Critical Race Theory: What is it and why is everyone talking about it?

You may have seen the term “Critical Race Theory” in the news this summer. Learn what it is, what it’s not, and why it’s being used to attack teachers and school curricula all over the United States.
What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical race theory, or CRT, is a framework that emerged from legal scholars of color in the late 1970s and 80s as they sought to understand the role race plays in the law and legal system. As explained in the 1995 text, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, CRT “compels us to confront critically the most explosive issue in American civilization: the historical centrality and complicity of law in upholding white supremacy.” The basic tenet of CRT is that racism is more than individual prejudices and biases; it is embedded within all our systems and institutions. Therefore, the racial inequities that we see in every system (i.e., healthcare, education, criminal justice, economic, political) are not abnormalities, but the results of the normal, everyday workings of racism.

If CRT is over 40 years old, why is it such a hot topic now?

We must place this attack on CRT within a larger historical context. Following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the racial disparities that were brought into focus during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism was thrust into the mainstream discourse. In fact, the term “systemic racism” was used more in 2020 media reporting than in the previous 30 years combined. The attacks on CRT, equity, and antiracism are a direct response to the protests and demands for radical, structural changes that followed the murders of Floyd and Taylor and the senate and presidential elections of 2020.

Who is spearheading the attack on CRT?

This backlash is spearheaded by some of the same wealthy, right-wing individuals and organizations that continually seek to weaken teacher unions, defund education, and lobby for corporate, anti-worker policies: the Heritage Foundation, the Koch Family Foundation, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the Fordham and Manhattan Institutes, to name a few. The individuals behind these organizations benefit and derive power from the status quo and do not want to see their power, privilege, and way of life disrupted.

What tactics are they using?

Partisan extremists and conservative pundits have used media outlets to demonize and spread misinformation about CRT. A key component of their strategy as articulated by Manhattan Institute fellow, Christopher Rufo, is to vilify CRT and make it a catch-all for any discourse regarding equity, racial justice, or LGBTQIA-inclusivity. They are using their GOP connections to create legislation that completely omits, limits, and/or distorts portions of America’s history in school curricula to silence and push folks of color farther to the margins of society.

- In Texas, lawmakers have filed bills that would strip requirements that students learn White supremacy is morally wrong, the history of slavery, writings by Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass, Native American history, the women’s suffrage movement, and more.
- In Tennessee, some GOP activists have declared that the book “Ruby Bridges Goes to School”— the story about the first Black child to integrate a New Orleans school in 1960—should be removed from the curricula. The book faces resistance, not for being historically inaccurate, but for presenting facts that some deem as “anti-American” and “divisive.”
- Numerous state legislatures are debating bills seeking to ban CRT and curricula that address issues of racism or sexism in the classroom.
- At the time of publication, 28 states are seeing efforts to restrict education on racism, bias, and the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics.
- There is also legislation in several states banning initiatives designed to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Conservatives have set their sights on school boards and are using this as an avenue to control curricula and unseat board members that promote equity initiatives.
We must understand these attacks as a backlash to potential racial progress. Many of those “opposed” to CRT have not studied it. Their goal is not to understand, but to spread propaganda and misinformation in order to demonize it. Below we debunk some of the most circulated falsehoods:

**MYTH 1** CRT does NOT assert that all White Americans are inherently racist or that certain groups of people are inherently superior or inferior.

In fact, a fundamental tenet of CRT is that “race” itself is a made up, social construction; categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT maintains that while race is not a legitimate biological concept, racism is embedded within our society in order to advantage some and disadvantage others. And because racism is central to how our laws and systems were created, we are all socialized and impacted by it.

**MYTH 2** CRT is NOT cynical and divisive.

Having real and honest conversations about race and racism is not divisive; failing to acknowledge systemic racism and the harm it exacts upon people daily is. CRT is not at all cynical; it is radically optimistic. CRT asserts that since race is a construction, we can de-construct it. And by analyzing and understanding how racism works, we can transform and reimagine the systems that maintain and perpetuate it and create a more just and equitable society for all.

**MYTH 3** CRT is NOT contrary to the work and beliefs of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some have taken Dr. King’s words regarding judging each person by the “content of their character” and have weaponized it against CRT and other attempts to address systemic racism. But these so-called followers of King de-contextualize his words and de-radicalize King who also said, “White Americans must recognize that justice for Black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society.” While Dr. King hoped that America would one day live up to its principles of justice and fairness, he recognized that systemic racism kept those ideals from being realized. He dedicated his life to fighting for structural change: organizing and participating in protests; defying racist laws; pushing for immediate, societal change; speaking openly and honestly about the intersections between racism, capitalism, and militarism; creating discomfort for the white status quo—and he was ultimately killed for doing so. Those who are truly committed to King’s vision of equality and justice carry on his legacy by fighting against structural oppression—not denying it exists.

**MYTH 4** CRT is NOT used to shame and guilt White children.

By centering White children—and failing to consider children of color who make up the majority of public school students—those attacking CRT demonstrate their true intent: upholding White supremacy. These critics fail to acknowledge or even consider the ways in which Black and Brown children are impacted by curricula that ignores, omits, and/or distorts the facts about their history, culture and experience. CRT attackers fail to care about the way Black children feel when told that affirming their lives is a “political stance” that is not allowed in schools. These protectors of the status quo are unconcerned with the inequities and resulting traumas children of color endure daily. They seek to uphold White supremacy at all costs, even purposefully withholding the truth from students to keep existing structures intact—regardless of the harm these exact upon innocent children.

Those who are resistant to structural change are laser-focused on schools, educators, and curricula because they recognize the power of education. Children have a keen awareness of fairness and are quick to call out injustice. Teaching the truth about societal injustices encourages students—white and those of color—to act. The police murders of Floyd and Taylor resulted in protests in racially diverse urban centers like Chicago and New York, as well as in all-White rural areas of Appalachia—led primarily by young people. This threat to White supremacy has instilled fear among those who seek to maintain America’s social hierarchy. Their fear is driving the attacks against CRT, voting rights, and First Amendment rights to peacefully protest.
What is the IFT’s position on this debate?

As the union of professional educators, IFT is committed to supporting high-quality education that is honest, antiracist, and culturally relevant. We have a responsibility to engage students in learning that presents facts, truth, and multiple perspectives so that they learn to interrogate issues critically and empathically. This requires including facts that instill pride, along with those that contradict American ideals; facts that celebrate the unique and diverse contributions of the many peoples that have built America, while also acknowledging the systemic oppression that many of these groups endure despite their contributions. To intentionally negate and omit certain stories in order to paint a misleading, inaccurate picture of America is indoctrination, not education. We must teach truth through the discomfort and through the contradictions. We must equip our students with the critical thinking necessary to holistically analyze history and the present so that they can imagine and design a better future. As the late, great writer and playwright, James Baldwin once stated, “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

The IFT believes that our members must teach factual, age-appropriate, antiracist lessons that do not hide or distort facts, and we will defend and support them in doing so. Members also have the backing of our national union: AFT President Randi Weingarten has stated publicly that the AFT will support any teacher who is punished for teaching honest history. As the vanguards of public education, we will use our collective power to protect and defend democracy.

Questions?

Please email us at info@ift-aft.org if you have further questions about Critical Race Theory or to access learning opportunities and/or resources on antiracism for your union.

Learn more at ift-aft.org/crt.