

CARE-ED

California Alliance of Researchers for Equity in Education

Distinguishing Fact from Fiction about “Critical Race Theory” in Schools

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What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework that attempts to explain the continuation of racial inequality, despite laws that purport to end racism. It holds that racism, which goes beyond individual prejudice, is deeply embedded in the nation’s institutions. As a theoretical framework, CRT provides analytic tools for examining how racism was constructed in the context of slavery and theft of Indigenous peoples’ land, and how it continues to work today. CRT is taught mainly in graduate level courses.

Why are critics talking about CRT?

CRT was turned into a scare tactic by a blogger at the Manhattan Institute, explains Wallace-Wells in a June 2021 *New Yorker* article. The blogger believed that the terms “critical,” “race,” and “theory” would sound anti-American, particularly to those who tend to vote Republican. By portraying CRT in inaccurate and inflammatory ways, he and others constructed a scare campaign to galvanize conservative voters, using parents’ interest in their children’s education as a tool to activate these voters. But since CRT rarely appears at the K-12 level, this campaign threw practices designed to make schools work for a broad range of students into a bucket labeled “Critical Race Theory.” Critics also began to misrepresent and demonize other education approaches that are meant to support our diverse student population, including DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives, civil-rights initiatives, social-emotional learning, culturally responsive teaching, and initiatives to protect rights of LGBTQ+ students.

How are K-12 schools teaching about race and racism?

Most people in (and outside) of schools had not even heard of CRT until recently. What is widespread, however, is curriculum that reflects state learning standards about race, racism, diversity, and democracy, and this should be continued and strengthened, not banned. For example, many teachers teach about institutional racism in the past (such as slavery and Jim Crow laws) and how it works in the present (such as through redlining and voter suppression). These are issues everyone needs to learn to address if our country is to live up to its aspiration for fairness and justice for all.

While many people believe that racism will disappear if we ignore race and try to be colorblind, the reality is that it doesn’t work that way. The best way to eliminate racism is to recognize it—both individual prejudice and institutional racism—and learn to confront racism by working together across racial lines.

Is Ethnic Studies the same as CRT?

No, it is not. Ethnic Studies is the critical study of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity in the U.S., with a focus on the experiences and perspectives of Black, Native/Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, and Pacific Islander communities in the United States. However, it is not possible to focus on these experiences without delving into the workings of racism, which is why Ethnic Studies and CRT can intersect in important ways.

Does teaching about race and racism make students feel uncomfortable?

This depends on what experiences students bring. Education can help students of all age levels and racial backgrounds to expand their understanding of race and racism, including their ability to ask and seek answers to their own questions about race in their own lives, hear perspectives different from their own, and learn to address racism in constructive ways as members of a democracy. But we come at the issue from very different perspectives, based on our life experiences and learning.

In general, students who are Black, Native/Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American, and Pacific Islander welcome serious consideration of racism. In fact, students who are victimized by racism on a daily basis may be uncomfortable in classrooms that deny its existence. Research on the impact of Ethnic Studies, for example, overwhelmingly finds it to have a positive impact on such students, academically as well as personally.

White students, on the other hand, who are generally less aware of racism, may find grappling with it to be uncomfortable, especially at first. The more strongly students are committed to the ideas that U.S. society works fairly for everyone and that colorblindness will eradicate racism, the more discomfort they may feel, at least initially, with antiracist teaching. While teaching about racism generally focuses on how it is institutionalized and how people working together can challenge racism, White students sometimes personalize what is taught, and feel blamed, perhaps guilty for who they are. But the research finds that teaching about racism usually benefits White students by explaining what they see on TV, in other media, or in their own communities. Such teaching can lower students' fear of discussing racism and help them to become White allies in the work to eradicate racism.

What can I do?

Attend school board meetings to express support for all the initiatives under attack that actually support diversity, equity, inclusion, and historical honesty.

Call on your school board to push against censorship about race and to ensure that teachers and students can teach and learn about race and racism in developmentally appropriate ways that align with state curriculum standards.

Find out what your local schools are actually doing to prepare young people to be active members of a racially diverse world.

Talk with young people to find out what kind of questions and concerns they have about race and racism, and how they would like to see these issues addressed in school.

Organize people in your communities to discuss how best to engage young people in advancing democracy and justice.

Learn more about what CRT actually tells us (versus the misrepresentations of CRT), especially works written by people who are involved with CRT, such as:

- *Critical Race Theory* (4th ed) by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. NYU Press.
- *On Critical Race Theory: Why it Matters and Why you should Care*, by Victor Ray. Random House.
- *Critical Race Theory in Education*, by Gloria Ladson-Billings. Teachers College Press.
- *Critical Race Theory and its Critics*, by Christine Sleeter & Francesca Lopez. Teachers College Press.

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