

# Responding to politically motivated attacks on racial equity in schools

Educators across the country are experiencing a well-coordinated, multi-state attack on racial equity in public education. In Minnesota, this includes a public relations campaign by supporters of school vouchers led by an affiliate of the Koch propaganda network called the Center of the American Experiment. This campaign is expected to be the first of many waves of politically motivated efforts to use race to erode faith in public schools and the politicians who support them.

## KEY CONCEPTS FOR RESPONDING

1. Seize the moral high ground and engage on our terms. With attention on education, let's talk about the teaching and curricula we support, and communicate how it benefits all students.
  - For example: "We want Minnesota to be a place where every child can grow up to pursue their dreams, no matter what they look like or where they come from."
2. Ascribe motivations to the opposition. Instead of reflexively repeating the opposition's claims to dispel them, (e.g. "we are not teaching grade schoolers about XYZ"), talk about why they're attacking standards, equity and classroom educators.
  - For example: "Powerful groups want to keep us divided so we don't come together for better schools, affordable college, accessible health care and the other things regular families need."
3. Bring the conversation back to what we want. Don't stay on defense.
  - For example: "We want to prepare our students to be critical thinkers, good citizens and future leaders by giving them a more honest look at where we've been as a state/nation and where we're at. (Keep it aspirational and forward-looking. Avoid negative formulations like, "reducing racial disparities in test scores," or "closing the achievement gap.")"
4. Avoid the academic term "critical race theory." This phrase, unfamiliar to most audiences, has been redefined by the political right as an all-purpose racial dog whistle. Talk instead about the more honest and more complete education our students deserve.

## SAMPLE NARRATIVE FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, OPTION 1

Most (district name) parents agree our students deserve an education that encourages them to understand who we are, where we came from and what we're capable of being, no matter their skin color, background, gender, or ZIP code.

But right now, a few billionaires and the promoters and talking heads they pay for are spreading falsehoods about what's taught in public schools here, and all over the country. They're misleading Minnesotans about the lessons our educators teach about history, culture, gender and economics.

Instead of supporting a more honest education about race, they are campaigning to divide us so we don't join together to demand the things our children and their families need, like safe roads and bridges, college without debt, and affordable health care for all.

Our district is committed to growing students who will become informed citizens, good neighbors and critical thinkers who can live, and someday lead, in a multicultural, multiracial Minnesota. That includes teaching our students to learn

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from our history and respect people regardless of what they look like, where they come from, or who they love. Our kids deserve nothing less.

## **SAMPLE NARRATIVE FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, OPTION 2**

Most (district name) parents agree our students deserve an education that encourages them to understand who we are, where we came from and what we're capable of being, no matter their skin color, background, gender, or ZIP code.

It was that common goal that brought together Minnesotans from Red Wing to Red Lake to insist the 2021 Minnesota Legislature make the largest new investment in the futures of all our students in 15 years. And Minnesotans rejected the plan to redirect hundreds of millions of public dollars to vouchers for unaccountable private schools that can, and do, discriminate in which students they admit.

That's why it is so disappointing to see that a few right-wing billionaires, and the promoters and talking heads they pay for, have launched a national campaign to mislead Americans about the lessons schools teach about history, culture and gender. Once again, they're trying to distract and divide us so we don't demand the richest 1 percent and the largest corporations pay what they owe for what our communities need, like affordable health care for all.

In (district name), we remain committed to providing safe and welcoming schools where all of our students can receive what they need. That includes an honest look at our history and learning to respect and understand people regardless of what they look like, where they come from, or who they love. It's what students need to live and lead in the multiracial Minnesota they will inherit.

