

Texas bill to ban teaching of critical race theory puts teachers on front lines of culture war over how history is taught

Areliis Hernández, Griff Witte – *The Washington Post*, June 2, 2021

“That’s a small thing, but it’s also a big thing,” said Dougherty, an instructional coach in Round Rock, a fast-growing and increasingly diverse district just outside Austin. “The conversation has changed.”

Yet, now, Republican legislators have passed a bill that could change it back.

Under the culture war rallying cry of combating [“critical race theory”](#) — an academic framework centered on the idea that racism is systemic, not just a collection of individual prejudices — lawmakers have endorsed an extraordinary intervention in classrooms across Texas.

Their plans would impose restrictions on how teachers discuss current events, bar students from receiving course credit for civic engagement and, in the words of advocates, restore the role of “traditional history” to its rightful place of primacy by emphasizing the nation’s noble ideals, rather than its centuries-long record of failing to live up to them.

“We should be teaching American history,” Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton (R) [recently told an interviewer](#) with Sinclair broadcasting. “We should not be teaching that people are somehow unequal.”

To Texas educators who have cheered attempts to offer students a more thorough and honest account of the nation’s often ugly history of racial subjugation, it all feels like an attempt to put the post-Floyd awakening back to sleep.

“Traditional history. I wonder what that means,” said Dougherty, who submitted testimony opposing the bill. “It feels like history where we don’t have to tell the whole story.”

The rancorous debate over how to teach the nation’s past is not limited to Texas. Nor is it exclusively, or even primarily, about the past. In state capitals across the country where Republicans dominate, the push is on to revert to an approach to education that predates the racial reckoning of last year.

In Idaho, legislators have passed a law that would allow the state to withhold funding from schools that fail to heed their guidance on how to teach about slavery. Similar bills are under consideration in other states, and 20 Republican attorneys general recently wrote to the Biden administration demanding an end to support for critical race theory in schools nationwide.

“It’s based on false history when they try to look back and denigrate the Founding Fathers, denigrate the American Revolution,” Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) [said last month](#) as he announced his demand that the state’s board of education take on the issue. “If we have to play whack-a-mole all over this state, stopping this critical race theory, we will do it.”

Critical race theory is not new. It has been around at least since the 1970s, as scholars sought to understand and explain how the systemic racism that has coursed through American laws and history continued to reverberate in the form of disparities in wealth, health, education and criminal justice.

But the theory — once limited to the halls of academia — has taken on fresh currency as a cultural flash point. The debate has implications not only for how students learn about the past, but also for how myriad policies that will shape the country's future will be developed.

President Biden has vowed to put equity at the heart of his presidency, arguing that the law has too often been stacked against people of color. Republicans have countered that such an emphasis is unnecessary — and harmful — because in a nation built on the principle of equality, no one needs special treatment.

The debate is especially resonant, and consequential, in Texas. The nation's second-most-populous state is fast diversifying, with the Hispanic population likely to exceed that of White non-Hispanics this year. The vast majority of the Lone Star State's 5 million public school students are children of color, who rarely see themselves reflected in the histories they learn.

With demographic changes have come political ones; Texas has long been a deep-red bastion, but statewide races have become competitive.

The heavily-gerrymandered legislature remains dominated by Republicans, however, and GOP lawmakers used their advantage this spring to pass bills on abortion, gun rights and other red-meat social issues sure to rally the party's base.

Democrats were able to thwart a restrictive voting rights bill last week by staging a dramatic [walkout](#). But their attempts to halt legislation that would rework how teachers talk about race and current events fell short: The bill was sent to the desk of Gov. Greg Abbott (R) and he is expected to sign it.

While the legislation does not specifically mention critical race theory, Republicans repeatedly used the term as a cudgel in floor speeches.

State Rep. Steve Toth, who sponsored the House version of the teaching bill, described the theory as “a souped-up version of Marxism.” His bill, he announced when he introduced it, “is about teaching racial harmony by telling the truth that we are all equal, both in God's eyes and our founding documents.”

Educators have countered that “We the people,” as initially conceived, left out just about everyone who wasn't a White male property owner and that teaching students otherwise would be dishonest.

Monica Martinez, a professor in the Department of History at the University of Texas at Austin, said the legislation is an overt tool for mobilizing voters in the upcoming midterm and gubernatorial elections. The legislative push also is an organized campaign to undermine the public's trust in what she said are already underfunded public schools and in underpaid teachers.

“Lawmakers are making bold, unsubstantiated claims that public schools are indoctrinating students with Marxist ideas,” Martinez said. “Those things are not being taught in the classroom, but [lawmakers] are invoking CRT, which they can't define, to try to make it an enemy of students that parents should rally around.”

The legislation's opponents also say lawmakers are misinformed about what happens in the classroom.

"I teach my students that Jefferson sat there and wrote 'all men are created equal,' but he made his money off plantations," said Jocelyn Foshay, a middle school social studies teacher in Dallas.

Foshay, 26, said she is careful not to impose her own views when teaching. "I give the students the facts and let them draw their own conclusions," she said. "That's what learning is."

But she said the legislation passed by Republicans would make that difficult, imposing what she described as a mandate to teach "happy history" rather than a reality that is often far more complex.

"History is not rainbows and unicorns," the Massachusetts native said. "But you can look at the twisted and the cruel and still take pride in how far the country has come."

In Round Rock, the Austin suburb, teachers say that administrators and school board members have been supportive of a more inclusive approach to history and an honest assessment of the nation's failures in addition to its successes.

