



WHAT IS CRITICAL RACE THEORY?

Frequently Asked Questions

ASSOCIATION OF CALIFORNIA SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS 

Scholars apply Critical Race Theory as a lens to analyze policies and the law. It is a high-level legal concept that holds that racism can impact multiple societal areas, ranging from housing, education and everything in between. Critical Race Theory proponents use this messaging to explain why “separate but equal” policies and institutional segregation were maintained for years.

What does K-12 education have to do with Critical Race Theory?

The complex legal aspects of Critical Race Theory make it impossible for the theory to be taught in California public schools. Critical Race Theory should not be confused with equity, which many school districts have incorporated into their teaching methods and curriculum.

Does Critical Race Theory encourage discrimination?

Absolutely not; the tenets of Critical Race Theory do not tell people what to believe. The theory simply provides context to the roots and how systems tend to favor certain groups. In the United States, white people have historically been favored. That said, Critical Race Theory does not promote discrimination against one racial group; that would, in fact, be counter to the central beliefs of Critical Race Theory.

Is Critical Race Theory the same as equity and diversity or social justice?

No — Critical Race Theory is an approach used by scholars to explain why policies were implemented that disadvantaged (a subset of) people of color.

Equity and diversity is a principle used in education to further the belief that every student matters regardless of race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or physical or neurological abilities. Despite these differences, every student is entitled to a quality education and equal opportunities to achieve it.

Further, the principles of equity and diversity are often incorporated into curriculums, teaching methods and overall education management to ensure each student feels comfortable, included, and valued.

Social justice is the understanding that equal opportunities are not inherent. In order to uplift disadvantaged students, leaders must be proactive, thoughtful, and strategic in their approach.

Is Critical Race Theory the same as ethnic studies?

No — Ethnic studies is the interdisciplinary study of people of color. While ethnic studies celebrates culture and heritage, it is more than just multicultural studies. Ethnic studies examines the often-unnoticed contributions made by people of color in various fields, and digs deeper to examine how power structures and forms of oppression continue to impact social, emotional, cultural, economical, and political outcomes.

Critical Race Theory, on the other hand, analyzes policies to determine if racism played a role in its development.

Critical race theory

FAQ

July, 2021

Once an obscure academic concept, the term critical race theory (CRT) has become a regular fixture in mainstream media and social media as well as local school board meetings.

Many California school board trustees have asked CSBA for information on critical race theory to help guide these discussions. This document is intended to provide the requested support; it is not an advocacy piece making the case for or against CRT; that is a local matter. The purpose of this document is to provide additional background on CRT in order to allow for more productive conversations about this subject, and to distinguish it from other initiatives that may or may not be related.

More than 20 state legislatures have introduced legislation to ban critical race theory from classrooms, and parents, staff and community members nationwide are seeking information on, offering support for or expressing criticism of CRT.

What is critical race theory?

CRT is a practice of interrogating race and racism in society and the ways in which it impacts people. CRT emphasizes race as a social construct (a classification system developed by society that can change over time, rather than fixed biological categories) with social significance, not a biological reality. It acknowledges that racism is embedded within systems and institutions that replicate racial inequality — codified in law, embedded in structures, and woven into public policy.

The concept that came to be known as CRT was developed by Harvard Law School Professor Derrick Bell in the mid-1970s as Critical Legal Studies and refined by other legal scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (who coined the term critical race theory), Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller and Kendall Thomas. CRT has since spread to other fields, as it is closer to a method of analysis than a fixed academic subject, and thus evolves along with the society it critiques.



CRT emphasizes race as a social construct with social significance, not a biological reality. It acknowledges that racism is embedded within systems and institutions that replicate racial inequality — codified in law, embedded in structures, and woven into public policy.



Is CRT synonymous with diversity, equity or inclusion?