### **Responding to nonsense**

<b>They say</b>	<b>We say</b>
<b>Why are you teaching children that all white people are racist?</b>	First off, I'm thrilled you're taking such a deep interest in how and what our kids are taught, a conversation that I feel is long overdue. What I know most Americans believe is that we expect our students - whatever their color or background - to be able to learn hard truths and handle honest history and civics. I believe in children's potential to meet new challenges and have an honest reckoning, and when we try to edit and distort our history, we are doing them, and our future a disservice. My loyalty is to children and who and what they can become.
<b>Critical race theory is (Marxist indoctrination, racist against whites, counter-genocide)</b>	Critical race theory is an understanding that who we are, the laws we have in place, the histories that have been handed down to us, have been shaped by race. It's taught in law school and graduate school to adults. In our public schools, our kids deserve age-appropriate and accurate history lessons, helping them become the critical thinkers we need to make this a more just, prosperous and equitable country. DO NOT SAY: Critical race theory is not (thing opposition has said.)
<b>In America, we are colorblind. Race shouldn't matter. Critical race theory divides us instead of uniting us.</b>	We should live in a state where anything is possible for anyone to achieve. Unfortunately, that's not the case, but the promoters and their billionaire funders are manufacturing outrage to divide us along racial lines. People of color encounter hardships every day that white people do not. It is our collective responsibility to acknowledge, talk about, and change this reality so that every young person can reach their full potential, no matter what they look like or where they come from.

**Critical race theory should be banned in our schools. That doesn't make me a racist.**

I'm so glad you're taking an interest in how schools present information in age-appropriate ways about racism in America history and how that history affects the present. I hope we can agree that students need lessons and guidance in school to understand people from different races and cultures. It's how they will navigate the world they live in. That's a world where there's a past and present of racial injustice. We can't let the discomfort of a few white parents limit the futures of all our students. Lessons in equity help every student reach their full potential.

## Teaching the truth: "Critical race theory"

A growing number of people understand and publicly acknowledge the ways our laws, practices and institutions in the United States harm Black, Indigenous and other people of color.

Unfortunately, the right has resorted to its usual dog whistle strategy of distraction and division. This coordinated effort uses the phrase "critical race theory" as a catch-all for their anxieties about losing power and dominance.

The goal is to use schools and college campuses to stoke fears about what we teach our students so they can undermine trust in our public schools and its teachers and ultimately cut education funding.

## What is critical race theory?

It's an academic framework that is more than 40 years old and is centered on the idea that racism is systemic, not just a product of individual bias or prejudice, and embedded in our policies and legal structures.

Critical race theorists shift the focus away from individual people's actions and toward how systems uphold racial disparities.

## Who's behind the attacks

Billionaire-funded promoters, think tanks, activists and politicians have redefined critical race theory as a sweeping term to describe anything that has to do with equity, cultural competency, or education about race. This tactic is not a good-faith debate about pedagogy. It is intended to exploit racial divisions.

In Minnesota, the Center of the American Experiment is touring the state trying to push its false narrative about what's being taught in our school to block kids from learning our shared stories of confronting injustice.

CAE tries to disguise itself as a non-partisan think tank but pushes the agenda of its corporate donors -- promoting school privatization and vouchers and vehemently opposing programs that advocate for people of color. The organization also runs active campaigns to persuade Education Minnesota members to leave their union.

This attack on CRT is a coordinated effort across the country. Christopher Rufo, a prominent opponent who works for the conservative Manhattan Institute, wrote this on Twitter: "We have successfully frozen their brand — 'critical race theory' — into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.'"

- The 1776 Project PAC is a new political action committee that backs school board candidates who oppose critical race theory, arguing it's "hostile to white people."
- The Center for Renewing America created a toolkit for "Americans who are fed up with state sanctioned racism" on how to "combat critical race theory and reclaim your local school board."
- The Manhattan Institute's toolkit: "Woke schooling: A toolkit for concerned parents."
- The Heritage Foundation, known for pushing voter suppression laws and private school voucher schemes, is in the debate. Its political advocacy arm, Heritage Action, has talking points and scripts to combat "racist teachings in schools."