



The culture wars have come to the classroom. Now what?

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There are many problems roiling America's public schools, including culture wars that have found their way into the classroom, school libraries and school board meetings over the past several months. But some challenges are more endemic, the product of decades of low pay and lack of appreciation for the service that administrators and teachers perform. CNN Opinion gathered the views of nine experts in the field of education about the problems they feel should be most urgently addressed in the classroom – and what solutions might be viable in our tumultuous political times.

Shaun Harper: Conservatives reject any mention of race in the classroom. We must counter by teaching truth

Last year, Democratic Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe lost his reelection campaign, at least in part because his Republican opponent, Glenn Youngkin, repeatedly declared that McAuliffe's reelection would lead to the widespread teaching of critical race theory in schools across the Commonwealth. Simply put, attacking critical race theory helped the now-governor of Virginia secure his win.

Critical race theory is a set of concepts seeking to explain the structural underpinnings of inequality and racism in the United States. But the term has been attacked by its critics as unfairly pinning blame on White Americans for some of society's most pernicious ills.

Classroom discussions about race, and what I like to call “truth teaching,” haven't been as much of a talking point as they were a year ago, and critical race theory isn't being debated as much in this year's midterm campaigns. It doesn't have to be. For the most part, conservatives have already succeeded in banishing talk about racism from the classroom.

After a campaign of intentional misinformation and fear mongering, critical race theory quickly became one of our nation's most contested and misunderstood education issues. Conservative strategists successfully convinced millions of Americans, including concerned parents of school-aged children, that it was being taught in K-12 districts across the country. No evidence exists to confirm that this was actually the case.

As of last month, elected officials in 42 states have introduced legislation that broadly aims to ban the teaching of racial and social justice topics in public schools, according to data compiled by Education Week. Similar bills have passed in 17 of those states. Many more school boards have enacted local bans. In addition, books about race have been banned in numerous districts.

The campaign to eliminate critical race theory succeeded mostly because White parents and state lawmakers were led to believe that White school children were being made to feel badly about being White. Where's the proof that teachers, nearly 80% of whom are White, were doing this? They weren't, certainly not in any widespread fashion.

With no credible evidence of an actual problem and no opportunity to vote on the issue, citizens who recognize the value of teaching our children the truth about America's racial past and present won't have a voice in the upcoming election.

There's at least one state where voters will decide this fall what gets taught in the classroom. West Virginians will consider a ballot question known as the Education Accountability Amendment, which if passed, would amend the state constitution to give the majority-Republican legislature more control over just about every aspect of public schooling.

Until bans on truth teaching are lifted, our democracy will become increasingly susceptible to the exacerbation of the racial tensions, inequities, injustices and violent acts of racism that have always kept America from reaching its full potential. Educators, meanwhile, will have unchecked authority to lie to school children about race. One recent example of this is educators' failed attempt to change slavery to "involuntary relocation" in Texas schools.

Those who truly care about the advancement of our democracy must insist that its full truth be taught. Unfortunately, we may have to wait a while before that discussion resumes in our public schools.

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Valerie Wolfson: Teachers deserve trust and respect

I'm a middle school social studies teacher in New Hampshire and an avid supporter of public education. Having taught for over 20 years, my greatest joy is participating in a democratic institution that is for everyone.

I stand for all my students by committing myself to perpetual learning and growth. I continue to update instructional strategies, let go of old projects that no longer serve my current students and adapt my curriculum and language to ensure my approaches are culturally sensitive.

I teach well-rounded history to the best of my ability as I continually strive to keep my background knowledge robust. I am here to hold space for all my students regardless of their identity, political positions or other affiliations. To do this, I must rigorously and regularly examine my biases, consider what and whom I am centering and why.

That's why it was so disheartening to see laws like House Bill 2 (sometimes referred to as the "divisive concepts" law) pass in New Hampshire. The disrespect and lack of trust it communicates to the hundreds of honorable educators I know and work with cannot be overstated.

The measure, formally known as the Right to Freedom from Discrimination in Public Workplaces and Education bill, was written with the mistaken idea that discrimination is somehow endorsed or practiced in public spaces and classrooms.

