

Civics legislation snared in national debate over talking about race in education

Laura Meckler = *The Washington Post* – May 16, 2021

The lesson today, class, is how to turn bipartisan legislation encouraging teaching of civics into an ideological food fight.

The [legislation](#) in question seemed noncontroversial at first, even boring. It would authorize \$1 billion a year in grants to pay for more civics education. The goal was to better balance a test-driven K-12 education system that focuses heavily on math and reading with a subject — civics — that has gotten less attention and far less money in recent years.

Civics is critical, backers say, to maintaining a functioning democracy.

But in recent days this bipartisan measure has run into a force more powerful than a [schoolhouse rock](#). Conservative media and activists are pelting the Republicans who support the bill to abandon it. They call the grant program a “Trojan horse” that would allow the Biden administration to push a liberal agenda.

In a country where millions of Americans including the former president insist that a fair election was stolen, it’s not clear that anything related to civics can be noncontroversial. The bill is trying, partly by making clear that the federal government will not make curriculum decisions.

Nonetheless, it has become wrapped up in a fierce broader debate over how to talk about race and racism in education. A growing number of educators are putting increased emphasis on racial equity and addressing systemic racism in their policies and lessons. They say it is critical that marginalized communities are represented in school policy and curriculums.

A backlash has ensued, in which critics allege schools are trying to indoctrinate children with what they call damaging lessons about critical race theory, a decades-old academic framework that examines how policies and the law perpetuate systemic racism. They say the civics grants could be used to advance that cause.

The two Republican sponsors of the civics bill, Sen. John Cornyn (Tex.) and Rep. Tom Cole (Okla.), are being pressured by a [drumbeat](#) of [negative articles](#) in conservative media to drop their support for the measure.

An [open letter](#) to the pair from a conservative advocacy group called the National Association of Scholars argues Republicans cannot trust the Biden administration to implement the civics grants

impartially. The administration, it asserts, “will instead direct the funds it authorizes to subsidize ideologically partisan political activism.”

Nonpartisan civics advocates who have worked for years on the measure are crushed, terrified that their efforts toward bipartisanship and evidence-based education are melting away beneath a broader ideological battle.

“This is straight down the middle, classic civic education,” said Shawn Healy, senior director for policy and advocacy at iCivics, a group that provides educational material on civics and advocates for civics education. “This is something that should bring us together, not tear us apart.”

He said the civics coalition’s work is completely separate from the heated conversation over race in education. “That’s a whole ’nother debate and one we do not want to be part of.”

Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden on how Black history has been taught in schools (The Washington Post)

A Cornyn aide said the senator is not considering dropping his support for the bill and said it does not do what critics are alleging. A spokeswoman for Cole said he wants further clarification from Education Secretary Miguel Cardona on how he would implement the bill if passed.

The civics bill would authorize new grants to states and others for civics education. Purposes include teaching about history and civic institutions of the United States and teaching skills such as analyzing texts and assessing reliability of sources. Money could be used to promote values such as free speech, civil discourse, tolerance and inclusion; understanding different perspectives; and development of civic habits such as voting, serving on juries, volunteering and engaging in deliberative discussions.

[Just 24 percent](#) of U.S. students were proficient in civics in 2018, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which administers exams to a sample of eighth-graders across the country.

Last month, Cornyn and Sen. Christopher A. Coons (D.-Del.), co-sponsor of the measure, [appeared together on NPR](#) to tout the bill.

“Ours is a government of the people, by the people or for the people, as Lincoln said. But we can’t govern ourselves if we don’t have knowledge of our foundational principles or our history,” Cornyn said.

“I wonder whether some members of Congress know how government works,” he joked. “Frequently what I’ll do is ... is I’ll say, you remember that old cartoon called ‘Schoolhouse Rock!’? I’m just a bill on Capitol Hill? If we are the government, we need to know how it works so we can influence it.”

Five days after that interview, things got complicated, when the Education Department [published a notice in the Federal Register](#) about an unrelated federal grant program. Both Republicans and Democrats supporting the civics bill say this notice and an uproar of conservative reaction that followed have made their work harder.

The notice laid out proposed rules governing a grant program for teaching U.S. history. It said that in awarding grants, the agency would prioritize programs that “reflect the diversity, identities, histories,

contributions, and experiences of all students” and “create inclusive, supportive, and identity-safe learning environments.”

It also included an introductory section, where it talked about the importance of teaching subjects such as the consequences of slavery. As an example, it cited the New York Times’s [1619 Project](#), a collection of articles and essays arguing that the nation’s true founding year is 1619, the year enslaved Africans were brought to the shores of what would become the United States.

Both the priorities and the reference to [the 1619 Project](#) set some conservatives off. Critics led by former president Donald Trump have slammed the project, saying it presents an overly negative view of the country and questioning some of its analysis.

The proposed rule has so far garnered more than [4,800 comments](#), and they appear to be overwhelmingly negative. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and 38 other Senate Republicans sent a letter to Cardona also complaining about the notice.

Backers of the civics bill note that the text specifically bars creation of a national curriculum. Civics classes are likely to reflect the communities where they are taught, they say. They say they are still working to recruit Republican co-sponsors but that the negative attention is making it hard.

A Cornyn aide said the civics bill would prohibit “the exact type of thing Biden is proposing” in the Federal Register notice.

At a [congressional hearing](#) earlier this month, Cole told Cardona that the Federal Register notice is jeopardizing the bill. He cited the reference to the 1619 Project and to scholar Ibram X. Kendi, who promotes anti-racist actions and policies to combat racial inequities.

“These references have politicized civics education, whether intentionally or unintentionally, created an impression that the administration cannot be trusted to promote civic education in a bipartisan, nonideological way,” he said. “The impression left is we want a particular version and a particular kind of civics taught.”

He asked Cardona to withdraw the notice. “I don’t want to lose a good piece of legislation and I think we’re gonna over this issue.”

Cardona said curriculums are set at the local level, and it should stay that way. He defended his agency’s approach without discussing the details of the Federal Register notice.

“It touches a pain point for so many because it shows how divided we are as a nation,” he said. He said civics should have bipartisan support: “I feel very strongly, very strongly that when done well, it should unite us under one flag, one country. We can do that while providing students with opportunities to look at different perspectives.”