

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

Public Education Under Attack: The Fight to Preserve the American Dream

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Haley Taylor Schlitz, 22, is the youngest Black person and youngest woman to earn a law degree in U.S. history. At 19, she graduated from the SMU Dedman School of Law and previously, at age 16, became Texas Woman's University's youngest honoree with a Bachelor of

Science. She dedicated a year to teach US History to 5th graders in Fort Worth, Texas. Now, she is an Assistant Attorney General for the Minnesota Attorney General's Office. Haley's significant contributions include leading grassroots efforts for the Texas CROWN Act, championed by State Representative Rhetta Bowers, which she witnessed become official law in 2023. As an authoritative voice on Generation Z issues, she's spoken internationally and written for platforms like *TheGrio*, *Blavity*, and *Teen Vogue*. Beyoncé recognized her in "This Is Black History 2020". Currently, she's on the board of the Emerge Young Leaders Cabinet. Haley has earned accolades such as *Brightbeam's Top 30 Education Influencers* in 2021. She is a proud member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Incorporated, a historic Black sorority.

Disclosure Statement

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Education is the cornerstone of opportunity in America. It builds pathways, changes lives, and holds the promise of a brighter future. For my family, it has been the bridge that carried us from the American Nightmare to the American Dream.

But make no mistake: that bridge is under attack. Public education—the very foundation of opportunity in this country—is being dismantled before our eyes. Harmful policies, political agendas, and deliberate disinvestment threaten to sever that lifeline for millions of students.

This is not just a political fight; it is deeply personal. As the descendant of both those who came to this country chasing the promise of Ellis Island and those who were brought here in the chains of slavery, I carry the weight of both the American Dream and the American Nightmare. Education has been central to my family's story, helping us overcome systemic barriers, reclaim our voices, and demand our place in the nation's progress.

Now, as an attorney, an educator, and an advocate for education policy, I see the battles we face today as critical moments in the fight for justice and equity. Public education is not just a pathway to success; it is the backbone of democracy, the safeguard of opportunity, and the key to realizing our collective potential.

A Family Legacy of Transformation

My family's story is a testament to the transformative power of education. My great-grandmother left East Texas with little more than her determination and grit. She became a licensed vocational nurse at a time when opportunities for Black women were scarce, breaking barriers not just for herself but for her children and grandchildren.

My grandmother carried that legacy forward. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing and later her Master of Public Health, using her education to serve her community and uplift her family. She instilled in her children the belief that education was not just a tool for personal advancement but a responsibility to give back.

My mother took that legacy even further, becoming a physician—a field that had long been inaccessible to Black women. Her journey was not just a personal milestone; it was a victory for our family, a symbol of how education could break the chains of systemic inequity and open doors that had long been closed.

For my siblings and I, the bar was set high, and we were encouraged to dream even bigger. Each of us graduated from high school and college before the age of 18, and we have earned graduate degrees in fields such as law, business leadership, and technology. Education gave us the tools to succeed, but it also instilled in us the responsibility to fight for those who have not yet had the same opportunities.

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My Education Journey: Breaking Barriers

My journey began in a public school system where I did not fit the mold. I faced racism, sexism, and a lack of support for my learning needs. I disengaged, almost losing my passion for learning altogether. But my parents saw something in me, something I couldn't see in myself. They pulled me out of that system and into homeschooling, where I could thrive.

Homeschooling gave me the freedom to learn at my own pace. By the time I was 13, I had graduated from high school and started attending Tarrant County College (TCC). TCC was where I truly discovered the transformative power of higher education. As a young teenager in a college classroom, I learned not just academics but the value of community, the importance of self-advocacy, and the potential of education to shape lives.

From TCC, I transferred to Texas Woman's University (TWU) and at age 16, became the youngest graduate at that time in the school's history. My younger sister would break my record a couple of years later. TWU was a place where I felt seen and supported and where administrators and faculty worked with me to craft a degree plan that fit my unique needs and aspirations.

For example, part of my degree plan in education was taking the teacher licensing exam. However, in Texas, you had to be 18 years old to take it. Because of this, TWU created an entirely new degree program for students who wished to earn their degree in education but utilize it non-traditionally. It is this kind of innovative leadership that changes the lives of those who will go on to boldly change the world. After TWU, I went on to attend Southern Methodist University's Dedman School of Law, and in May of 2022, I graduated at the age of 19 as the youngest woman and youngest Black person to ever earn a law degree in the history of the United States.

My desire with my law degree is to pursue the field of education law. I reflect on my fortune and realize how it allowed me to thrive. I had parents who not only were aware of the issues in our public school system but also had the means to say no and create their own yes. Many families do not have the option of homeschooling or crafting the most desirable situation for their student's education. How many children are we doing a disservice? How many future leaders and changemakers is the

United States losing, again doing the world a disservice? Moreover, what can I do to change that? Not only did I write two books raising awareness of the issues and options that would work for any family, but I also went into law and public policy to change the way we approach education.

Each of these postsecondary institutions played a critical role in my journey, and each reinforced my belief in the power of education to break barriers and create opportunities. However, my path was not without friction. I faced ageism, sexism, and racism at every stage of my journey. From being told I needed to be "held back" as a child in our public schools to hearing, "You people always want special treatment." in college, the barriers were both personal and systemic. And yet, each challenge only strengthened my resolve to fight for a better future for myself and for others.

