paying a high price for exercising constitutionally protected speech, and some have even been accused of hate speech for *decrying* hate speech. We must recommit as a nation to the right to express ourselves nonviolently without fear and to resolving disagreements peacefully and civilly.

Teachers are under siege not for anything they do wrong, but for what they do right.

Ninety percent of America's young people attend public schools, where educators strive to prepare them with the fundamentals for full and productive lives—with the academic foundation they need, of course, as well as the ability to participate in civic life and to work together across differences. Our public schools are America's great engine of opportunity. They are where teachers dedicate themselves to providing children of every background an education that is safe, welcoming, relevant and engaging. When we strengthen our public schools and support our children's teachers, we sustain the American dream and democracy itself.



Weingarten signing her book, *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*, on Sept. 16 in New York.

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