The new law bars educators from teaching that any particular group is inherently racist, sexist or otherwise oppressive. It purports to promote teaching about people without regards to their race, gender, disability or other differences. But the language is so vague that it discourages teachers from having classroom conversations about race, racism and discrimination.

Legislation like HB2 and similar laws in other states are obstacles to growth, student well-being and compassionate practices. HB2 prohibits schools in New Hampshire from creating mandatory equity training for faculty because someone might "feel bad."

Because I teach social studies, I've developed a healthy resilience around complex conversations and divergent opinions. My entire career has been centered around navigating one tricky topic or another. I've mediated dialogues around presidential elections, the events of September 11, different wars and conflicts, and facilitated a variety of debates.

Through it all, I've dedicated myself to building a foundation of trust, joy, understanding, respectful discourse, care and acceptance in my classroom. Some of us are finding that harder to achieve under the new legislation. For example, a colleague who teaches in a nearby school district was told that if she openly said slavery was a "bad practice," she must make it clear to her students that she is expressing an "opinion." It's an experience other teachers in my state have spoken about as well.

At what point did we decide it's divisive to take a stance on cruel and dehumanizing activities? Who are we harming by taking a hardline on the concept of slavery? Our silence is an endorsement. That is our ethical crisis. That is what fear-mongering yields.

Teachers deserve better: Shame and blame have been imposed upon a profession that is filled with loving, kind, compassionate and principled people. Choosing a career in education is almost always driven by a heart-centered desire to make a positive difference. I have never encountered a teacher in four districts, two states and 22 years who displayed devious political intentions.

The conflation of equity and inclusion work with "critical race theory" has led to wildly inaccurate and unfounded accusations. This "threat" has taken seed in the imaginations of some legislators and families.

Future voters must understand that disagreement is normal and healthy. Changing your mind in light of new evidence is logical and admirable. Nothing could be more American, patriotic or democratic than striving for a more just society.

Feeling discomfort and dissonance often accompanies growth and learning; this is something I strive to normalize for my students. Teachers teach critical thinking and analysis by asking students to wrestle with challenging ideas and evidence. At some point, we have confused feeling uneasy with a lack of safety. There is a crucial difference.

Poorly constructed laws were drafted to stop good, productive work under the guise of being “anti-critical race theory” and have resulted in the oppression of free thought, critical thinking and children. I know we can do better.

My message to lawmakers? Trust teachers. Asking them to be thoughtful, sensitive and inclusive is always reasonable. You’ll find that’s what they generally already are.

Valerie Wolfson, a middle school social studies teacher, was named the 2020 New Hampshire Social Studies Teacher of the year.

Neal McCluskey: American schools have a diversity problem

Public schooling struggles with diversity. From early battles over the Bible to current fights over race, gender identity, prayer and more, public schooling – in which all must fund a single system of government schools – inevitably pits people with diverse values, needs and backgrounds against each other.

But why are conflicts burning especially hot now?

Covid-19 set the conditions, creating clashes over in-person instruction and masking that many saw as having literally life-and-death stakes.

The murder of George Floyd added fuel, prompting many public school officials to target systemic racism – discrimination built into American institutions – and conservatives to demand colorblindness and an emphasis on America’s basic goodness. Graphic novels, such as “Gender Queer,” with graphic depictions of sexual activity, and other books on hot-button topics sparked dueling accusations of “hate” and “indoctrination.”

This all happened amid rapid demographic and social change.

In 2000, the US population was 71% non-Hispanic white. By 2020, that was down to about 58%. Gay marriage support skyrocketed from 27% of Americans in 1996 to 77% in 2021, while the share of people belonging to a church, synagogue or mosque plummeted from 70% in 1999 to 47% in 2020.

What can deescalate education politics?

Not “parents’ rights,” a term that can encompass useful things like requirements that districts share curriculum information, but sometimes seems invoked so that just one group of parents will get what it wants.

Giving parents more say does nothing to change a system that forces diverse people, including parents, to fund – and fight to control – government-run schools.

Freedom is the answer: Attach money to students – as many other countries do – and let families choose among diverse options. This can be accomplished through universal education savings accounts, such as Arizona recently enacted, scholarship tax credits and other choice vehicles.

