

Seven Steps to Combatting “Critical Theory” in the Classroom

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Parents and educators committed to the pursuit of truth need policy solutions that protect diversity of ideas and restore a shared sense of equality under the law.

Critical Race Theory and Critical Pedagogy in K-12 curricula derive from Marxism and create groups of victimhood.

Public schools should be transparent about their curricula and teach content that fosters a civil society where everyone can flourish.

The Illinois State Board of Education is now insisting that there is “not one ‘correct’ way of doing or understanding something” and “what is seen as ‘correct’ is most often based on our lived experiences.”¹ Statewide, black and Hispanic students score 28 points and 20 points, respectively, below their white peers on a standard fourth-grade reading comparison, so giving up on teaching correct answers is a strange way of encouraging student success.²

In December 2020, the Illinois State Board of Education adopted new “Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards” that are focused on identity politics, teaching students to find bias around them, and instructing students on how to resist the “systems of oppression” in which they allegedly live.³ Teachers are to recognize how their own “identity (race/

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ethnicity, national origin, language, sex and gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical/developmental/emotional ability, socioeconomic class, religion, etc.) affects their perspectives and beliefs about pedagogy and students.”

All of these concepts, from grouping people according to ethnicity to assuming that bias is always causing oppression in one’s community are parts of a worldview known as “Critical Race Theory,” which is itself a subset of a larger philosophy known as “Critical Theory.”⁴ German intellectuals developed Critical Theory in the 1920s in an attempt to find the purest form of Marxism after their frustration that socialism had not taken hold in Germany. Later generations of students and educators developed the ideas into Critical Legal Studies (the belief that America’s system of law is systemically racist), Critical Race Theory (the belief that racial oppression exists everywhere), and Critical Pedagogy (teaching students the ideas of Critical Theory and emphasizing the need to disrupt existing systems of power).⁵

Educators today are using Critical Race Theory and Critical Pedagogy to design standards and curricula for K–12 schools. Parents and policymakers can find these ideas in new ethnic studies programs under development in states such as California, or through Black Lives Matter at School’s “Week of Action,” recognized by school systems around the country.⁶ In California, a proposed set of ethnic studies standards focuses on “identity” and “systems of power,” to name just a few “Critical” concepts in the materials, while in New York City, the teachers union adopted a resolution that includes the Black Lives Matter “Guiding Principles,” which state that the group is “committed to disrupting the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement.”⁷

Critical Theorists displace America’s tradition of freedom—that all people are created equal and have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—and concepts promoted during the Civil Rights era, such as treating people according to their character and not their skin color. Critical Theory and its offshoots displace these traditions and concepts with accusations of guilt, and a Marxist doctrine in schools, the media, and the common culture that divides people into oppressors and the oppressed.

Parents of K–12 students and educators who are still committed to the pursuit of truth need policy solutions that protect a diversity of ideas in the classroom and restore a shared sense of equality under the law. The following are seven ways state and local policymakers can pursue this goal. Officials can:

1. Create Curriculum Transparency. Public school officials should make public school K–12 curricular materials available to taxpayers and

families.⁸ Educators do not need to put every textbook or assigned reading material available online in full, but parents and taxpayers should be able to view course syllabi, the titles of assigned books and articles, homework questions, and in-class assignments online. At present, some state laws limit access to public school instructional content.⁹ Utah legislators recently sent a proposal that provides curriculum transparency to their governor, and Arizona lawmakers are considering such a proposal now.¹⁰

2. Promote Civics Knowledge, Not Diversity Training. K–12 and postsecondary school officials are spending significant amounts of taxpayer money on so-called anti-bias training.¹¹ Such “diversity” training has been common in the corporate world for decades.¹² A significant body of research, however, finds that such training has no positive effects on participants.

Harvard researchers who surveyed hundreds of reports on bias training say that the sessions are “likely the most expensive, and least effective diversity program around.”¹³ Researchers have found that diversity training provokes resentment among participants, and while it is possible to measure individual attitudes, studies find that changes among participants are “weak” and do not last.¹⁴

Educators should focus on teaching civics and history content that prepares students for life after school. Rigorous civics curricula exist, including materials produced by 1776 Unites, the Institute for Classical Education, the Jack Miller Center, the Bill of Rights Institute, and the Ashbrook Center.¹⁵ This material recognizes the importance of facts and acknowledges the periods in history when Americans failed to live up to their ideals while not allowing these periods to eclipse the national character and culture of freedom and equality under the law.