Some critics of CRT have mistaken or mislabeled any discussion of equity, diversity or ethnic studies as equivalent to CRT. Although certain approaches to ethnic studies may incorporate elements of CRT — as these concepts are both concerned with how race is constructed and the political, historical, social and cultural effects of race and ethnicity — they are not synonymous or interchangeable. Ethnic studies predates CRT and began in the 1960s as an attempt to correct the lack of access, misrepresentation and neglect of indigenous peoples and people of color through better representation of the experiences, contributions, culture, art and politics of groups whose stories were typically overlooked or underplayed in the curriculum. As typically taught in K-12 schools today, ethnic studies aims to build greater appreciation, understanding and respect between students of different backgrounds.

What are the main principles of CRT?

- 1) Race is a social construct, not a biological reality. Since race is a social construct, people's experiences related to race are impacted by the systems and policies that society designs. Historically, racial categories were created to justify and maintain social hierarchies, group-based exploitation and disparate levels of rights, access and privileges.
- 2) Racial categories are created at various points to serve a range of groups and purposes, so racial definitions differ across place and time and shift according to societal needs.
- 3) As a social construct, race is tied to other social constructions intended to bestow advantages on certain groups, such as (but not exclusive to) groups of people identified by their race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or nationality.
- 4) Discrimination should be understood not in terms of discrete, individual actions but as the product of systems and institutions where racism may be embedded and replicated.
- 5) Because race was integral to the development of American systems and institutions like law, government, nationhood, politics, religion and the economy, those institutions — whether by accident or design — retain aspects of the racial preferences that influenced their development.
- 6) Inequity results partly from the legacy of the racial attitudes and social goals of the originators at the time the systems were developed since legislation or judicial decisions outlawing explicit discrimination often fail to address the racialized nature of the underlying structures and policies of systems and institutions.
- 7) Without a structural analysis of the way in which race is used to reinforce social, political and economic power, solutions that emphasize colorblindness, integration and avoidance of prejudice and stereotyping are inadequate. To the extent that these frames overlook the impact of systemic



Some critics of CRT have mistaken or mislabeled any discussion of equity, diversity or ethnic studies as equivalent to CRT. Although certain approaches to ethnic studies may incorporate elements of CRT they are not synonymous or interchangeable.



racism, they preserve the status quo and enable discriminatory practices that are harmful to people of color.

- 8) Major changes that benefit people of color typically occur when an oppressive policy conflicts with one of the larger goals of American society (e.g., individual freedom, freedom of association, free markets, property rights, domestic or international interests) and creates alignment between the interests of people of color and American institutions.
- 9) People who have been oppressed have a unique perspective to offer on their circumstances. The everyday lives and experiences of people of color are relevant to scholarship and should be included in research on issues of race and efforts to combat racial discrimination.
- 10) CRT should be used not only to understand but also to challenge, reform and dismantle systems of power that perpetuate discrimination.

How does CRT relate to education?

In 1995, the scholars Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate began applying the principles of CRT to the field of education as a way to understand inequities within the education system. CRT argues that legal interventions, while helpful and essential to the cause of eradicating discriminatory aspects of the education system, are not by themselves sufficient to promote equality in schools. For example, merely ending legal segregation did not appropriately address de facto racism nor the systemic impact of factors like housing, demographic patterns, and funding mechanisms and decisions.

Scholars who have applied CRT to education have identified examples of racial inequality in schools such as:

- ▶ Ongoing segregation within and across school districts
- ▶ Ongoing segregation within schools
- ▶ Inadequate resources and facilities in predominantly African American and Latino school districts
- ▶ Disproportionate discipline of African American and other groups of students
- ▶ Narrow assessments that provide inaccurate measures of student ability and achievement
- ▶ Barriers to advanced classes, gifted programs and selective schools
- ▶ Curriculum that neglects the contributions and experiences of non-dominant groups

In essence, researchers who use CRT to study education evaluate how certain practices can contribute to racial inequality and seek and advocate for potential solutions.



CRT argues that legal interventions, while helpful and essential to the cause of eradicating discriminatory aspects of the education system, are not by themselves sufficient to promote equality in schools.



Does CRT say that all white people are racist?