Regardless of how it is done, the goal of choice is to enable diverse families to access education they think is right rather than forcing neighbor to defeat neighbor to control public schools.

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Denise Forte and Randi Weingarten: How we can recover ground lost to Covid-19 closures

American students’ steady progress in reading and math has become the latest casualty of the Covid-19 era.

In the first results since the pandemic began, the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed steep declines in the math and reading scores of fourth- and eighth-grade students. It’s not hard to see why. The pandemic has disrupted three years of students’ lives.

More than 200,000 children in the United States are grieving the loss of at least one parent to Covid-19. The economic fallout of the pandemic exacerbated food and housing insecurity. People were, and still are, stressed and scared. And remote learning has always been an inadequate substitute for in-person instruction, although NAEP results show comparable drops in student performance in school systems that were quicker to reopen.

Some critics see this as a chance to point fingers and to use kids as political pawns. We see it as an urgent call to institute short-term and long-term investments and proven strategies to support students’ emotional development and to accelerate learning, especially for Black and Latino students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were underserved and behind their peers prior to the pandemic.

What we must not allow is for students and educators to be dragged into bad-faith battles over bathroom access and participation on sports teams as an unwelcome distraction from ensuring that every student receives a great education and the supports needed to thrive academically and socially.

The good news is that we know what works from research and experience, and there is historic federal funding to accelerate learning and to start to remedy long-standing inequities. Resources from the Biden administration’s American Rescue Plan and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund can be directed so students have better access to experienced, diverse and certified teachers, high-quality summer and after-school programs, engaging and relevant curriculums and mental health supports.

Both our organizations are engaged in longer-term strategies to address the needs of kids, families and communities, but there are interventions that can help students right now.

In the short term, targeted, intensive tutoring has large positive effects on both math and reading achievement. Teachers tend to be the most consistently effective tutors; however, recent studies have found that paraprofessionals (teaching assistants), AmeriCorps volunteers and others who are trained to support student learning can be just as effective when tutoring one-on-one or in small groups.

Many states are using state and federal funds to invest in strategies to increase the diversity of the workforce. Access to a racially and culturally diverse teacher workforce is beneficial for all pre-K-12 students, particularly for students of color, who often thrive in classrooms led by teachers who share their racial and cultural background.

The pandemic's impact on children cannot be measured by assessments alone. But we hope that the alarm over the steep drop in NAEP scores creates urgency to address the conditions that contributed to the decline, many of which far predate the pandemic.

Educators didn't need to see declines in test scores to know what to do right now: focus like a laser on helping our kids recover and thrive.

Safety was required to return to in-person teaching and learning. Now is the time to double down on proven strategies, using the resources we are fortunate to have, to deliver on a promise the US has not yet fulfilled—providing every child access to a high quality public education, without exception.

Denise Forte is the interim CEO at The Education Trust. Randi Weingarten is president of the American Federation of Teachers.

Jay Richards: The battle over parents' rights in education is just getting started

It should come as no surprise that parents have been fighting for their rights so vociferously when it comes to public education. They're fighting because they sense that those rights are under attack.

It started with the lockdowns in 2020. For the first time, many parents suddenly saw, courtesy of online conferencing apps like Zoom, what their kids were being taught. And they didn't like it: Toxic and divisive ideas about race – disguised as lessons on slavery and racism – contradicted the belief in racial equality that most Americans – whatever their politics – shared with civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

But critical race theory is far less shocking than the radical gender ideology that seems to have overtaken our nation's schools. It teaches children that “some people are boys, some people are girls, some people are both, neither, or somewhere in between” – as one popular children's book puts it.

Schools are promoting the notion that some kids – perhaps many kids if recent trends continue – are born in the wrong body. Suddenly, from Florida to Texas to Wyoming, parents are discovering that schools are teaching, seemingly across the curriculum, that an internal sense of gender trumps biological sex. Worse, some schools are changing, at their students' request –

but without their parents' knowledge or consent – their students' names and pronouns to conform to a child's surprising new “gender identity.”

When parents come to school board meetings to complain, far too many are met with silence or risible accusations that they are politicizing education. Parents have the primary right and responsibility to raise and teach their children.

Many parents delegate part of the teaching task to schools, in an act of trust. Rather than acting as faithful stewards of that trust, too many schools have decided that it's their job to alienate kids from “regressive” views of their parents.