The source of my motivation has always been my village—the community of people in my life who saw greatness in me knew I would be successful and invested in me and my future. Without the knowledge, experiences, support, and guidance of my parents, I would not be here or be who I am. Nor would I be here without my family and friends, who poured their energy and resources into me, opening doors of opportunities I was equipped to walk through. As vital members of my village, my mentors and teachers not only provided light along my journey but also a wealth of information, pearls of wisdom, and character development within myself.

The Impact of Teachers: Micro and Macro

At every stage of my journey, teachers and educators played a pivotal role. Sometimes, it was a single engagement that changed my trajectory—a teacher who encouraged me to think bigger, a mentor who helped me navigate a challenge, or a professor who showed me what was possible. Micro-level moments often have a ripple effect, shaping the lives of students in ways that are felt for years to come. For example, I remember a professor at TCC who did not see me as the youngest student in the room but as someone capable of extraordinary things. That professor's belief in me gave me the confidence to push forward when the odds seemed stacked against me.

On a macro level, teachers and educators have the power to unite their voices and advocate for systemic change. By standing together, they

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remind communities—and themselves—that the torch to protect public education has been passed to them. In the face of the current political climate, this unified voice is more important than ever.

Public education is not just about academic outcomes; it is about equity, opportunity, and empowerment. Teachers are not only shaping individual lives but also protecting the very foundation of the American Dream. Teachers craft the pipelines that guide students towards opportunity and success and are simultaneously the pumps that push our students through.

Reshaping the Profession: A Call for Diversity and Protection

Understanding how crucial teachers are leads to the discussion of diversity. As educators fight for public education, they must also focus on reshaping the teaching profession to ensure its future. It is essential that educators foster a new generation of diverse teachers who reflect the students they serve. Representation matters.

Studies consistently show that students benefit academically and emotionally when they see themselves reflected in their educators. According to a study by Johns Hopkins University and American University, Black students who had just one Black teacher by third grade were 13% more likely to enroll in college. Black students who had at least one Black teacher in elementary school were 29% less likely to drop out (Gershenson et al., 2021; Papageorge et al., 2018). Research also consistently shows that when students feel safe and welcome in a classroom, they are more likely to learn better and achieve higher academic success. A sense of security and inclusion allows them to focus on learning without anxieties or distractions related to feeling unsafe, enabling them to engage more fully with the material and take intellectual risks (Roldán et al., 2021).

But representation alone is not enough. Educators must also protect the teaching profession from unwarranted attacks that threaten its integrity and sustainability. If educators do not speak up now, they risk losing their voice and watching as the profession is devalued and dismantled. Teachers are often the first line of defense against harmful policies that seek to undermine public education. Whether it is fighting for fair pay, opposing book bans, or advocating for inclusive curricula, educators must be bold in their advocacy. The stakes are too high to remain silent.

The Fight for Public Education

Today, I am an Assistant Attorney General in the Minnesota Attorney General's Office, an educator, and an advocate for policies that protect

and expand access to education. Nevertheless, I am deeply concerned about the state of public education in this country.

Public education, in my opinion, is under attack. Harmful policies, such as anti-DEI legislation and the gutting of civics education, are being deliberately designed to limit opportunity and maintain systemic inequities. These attacks are not just political; they are deeply personal for families like mine, who have relied on public education to rise above the barriers of the past.

As an educator, I launched a Freedom School to combat what I see as the deliberate erasure of civics education in many states. This is not just an academic issue—it is a strategic move to keep the next generation uninformed about how our government works and ill-prepared to advocate for their needs. Through the Freedom School, I worked to equip young people with the knowledge and tools to engage in democracy and fight for their futures.

As a law student, I worked to support the passage of the CROWN Act in Texas, legislation that protects individuals from discrimination based on their natural hair. This work was not just about policy—it was about affirming the dignity and humanity of every student, ensuring that they could show up as their full selves in classrooms and beyond.

A Call to Action for Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff are on the front lines of this fight; they are not just educators but also advocates, mentors, and change-makers. Defending public education will take deliberate and constant action.

First, educators must remind themselves of the transformational impact public education has had on the United States. Public education has been the foundation of the American Dream, enabling families like mine to rise from licensed vocational nurse to registered nurse to physician, from student to attorney, and from oppression to opportunity. This progress is worth fighting for, and it must be protected.

Second, educators must engage in advocacy. Real change often starts locally. Educators must attend school board meetings, push for policies that protect students and promote inclusivity, and collaborate with community organizations to amplify their impact.

Finally, educators must educate students not just on the subjects in the classroom but on their rights, their power, and their ability to create change. Every empowered student who understands how government works is a step toward a more informed and engaged generation.

The Stakes are High

Public education is, and will continue to be, the foundation of the American Dream. This dream has allowed for truly transformational progress in the United States, but that progress is not guaranteed. The attacks on public education are attacks on opportunity itself and demand a bold and deliberate response.

Faculty and staff have the power to shape the future. Educators are builders of dreams, defenders of justice, and champions of opportunity. Together, they can ensure that public education remains a beacon of hope for generations to come.

Educators must remind themselves of the shoulders they stand on and the legacy they carry forward. Let them ask: “What actions are we taking? What are we doing to ensure that public education continues to improve and serve the future we want to be?”

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