No. CRT avoids a focus on the individual in favor of critiquing how systems use race to allocate social, political and economic power in ways that favor certain groups, historically white people in the case of the United States. Critical Race Theory holds that racism is embedded in American systems and institutions and part of everyday life, so people can perpetuate and benefit from racism through their normal, everyday existence, even if they do so unintentionally. The goal is not to create guilt, but instead to examine the source and impact of racial inequality and advocate for change.

Is CRT Marxist?

CRT was developed by left-leaning legal scholars, some of whom were neo-Marxist, but it is not inherently Marxist. Marxism is too complex to explain appropriately here, but in simple terms, it can be understood as the idea that history and society are driven by struggle between the ruling and oppressed classes. Marx believed that the relationship between the capitalist class and the working class is inherently exploitative and bound for conflict, which will ultimately result in substitution of collective ownership for private ownership and the dissolution of social classes and class struggle.

There is significant tension between CRT scholars and those who ground their cultural analysis in the Marxist tradition of class struggle. While some scholars see Marxism as potentially compatible with critical race theory, others criticize the emphasis that CRT puts on race as opposed to economic class or other factors. Other scholars critique CRT for potentially alienating the white working class from people of color who hold similar class status.

Is CRT widespread in K-12 public schools?

No. There is no evidence that CRT is widespread in K-12 education. Although there is no definitive resource documenting the prevalence of CRT in schools, the consensus is that CRT is not included in curriculum and is rarely taught in K-12 schools. While often confused, CRT is not synonymous with culturally relevant teaching or pedagogy, which aims to nurture:

- ▶ **Student learning:** By supporting students' intellectual growth, moral development and ability to reason and problem-solve
- ▶ **Cultural competence:** By encouraging students to affirm and appreciate their culture of origin while developing fluency in at least one other culture
- ▶ **Critical consciousness:** By improving students' ability to identify, analyze and solve real-world problems, especially those that result in societal inequalities

CRT should also not be confused with ethnic studies, which is designed to highlight the often-overlooked history, experiences and cultures of underrepresented groups, and to build respect and appreciation between students of different backgrounds.



Critical Race Theory holds that racism is embedded in American systems and institutions and part of everyday life, so people can perpetuate and benefit from racism through their normal, everyday existence, even if they do so unintentionally. The goal is not to create guilt, but instead to examine the source and impact of racial inequality and advocate for change.



What does state law say about the CRT and ethnic studies?

The state law that required the development of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum does not mandate or recommend the incorporation of specific concepts into a course that an LEA may choose to offer to its students. Education Code states, in part, that:

- ▶ The Instructional Quality Commission shall develop, and the state board shall adopt, modify or revise, a model curriculum in ethnic studies to ensure quality courses of study in ethnic studies. The model curriculum shall be developed with participation from faculty of ethnic studies programs at universities and colleges with ethnic studies programs and a group of representatives of local educational agencies, a majority of whom are kindergarten to grade 12, inclusive, teachers who have relevant experience or education background in the study and teaching of ethnic studies. (EC 51226.7 (a))
- ▶ The model curriculum shall be written as a guide to allow school districts to adapt their courses to reflect the pupil demographics in their communities. The model curriculum shall include examples of courses offered by local educational agencies that have been approved as meeting the A–G admissions requirements of the University of California and the California State University, including, to the extent possible, course outlines for those courses. (EC 51226.7 (b))
- ▶ Beginning in the school year following the adoption of the model curriculum pursuant to this section, each school district or charter school maintaining any of grades 9 to 12, inclusive, that does not otherwise offer a standards-based ethnic studies curriculum is encouraged to offer to all otherwise qualified pupils a course of study in ethnic studies based on the model curriculum. A school district or charter school that elects to offer a course of study in ethnic studies pursuant to this subdivision shall offer the course as an elective in the social sciences or English language arts and shall make the course available in at least one year during a pupil's enrollment in grades 9 to 12, inclusive. (EC 51226.7 (e))





How is CRT related to California’s Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum?

The state’s model curriculum is intended to provide guidance to school districts and county offices of education. It does not require specific concepts — such as critical race theory — be incorporated, should an LEA decide to offer an ethnic studies course.

