What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical race theory was developed by legal scholars in the 1970s. It critically examines how racism is codified in U.S. law and how "colorblind" policies and practices lead to racial disparities. CRT demonstrates that racism is systemic and is built into the fabric and foundations of our country. Critical race theory is generally taught in law school and graduate school to adults.

While critical race theory is not typically taught in K-12 schools, many educators do engage students in a truthful and critical analysis of U.S. history and current events, identifying examples of structural racism and the intersections between race and other identities, such as gender identity and class. In K-12 curriculum, schools often teach U.S. and local history, the facts of the founding of the country, the country's legacy of slavery, the history of discrimination, and land theft from indegenous peoples, among other topics.

Over the past year, critical race theory's common usage has diverged from its exact meaning. Conservative activists and politicians now use the term as a catchall phrase for nearly any examination of systemic racism, past or present.

Why are we talking about it now?

Though the theory is decades old, it started receiving widespread attention last fall following the summer of Black Lives Matter protests. During the summer, Fox News gave airtime to conservative activist Christopher F. Rufo, who told host Tucker Carlson he was "declaring a one-man war against critical race theory" and wouldn't stop until it was "abolished within our public institutions." This caught the attention of then-President Donald Trump, who signed an executive order restricting implicit bias and diversity training by government agencies.

Fox News mentioned "critical race theory" nearly 1,300 times from February through the middle of June - doubling month over month. On one day in July alone they mentioned it over 100 times.

Are state legislatures taking it seriously?

As of July 15, 2021, **26** states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism. **Eleven** states have enacted these bans, either through legislation or other avenues.

In Rhode Island, Bill H6070 was introduced in Rhode Island to House Education Committee on March 3, 2021 by Patricia Morgan (R-Dist. 26, West Warwick, Coventry, Warwick), George Nardone (R-Dist. 28, Coventry), and Sherry Roberts (29 - Coventry, West Greenwich). It was held for further study, but a recent social media post by the RI Center for Freedom and Prosperity suggests there may be a push to revisit this issue in the fall session.

What could happen if these bills are passed?

- **Discussions of racism will be limited**

  Administrators who have closely read the bills or laws in their states say this sort of broad ban will make it difficult for teachers to talk about the day's news, most American social justice movements, and many historical events that involved explicit acts of white supremacy, such as the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement.

- **Anti-bias training and other anti-racism efforts could be curtailed or canceled**

  In recent years, some school districts with shifting racial demographics have launched multi-pronged efforts to better serve students of color. They've formed diversity, inclusion and equity committees made up of students, teachers, and administrators, hired equity officers, and offered ongoing training for teachers to recognize and dismantle their implicit biases, which many experts argue lead to, among other things, disproportionate suspensions and expulsions for Black and Latino students.

- **Teachers and administrators will have to restrict conversations about sexism and gender identity**

  The bills also aim to restrict how schools can teach about sexism and gender identity.

  Most bills would prohibit educators from teaching students that "an individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously."

  The language in some states' bills is even more explicit and bans classroom discussions about gender identity. For example, the proposed bill in Ohio would prohibit teachers from being required to "affirm a belief... in the multiplicity or fluidity of gender identities or like ideas, against the teacher's sincerely held religious or philosophical convictions."

Why should you care?

- Students deserve to be presented with age-appropriate and accurate lessons on historical and contemporary issues that support them to become the critical thinkers we need to make this a more just and equitable nation.
- Teaching the history of racism in the United States is also an opportunity to teach the history of movements to end it. These movements have always been multiracial, multiethnic, and built across lines of gender and class. Understanding this can be an incredible and powerful source of unity for all students.
- Ignoring the U.S.'s actual history, including racism and other systems of oppression, is deception, not education. Teaching young people about the centuries of resistance to that oppression is empowering, not shameful or paralyzing.

- When educators teach the truth, students start to see themselves as part of a bigger story.
- Banning conversations about racism in schools is a form of censorship. A shared, honest understanding of the past bridges divides.
- Facing challenging discussions and disagreements head-on is a long tradition in this country. The Declaration of Independence was divisive. The abolition of slavery was so divisive that there was a Civil War. Let teachers teach, and keep politicians from legislating away students' rights to the truth.
- This is part of a larger, multi-pronged approach to shift not only the nature of public education for children, but also the community's collective knowledge, as these groups are now attacking public libraries, working to remove books, resources, and programming that are justice-oriented.

How can you help?

School Committees:
Proactively email your local school committee members and let them know that:

- Research shows that students who see positive representations of themselves in their curriculum have improved educational outcomes. For students of color as well as white students, culturally responsive education decreases dropout rates and suspensions, increases student participation, confidence, academic achievement and graduation rates.
- We need racial equity to be an important and central part of our curriculum, at all grade levels and not just in history classes.
- Young people need skills and knowledge to navigate the world in which they live. We live in a world where racial injustice isn't just historic – it's ongoing. If we only care about the discomfort of white parents and students, we can't get to a place where every student can reach their full potential.

Thank the school committee members for the job they are doing and urge them to reject these dangerous proposals that would ban teaching the truth in public schools.

Stay informed of upcoming school committee meetings in your community and show up prepared to speak. This document has a running list of meetings statewide for your reference.

Join the campaign to #TeachTruth or connect with a local organization doing this work:
Join our mailing list or a working group:
https://forms.gle/dbmexcvh62ew1JtWA

SURJ-RI (Showing Up for Racial Justice - RI)

https://www.facebook.com/SURJRI

TANK (Towards an Anti-Racist North Kingstown)
https://www.tankri.org/

TASK (Toward an Anti-Racist South Kingstown)
https://www.facebook.com/taskrhodeisland/

S-RIPA (Southwestern RI Progressive Alliance)
https://www.sripa.org/

Westerly ARC (Anti-Racism Coalition)
https://www.facebook.com/westerlyarc/

References:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2021/05/29/critical-race-theory-bans-schools/
https://wordinblack.com/2021/06/heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-critical-race-theory/
https://rifreedom.org/2021/07/center-calls-on-general-assembly-to-be-heroes-and-end-divisive-school-based-race-wars/?fbclid=IwAR2IoY8E_Ahv_Wfk3jnp3zAfUCngWDxC9enAf2b-SczqbowlZn90JoSPH20
https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06
https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/four-things-schools-wont-be-able-to-do-under-critical-race-theory-laws/2021/06
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1uhvPPeIakz0EP5xE88W51FxBdRoaP8Tt/edit
https://futureforlearning.org/2021/06/03/truth-bridges-divides/
https://www.businessinsider.com/fox-news-critical-race-theory-mentions-thousand-study-2021-6
https://www.salon.com/2021/07/07/fox-news-mentions-critical-race-theory-more-than-100-different-times-in-less-than-a-day-report_partner/