3. Offer Alternatives to Entering the Teaching Profession that Do Not Include the Ideology of Critical Pedagogy. Nowhere has Critical Race Theory permeated curricula and instruction more than in university-based schools of education. Colleges of education have a tremendous reach when it comes to training teachers who populate public and private schools across the country. Ninety percent of public school teachers have a state teaching license, approximately 70 percent of whom obtained their license through a college of education. Over 600,000 prospective teachers were enrolled in teacher training programs in 2018, and an estimated one in 10 college students was majoring in education that year, putting these majors on a path to teach in elementary and secondary schools when they graduate.¹⁶

It is in these colleges that future teachers learn the fundamentals of pedagogy, discover curricula that they will use in their K–12 classrooms,

and refine theories of learning and knowledge acquisition. And, it is in these schools that future teachers are frequently introduced to, and then steeped in, Critical Race Theory. As the James G. Martin Center's Jay Schalin found after analyzing syllabi at colleges of education, the "most influential thinkers in our education schools are radicals who adhere to a collectivist, utopian vision."¹⁷ As Schalin found, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Critical Theorist Paulo Freire's seminal 1968 book making the case for dividing individuals into groups of "oppressors" and "oppressed," was the third-most-assigned book in colleges of education. Other researchers who review teacher college syllabi also noted that professors use Freire often.¹⁸ Works by Critical Theorists Henry Giroux, Richard Rorty, and Howard Zinn rounded out the list of most-assigned writers in colleges of education. What is taught in colleges of education trickles down through K-12 classrooms, which can be seen in recent efforts, such as the historically inaccurate and misleading 1619 Project, or lesson plans like "Confronting Whiteness in Our Classrooms."¹⁹

Would-be teachers should not have to accept training in Critical Theory in order to enter the classroom. In order to provide alternatives, states should end requirements that teachers be state certified, significantly reducing enrollment in schools of education. For their part, states should allow alternative teacher certification that takes place outside colleges of education.

4. Prepare Educators to Teach Values that Preserve Civil Society.

Schools should impart civics content that teaches students about the essential functions of government, reinforces the fact that the United States is governed by the rule of law, and teaches that America is a nation founded on the principle that all men and women are created equal. Yet, rather than teaching these core tenants of the American Founding, preparing students to be knowledgeable citizens, too many K-12 schools across the country are instead teaching a politicized leftist action civics, encouraging students to participate in protests and demonstrations, without equipping them with foundational history and civics content.

Action civics takes its cue from Critical Theory, including the use of Critical Pedagogy, which grounds instruction in content that is filtered through the prism of identity politics, imposing on students the notion that America was founded on racism and systemic oppression, rather than instilling an understanding of natural rights.

This warped civics instruction is leaving students with subpar civics outcomes. Just 24 percent of eighth-grade students are proficient in civics, a figure that drops to just 10 percent for black students and 13 percent

for Hispanic students;²⁰ only 39 percent of all native-born Americans can pass the U.S. citizenship test.²¹ Parents should engage with their local school board members about the civics content taught in their children's classrooms.

5. Give Families Access to School Board Decision-Making Process About Curricula. More than 14,000 school boards and nearly 100,000 school board members, who constitute the largest body of elected officials in the country, influence everything from districts budgets and construction projects to school textbook adoption and collective bargaining processes. School boards oversee much of the policies and practices in the public schools in their districts. Yet information about the curricula and textbooks put in place in those schools is opaque. Parents should engage with their local school boards, and can do so by (1) identifying school board meetings to attend throughout the year; (2) staying up to date with school board activities by reading posted meeting minutes; (3) drafting questions about spending, curricula, and staffing to pose at school board meetings; and (4) reading the school board's mission statement. If a child's school is using materials rooted in Critical Theory, parents should talk to their child's school principal and school board about the content.

6. Expand Parent Choice in Education. One of the most important tools for combatting Critical Theory in the classroom is giving families control of where, and what, their children learn. More than half of all U.S. states offer some form of private school scholarship option for K–12 students; lawmakers in 44 states and Washington, DC, allow the creation of public charter schools; and every state allows parents to homeschool their children. State officials in every state should give students access to private schools, especially when in-person learning is not available at assigned schools due to the pandemic or teacher union strikes.

Many states, however, have limits on student participation or the creation of public charter schools. For example, Kentucky and West Virginia have enacted charter school proposals, but the laws' provisions are so strict and the limitations on the number of such schools are so narrow that educators and community leaders have not been able to create any charters in those states.²² Likewise, private school scholarship organizations in Pennsylvania and Florida have waiting lists.²³ Lawmakers should lift the caps on scholarship programs and ease the provisions that limit additional public learning options through charter schools.

7. Provide Open-Enrollment Options to Allow Students to Attend a Public School of Choice. In addition to establishing private school-choice options, states should also adopt statewide open-enrollment policies,

enabling students to enroll in any public school in the state, instead of being forced to attend the public school that has been assigned by Zip code. Florida and Arizona have such provisions, allowing students to enroll in any public school in the Sunshine State, and requiring all 67 of the state's school districts to participate.²⁴

Conclusion

State policymakers and local school board members have a role to play in making sure that public schools teach content that accurately reflects American ideals and rejects the toxic ideology of Critical Theory. As institutions that have an obligation to uphold the public's trust, and as taxpayer-funded entities, schools and the school boards that oversee them should make curricula transparent, provide families with options that fit their needs, and teach civics content that creates a civil society in which everyone, regardless of background or skin color, can pursue the American Dream.

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