In fact, the only references to CRT in the model curriculum are outlined below:

In Chapter 3, “Instructional Guidance for K-12 Education,” under “Useful Theory, Pedagogy, and Research” in the Approaches to Ethnic Studies section, the model curriculum recommends that teachers and administrators should **“familiarize themselves with current scholarly research** around ethnic studies instruction, **such as** critically and culturally/community relevant and responsible pedagogies, **critical race theory**, and intersectionality, **which are key theoretical frameworks and pedagogies that can be used in ethnic studies research and instruction.**” [emphasis added]

CRT also appears in a footnote in this section along with definition of the phrase: “‘Critical race theory (CRT) is a practice of interrogating race and racism in society. CRT recognizes that race is not biologically real but is socially constructed and socially significant. It acknowledges that racism is embedded within systems and institutions that replicate racial inequality — codified in law, embedded in structures, and woven into public policy.’ Janel George (2021). [“A Lesson on Critical Race Theory.”](#) American Bar Association.”

In Chapter 6, “UC-Approved Course Outlines,” the model curriculum includes examples of outlines of courses offered by LEAs. Of the nearly 30 outlines included in the model curriculum, only one includes references to critical race theory.

The Chapter 6 Overview notes:

- ▶ The course outlines provided with this model curriculum are intended to offer guidance to teachers and administrators interested in developing courses/units in ethnic studies.
- ▶ Every course is unique, and LEAs are encouraged to tailor their particular courses to the needs and interests of their student population.



The state’s model curriculum is intended to provide guidance to school districts and county offices of education. It does not require specific concepts — such as critical race theory — be incorporated, should an LEA decide to offer an ethnic studies course.

Questions or comments?

Contact csba@csba.org

Ethnic studies

FAQ

July, 2021

What is ethnic studies?

Ethnic studies examines the histories, experiences and cultures of various racial and ethnic groups and explores race and ethnicity in various social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts. The preface of California's [Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum](#) states that it will "focus on the traditional ethnic studies first established in California higher education which has been characterized by four foundational disciplines: African American, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x, Native American, and Asian American and Pacific Islander studies. The focus on the experiences of these four disciplines provides an opportunity for students to learn of the histories, cultures, struggles, and contributions to American society of these historically marginalized peoples which have often been untold in US history courses."

Is ethnic studies required?

Ethnic studies is not a required course, nor is any school district or county office of education bound to implement the model curriculum. The model curriculum offers a menu of options from which schools can choose from or simply use as a reference in designing their own customized approach. There is pending legislation that, if passed and signed into law by the Governor, would phase-in an ethnic studies graduation requirement for the class of 2029–30, but that outcome has yet to be determined.

Why are we talking about ethnic studies?

On March 17, 2021, the State Board of Education adopted a model curriculum for ethnic studies, complying with a mandate from the California Legislature to approve a curriculum by April 1, 2021. The bill creating the mandate passed in both Assembly and Senate policy committees without a dissenting vote and was approved by both houses on bipartisan votes. The approval of the curriculum completed a lengthy process that took four years, encompassed four drafts, and three public vetting and comment periods that generated more than 100,000 public comments. As suggested by those numbers, interest in this topic is significant and the debate over how best to construct the model curriculum was intense.



The focus on the experiences of these four disciplines provides an opportunity for students to learn of the histories, cultures, struggles, and contributions to American society of these historically marginalized peoples which have often been untold in US history courses.



The tension surrounding this issue was evident during public comment at the State Board of Education and caused SBE President Linda Darling-Hammond to say, “The passion that we hear about this topic illustrates why ethnic studies is so important. Much of it is a quest by each person or each group for a sense of belonging and acknowledgement. Ethnic studies demands that we understand the forces that stand in the way of our shared humanity so that we can address them. We need the more complete study of our history that ethnic studies provides and the attention to inequality that it stimulates.”