The area was once relatively conservative and predominantly White. But that has changed with an influx of residents, many of them Black or Latino, from Austin to Round Rock.

Teachers said they were able to have candid conversations with their students about the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and they watched in class as Biden was sworn in as president two weeks later. When parents have complained that the race-related books being assigned were making their children uncomfortable, teachers said their bosses defended the instruction being provided.

That hasn't been true everywhere.

Dallas-area real estate agent Kelli Macatee said she was motivated to run for her local school board in part because of concerns raised by parents who were at home with their children and overhearing virtual lessons. She said critical race theory is a "dangerous ideology" that "hides in our education system" and teaches children to see everything through the lens of race and racism.

"Is there racism out there in the world? Yeah, you bet," Macatee said. "Do I hate it? It boils my blood like nothing else. But I don't want to feed that, because what you feed grows. You are creating dividing lines."

Said Macatee: "If something is good and it works, we don't need to change it. We don't need to change curriculum with every educational trend."

Macatee's board run failed. [But in nearby Southlake](#), outraged parents in the mostly White, affluent suburb northwest of Dallas revolted, ran, and won several seats on the board for the Carroll Independent School District in an effort to quash its plan to introduce requirements including diversity and inclusion training for students.

Texas Board of Education member Pat Hardy, who represents school districts in the Fort Worth-area, said she fielded complaints from Southlake parents worried that discussions at school were giving way to talks about White privilege and other kinds of judgment. Hardy herself attended training on critical race theory with source material from the Southern Poverty Law Center and said she found the program unnecessary.

“It’s pervasive. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. And I don’t think we need anything like that,” said Hardy, a former teacher in Dallas-Fort Worth. “I am really under the impression that most of our younger children are colorblind in school and they don’t see along racial terms.”

Hardy, who supports the legislation, said she wants to ensure that students are getting both sides of the story without having teachers “pushing an agenda.”

But it is teachers who have long facilitated delicate conversations because their students bring them up or they relate to a lesson. Ethnic studies teachers, encouraged by the progress of having their classes approved recently by the state Board of Education as an elective, are curious how their districts will reconcile the bill’s limits on classroom discussion with teachers’ efforts to give a broader accounting of history.

Mexican American studies, for example, an in-demand class for many Texas high school students, is all about connecting the past to the present, said Juan Carmona, a Rio Grande Valley teacher who pushed to institutionalize the course.

Support for such an approach could change with the passage of a bill that, in Dougherty’s words, appears intended “to prioritize the comfort of White people.”

“The teachers I’ve spoken with say this will dampen how they approach conversations about race,” said Dougherty, who was inspired to become involved in anti-racism work after the [killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice](#) by Cleveland police in 2014. “They don’t want to get into conflict with parents.”

Elizabeth Calvert, who teaches AP American history in Round Rock, makes a point of using her class to talk about the multiple perspectives through which America’s story needs to be understood. She and her students keep a running timeline of what was happening for different groups: World War I is juxtaposed with the Great Migration and the fight for women’s suffrage, for example.

Calvert said the legislation is so ambiguously written that it is hard to say what the impact would be on her class. But she said she has grave concerns about the fact that lawmakers are considering the bill at all.

“The idea has been that teachers are experts and they’re not trying to indoctrinate anyone’s child,” she said. “But that trust has been lost.”

Children are not going to stop thinking, talking or questioning, but the consequences of those intellectual inquiries in the classroom may fall on educators, particularly those who teach ethnic studies, if the legislation passes, said State Board of Education member Georgina Pérez, who helped shepherd Mexican and African American studies to approval for high schools.

“Teachers don’t choose to teach controversial topics; they are required to,” Pérez said. “Ultimately, lawmakers want teachers to teach that there were ‘very fine people on both sides.’ ”

“This is classic Texas pushing back because there are people of color who are learning their history, and their fear is that if you are brown, as most children in Texas are, you are going to learn the good and the bad like we should and that these brown kids will become victims and hate White people,” she said. “That rationale is so far from reality that I can’t see it with a telescope.”

Carmona, the Mexican American studies teacher, said he has watched his dual-enrollment students become more engaged in school, work harder to graduate on time and blossom as thinkers after taking his course and seeing themselves reflected in the texts. He is not sure how the legislation may restrict his lessons, but he doesn't plan to change.

"We've had the Anglo point of view forever. We are barely beginning the effort of getting other voices and viewpoints," he said.

The legislation also would target students involved in social or public policy work by prohibiting them from earning any course credit or service hours for advocacy activities. San Antonio high school senior Alejo Peña Soto said he can draw a straight line from his schoolwork to the lobbying he does at the statehouse for his district's student coalition.

Students, he said, organized because they did not want to be left out — as their ancestors had been excluded from history — of the legislative discussions that affect them.

"You can't ignore the world around you, and punishing students for engaging with it isn't the answer," said Peña Soto, who plans to pursue urban and ethnic studies in college. "Lawmakers target CRT because they say it makes students angry. But it's actually about us being heard and learning from the mistakes of the past to improve our country."

Houston high school senior Angel Elizondo said his teachers provided a space for him and his classmates to think through what they saw in the video of Floyd's death under the knee of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. The virtual conversation was a bit awkward, but his teacher asked questions without leading and allowed students to drive a civil debate about the actions of Minneapolis police.

"We want to be voices in our community," said Elizondo, who plans to study public administration in college and wants to be an immigration lawyer. "I feel like lawmakers in Texas are targeting the schools because they see a lot of young people are becoming more aware of their government and their community and are taking a stand and wanting a change. They are concerned about maintaining the status quo."