Is it any wonder that this has proved controversial?

We could dissipate some of the heat by increasing the rights of parents over their children's schooling. States should connect school money to children, rather than to school buildings. Universal school choice for everyone – rich and poor, conservative and liberal – would not just make schools better and more competitive. It would make them less of an arena for the culture war that is otherwise roiling our culture.

Jay Richards is the William E. Simon Senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, where he is also director of the Richard and Helen DeVos Center for Life, Religion, and Family.

Akilah Alleyne: The education investments we need to make

Book bans and censorship debates have always existed, but America's children are facing an unprecedented moment in history. Today, school resources are stretched thin, schools are facing teacher and staff shortages and districts are still grappling with the long-term effects of the pandemic on student learning, as individuals' rights to quality education are under increasing threat.

Important investments toward providing more supports for teachers, classroom aid and salary increases – such as by passing the RAISE Act – are needed now more than ever. That measure would provide teachers tax credits totaling as much as \$15,000 each year.

Rather than addressing the real challenges facing teachers, many MAGA extremists have taken aim at books, racial and gender inclusion and more. Defunding the Department of Education, an ongoing federal level tactic among other changes in public school funding, should not be a topic of debate. However, it has also been central to MAGA Republicans' federal policy agenda and could have devastating consequences for students nationwide.

While parents are working with teachers and librarians to ensure that every child is acknowledged in school curricula and has a chance to thrive in school, regardless of who they are or where they live, far-right MAGA extremists are increasingly running for vacant school board seats or for reelection to gain control and power over decision-making at all levels of government.

Students and teachers want safer schools that reflect the diversity of their families and teach truthful history. They can be best supported through policy making that increases equity and

understanding in our school systems by supporting their First and Fourteenth Amendment rights, not denying them.

Akilah Alleyne is the director for K-12 Education at the Center for American Progress, a think tank in Washington, DC.

Ross Wiener: Restoring trust in public schools should be a national priority

Public schools educate approximately 90% of young Americans. The society we are, and the one we will become, is profoundly shaped by public education.

It has made America more inclusive, improving outcomes across lines of race, gender and ability status. The result has been overwhelming bipartisan support for public schools over generations.

But the evidence of a crisis in our public schools is overwhelming: Hundreds of thousands of students have disappeared from school rolls, derailing their futures and foreshadowing budget woes when emergency Covid-19 relief funds expire. The Nation's Report Card reported historic declines in reading and math scores, not surprising given pandemic disruptions.

What's more, educator morale is low, exacerbating staff shortages. Classrooms are targets in the culture wars, leading to book bans and speech codes that never end well. Young people report epidemic levels of anxiety and depression.

The pandemic and broader turmoil afflicting the nation have left public education in peril. Every one of us has a stake in reversing this decline because, whether we're talking about growing the economy or strengthening democracy, every path to redeeming the promise of America runs through public schools. Addressing lost learning is important, and so is addressing the lack of trust in public education.

Public education has played an enormous societal role: In the 19th century, common schools forged shared identity when government of the people, by the people, for the people was a novel idea. In the 20th century, universal high school fueled the growth of the middle class.

Over the last several decades, the broad vision that propelled America's public schools has dwindled into a narrow, technocratic policy frame.

"A Nation at Risk," a major report on education released by the Reagan administration in 1983, used fear-based arguments to argue that reading and math test scores were essential for national security. This logic eventually transformed test scores from one critical indicator (which they are) to the very purpose of public schools (which they are not).

Early accountability reforms led to gains among low-income students and students of color, but progress plateaued a decade ago. Test-and-accountability reforms over-promised and under-delivered and no longer command broad bipartisan support.

Renewing the promise of public education starts by rebuilding trust. Local education leaders were left holding the bag on school closings that should have been shared with health officials and political leaders.

Schools were expected to arrange meals, computers and broadband access – burdens they often shouldered alone. This was thrust on school systems where teachers already felt beleaguered and disrespected; in truth, our schools have operated in a low-trust environment for years. This led to schools being closed for far too long with continuing consequences, not only in diminished learning but also in diminished public support.

We must recommit to the mission of public education.