School districts and county offices of education are not required to implement the model ethnic studies curriculum adopted by the SBE. Yet, as ethnic studies has become intertwined with many of the larger social conversations around race, ethnicity, identity, culture, politics, law and history, the subject has received greater scrutiny. School boards meetings in particular have become a flash point for debates on ethnic studies and its role in public education.

What is the debate about ethnic studies?

Adoption of the model curriculum did not end the discourse on ethnic studies. If anything, it intensified discussion at the local level. In local educational agencies around the state, parents, students, staff and community members are debating not only the specific composition of the ethnic studies curriculum, but also the general value of ethnic studies as a course. Some view ethnic studies as radical, divisive, anti-white or un-American, while others feel that elevating the experiences and contributions of underrepresented or marginalized groups teaches students essential lessons that can lead to better understanding.

The local debates taking place across California follow years of discussion at the state level about which ethnic groups should be included in the curriculum, the extent to which they should be included, and how their experiences should be presented when there are conflicting viewpoints. Divergent opinions have been expressed across the political spectrum on a range of issues, which resulted in multiple rewrites of the initial draft curriculum.

The version of the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum that was approved this spring includes an exploration of anti-Semitism and lessons on the Arab, Armenian, Jewish and Sikh American communities that were absent from earlier iterations. It also removes some terminology that critics felt was inaccessible to many users. The changes satisfied some of the groups that were originally opposed to the model curriculum and alienated some of its supporters who felt they deprived the model curriculum of important critiques of American society. The debates over ethnic studies now continue at the local level as local governing boards make their own decisions about whether to adopt ethnic studies and what material to include.



The passion that we hear about this topic illustrates why ethnic studies is so important. Much of it is a quest by each person or each group for a sense of belonging and acknowledgement.

— Linda Darling-Hammond, SBE President



Why do supporters advocate for ethnic studies? What does the research say?

Supporters maintain that ethnic studies improves student outcomes, critical thinking, self-esteem and student engagement while increasing connection between students of different backgrounds. One of the leading papers on ethnic studies, [The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum](#), indicates that participation in ethnic studies can reduce dropout rates and improve student achievement and that “culturally relevant teaching, when implemented in a supportive, high-fidelity context, can provide effective support to at-risk students.”

In 2014, Thomas Dee, a professor at [Stanford’s Graduate School of Education](#) and director of its Center for Education Policy Analysis, and Stanford post-doctoral fellow Emily Penner assessed the impact of ethnic studies programs in San Francisco USD. The pair evaluated 1,405 ninth-graders who were at risk of dropping out and had been assigned to an ethnic studies course. They compiled their findings in [The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum](#). The study showed that struggling students who took ethnic studies went on to record a C-plus average in their freshman year while similar students who didn’t take the course logged a D average. The ethnic studies students also completed four more semester-long courses than their peers and had nearly perfect attendance.

Researchers also discovered positive effects for male, female, Asian and Hispanic groups of students, but the most improved outcomes were found among boys and Latino students. The difference was so dramatic that co-author Dee admitted to being greatly surprised at the degree of positive impact. The results showed that enrolling in the ethnic studies elective improved general academic performance in terms of attendance rates, grades and credits earned, boosting attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points and credits earned by 23.

The authors attributed the program’s success to the idea that culturally relevant teaching — when implemented in a supportive, high-fidelity context — provides effective support to at-risk students by insulating them from and combatting stereotypes, providing positive affirmation, and insulating them from the stereotype-induced anxiety and promoting a growth mindset. Co-author Penner, now an assistant professor at the University of California, Irvine, described the ethnic studies course as having an unusually significant impact on student achievement.

“What’s so unique about this program is the degree to which it helped the students who took it,” Penner said. “Schools have tried a number of approaches to support struggling students, and few have been this effective. It’s a novel approach that suggests that making school relevant and engaging to struggling students can really pay off.”



The authors attributed the program’s success to the idea that culturally relevant teaching — when implemented in a supportive, high-fidelity context — provides effective support to at-risk students by insulating them from and combatting stereotypes, providing positive affirmation, and insulating them from the stereotype-induced anxiety and promoting a growth mindset.

Questions or comments?

Contact csba@csba.org