The Aspen Institute recently convened a bipartisan group of state policymakers to ask: What do we want to be true about the opportunities our public schools offer? After reflecting on values and reviewing research, these policymakers authored “Opportunity to Learn, Responsibility to Lead.” The principles they developed refocus attention on the core purposes of education in a diverse democracy and market-driven economy. It presents an evidence-informed vision for schools as engines of opportunity, which could galvanize the political middle to coalesce around a more positive approach.

State leaders should call for a public conversation about the future of their state and the role of public education in realizing that future. Unspent federal Covid-19 relief can be a perfect catalyst for this work. Grants to community-based organizations and PTAs, after-school providers, 4-H Clubs and faith-based youth groups can support stakeholders in articulating what they want to be true about their public schools and identifying opportunities in their communities. Universities, chambers of commerce and other civic organizations can use their own resources to sponsor similar inquiries.

Experience demonstrates there is much common ground to be found in efforts to strengthen public schools. Channeling Americans’ shared commitment to opportunity is the ideal antidote to the cynicism and division currently plaguing the policy and politics of public education.

Ross Wiener is executive director of the Education & Society Program at the Aspen Institute and the author of “We Are What We Teach.”

Elisa Villanueva Beard: We can fix America’s teacher shortage

Teacher shortages are not new, especially in schools serving predominantly students from low-income backgrounds, who are disproportionately young people of color. Yet cracks in the system before the pandemic have become gaping crevasses: In February 2022, there were nearly 600,000 fewer educators in public schools than there were in January 2020, and National Center for Education data showed less than half of schools serving majority Black and brown students were fully staffed.

The organization I lead, Teach For America, has 33 years of experience attracting talented individuals early in their careers to teach in rural and urban classrooms. Our research into the priorities of current college students finds that they want to have an impact on what matters most in the world, and the issue of quality education for all children is in their top five.

However, they also want to preserve their mental health and have financial stability, and the teaching profession’s low pay and structures that challenge work-life balance are deterrents –

especially when the average student-loan debt is nearly \$30,000 and many other professions offer flexible schedules and remote work options. This disconnect affects the profession at large, which has been struggling for years. Between 2008 and 2019, the number of graduates from traditional teacher education programs fell by more than a third.

We can tackle these issues in a number of ways: by increasing teacher pay; creating financial incentives for effective educators to teach in schools serving low-income communities; expanding student loan forgiveness for teachers, especially in hard-to-staff schools and subjects; ensuring teachers' have sufficient resources and planning time, proper administrative help and the support of counselors and nurses; and fostering educator wellbeing by offering mental health supports and addressing sources of occupation-related stress.

These policies and practices will make teaching more desirable and accessible and will work to increase the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the teaching workforce, a move that research shows has a positive impact for students.

As essential as these efforts are, they are not sufficient to address teacher shortages in the long term. Our country must think boldly at this moment about another problem that needs solving: What if the real issue is not that young adults don't want to teach, but that the purpose of education has changed drastically and our education system has not kept up? What if we've reached the limits of this outmoded system and the conventional role of the teacher?

It's time to expand the traditional definition of learning to include all the skills and mindsets that students want and need to thrive in our 21st century world and careers of the future: qualities like developing empathy, sustaining mental health and wellbeing, building relationships and applying learning to solve real-world problems.

Redefining learning opens the door to a more diverse set of adult leaders to work alongside educators and students: professionals in various fields who can support the development of students' workplace skills; college students who can support digital literacy and serve as tutors and mentors; and any number of community leaders who can support students' sense of belonging.

For example, technology could allow expert educators to teach multiple classes virtually while a colleague who is expert in creating productive learning spaces – where every student is valued and feels they belong – focuses there. Many teachers excel at both roles – we just don't have enough of them to staff every classroom in our country. This shift is not only about making teachers' jobs more sustainable, but also about positioning teachers to further develop their areas of greatest expertise.

Fundamental changes of this magnitude don't happen quickly. But, for too long, we've expected teachers to carry the weight of an outmoded education system. We can't just replenish this system. We must redefine what and how students learn and reimagine the role of the teacher to inspire a new generation of purpose-driven young people to get involved and reinvent the system for a stronger, more equitable future.

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